

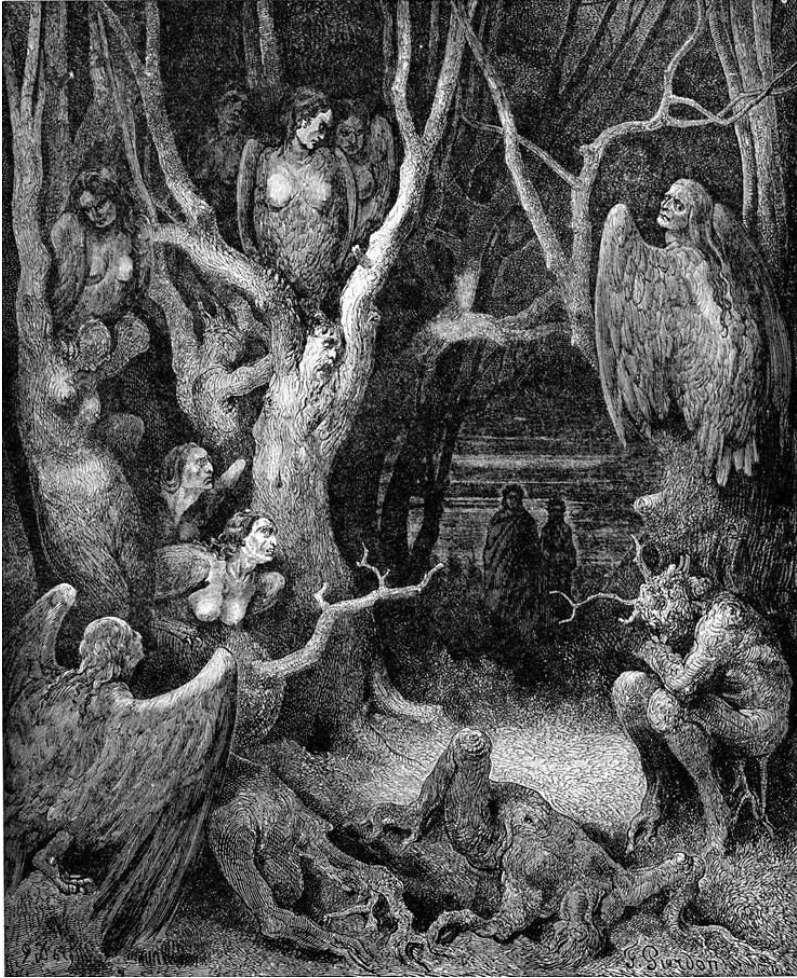


J. M. Munro

Mariana de la Mar 2

THE UNDEPARTED DEAD

Part 2



Gustave Doré - "Harpies in the Forest of Suicides"
(Canto XIII, Inferno, Divine Comedy, by Dante Alighieri)

Mariana continues her bawdy and frequently catastrophic career as a solver of mysteries, this time in England, where, having been recruited to a network of secret agents specialising in the occult, she takes on two of the Undead which infested the country, especially Essex, not only in the early Middle Ages but again in the 14th Century, in the wake of the Black Death.

"It would not be easy to believe that the corpses of the dead should sally (I know not by what agency) from their graves, and should wander about to the terror or destruction of the living, and again return to the tomb, which of its own accord spontaneously opened to receive them, did not frequent examples, occurring in our own times, suffice to establish this fact, to the truth of which there is abundant testimony." He wrote this *"as a warning to posterity"* and added *"were I to write down all the instances of this kind which I have ascertained to have befallen in our times, the undertaking would be beyond measure laborious and troublesome"*. (**William of Newburgh**, a 12th-century English historian and Augustinian Canon of Anglo-Saxon descent from Bridlington, Yorkshire.)

It turns out that the mission involves going undercover as a prostitute (not difficult for her, given her experiences since she was sold as a sex-slave at the age of fourteen) but will she ever again be able to convince people that Mad Mariana the Spanish Whore and Lady Marian MacElpin are one and the same person?

J. M. Munro

**THE
UNDEPARTED
DEAD**

Part II

*Wherever blood is shed
they gather round,
the undeparted dead.*

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WARNING

These books all contain sexually explicit scenes unsuitable for very young readers. And certain readers of more mature age may find the scenes depicting medieval witchcraft, torture and prostitution, not to mention the medieval Undead, all a little too much.

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1

BENEATH THE UNCHANGING NIGHT

*Life stirs among the tombstones, like a prostitute
Pursuing her business beneath the unchanging night.*

from the Spanish of Luis Cernuda [The lines come from his poem *Cementerio de la Ciudad* ("City Cemetery") composed, apparently, in Glasgow, Scotland]

June, 1379

Maiden Lane, in Southwark, where the powerful Scottish witch named Muriel lived, was close to my own house.

Across the Hoop in Dead Man's Place by the second bridge and there it was: Maiden Lane. No maidens there, and no shops either. Just what was left of the old Bishop's Park on one side, filled with squatters, and beggars and homeless whores working the street, and on the other side, people's homes and various private brothels, some smaller even than the Green Unicorn, and one or two large ones, including the Peacock and the Maid Marian. *Maid Marian?* And outside the brothels, girls standing in the filthy street flaunting their wares.

They looked at me suspiciously – no idea I was one of them! – until I spotted a dark-haired Spanish-looking woman who reminded me of Sancha and approached her.

I held out a silver penny – twice what she earned for each trick. 'I'm looking for Muriel.'

'Which Muriel, lady? There's Mad Muriel – over there among the squatters.'

'No, not her.'

'Then Scotch Muriel.'

'A whore?'

'What do you think? Works at the Marian these days.'

'The Muriel I want's not a whore. Not exactly.'

'That's her. Got a bun in the oven, have you? You don't look it, so it's early days yet, you'll be all right. Reckon you ladies are worse than us whores. Always one of you creeping along here with a *little* problem asking for "the witch". Don't be afeared. That's what Muriel's known as in the Liberty of the Clink, and the Bishop lets her be. She helps keep the girls working with her potions and philtres, and that's all *he's* interested in. Come, I'll show you.'

'You mean William of Wykeham?'

She nodded. 'That's him. Was Chancellor of England before, they do say, but the old King, God rest his soul, caught him fiddling the books and gave him the heave-ho. Others – the Bishop's people – say it was Alice Perrers, the old King's whore, gave the Bishop the heave-ho. Didn't like the way he looked at her.' She laughed. 'You know Alice? No? I do. Used to, anyhow. Here we are. Muriel lives separate in a cottage behind the house. But this is as far as I dare go. They catch me on their premises, they'll say I'm angling for their cullies and I'll be for it.'

She was right about that. 'What's your name?'

'Why?'

Another silver penny. 'No reason I can think of. I just like to have friends in unlikely places.'

'It's Rosa, love.'

'Rosa Love?'

She burst out laughing. 'Oh, I like that! Rosa Love it should be, but it ain't. Spanish Rosa, they call me.'

'No está nada mal.'

'Hey, you know Spanish! I understand a bit. You said it's not so bad being called Spanish Rosa. You're right, some girls have horrible names.'

Don't I know it!

'But Rosa Love now, that's really something!'

'Keep calling yourself it and get your friends to, it'll catch on.'

'My Ma was from Spain. Got dumped here by a sailor, said he'd marry her in England, decided to sell her instead.'

'Mine was Spanish, too.'

'Yeah? Hey, I must get back or Ralph'll be after me. You should see the bruises his new boots make.' She turned round and hoiked her skirt up. Her bottom and the backs of her thighs bore several big bruises, some black, some fading. But she was laughing. Whores are such nice people. Well, mostly.

She turned round, dropped her skirt, said 'See you later' and went hurrying back to her post. I realised I hadn't returned the compliment and told her my name. And if she'd asked, what would I have said? Lady Marian did *not* wander the filthy streets of inner Southwark on her own. So, Mariana. But I wasn't dressed as Mariana!

Now, where was Muriel? Ah. A woman emerged from one of a row of tumble-down cottages all squeezed together.

She studied me. 'You're not carrying.'

'No.'

'What do you seek?'

She carried on studying me. I returned the compliment.

I had expected – I don't know why – an old witch, small and wizened. Muriel was young-ish – in her early thirties and still beautiful. I'd also expected dark – or greying or white – hair, but she was tall and blonde. The nordic witch. Brynhildr.

'There's a little of the witch in you,' she announced finally. 'And more than a little of the whore.'

She was indeed from Scotland.

'I think something similar may be said of you, Muriel. A witch with a little of the whore in her.'

'Tis as a whore I'm permitted to make my home in the Liberty of the Clink. You think the good Bishop could be seen to grant right of residence to a witch? I'm officially employed *there*.' She nodded

towards the Maid Marian. 'And have to be *seen* to be working there when the Bishop's mastiffs come round sniffing and yammering.'

'But surely he knows what you are, what you do.'

'Of course he does. But in the eyes of the world, I'm just another of our good Bishop's Winchester Geese.'

'And you don't mind?'

She smiled. A lovely smile. 'Do you?'

At first I thought she meant did I mind about her being a whore. Then I realised she meant did I mind being taken for a whore, and sometimes having to work as one. 'No,' I smiled back. 'No, actually, I don't mind at all. And I'm only just coming to realise that.'

'That's good. Sit down. A drink? No? Then what can I do for you? Can I see your hands?'

I held them out for her, and she took them in her own, holding them from underneath exactly as I did myself when reading hands.

It was the first time anyone had ever asked to read mine – the first time anyone had ever read them, apart from other students in Paris practising, and Uncle Yacoub, who first taught me chiromancy. Then I remembered comparing hands with Niniane in Paris. Hers were Fire hands, mine Water hands. We both had on each hand a well-developed Mount of Venus covered with rows of horizontal lines, and a clearly defined Girdle of Venus. She had straight, strong Heart Lines, whereas I had a straight, strong Heart Line only on my right hand – on my left hand it curved – and while her Heart Lines had a double fork at the end – she was more *fun* than I was! – mine had a triple fork, which meant that, unlike her, I combined feeling with logic ... Hmm.

'You read hands yourself, don't you.'

I nodded.

'So ... is there anything you want me to tell you? Anything you're not quite sure about?'

'Well ... you could tell me what stands out, what you notice first.'

'The Fate Lines go right through to the Saturn Finger, but the line on your right hand's got a break in it here –'

'Yes, with a cross in it. I know about that. It was what happened in Avignon.'

'And another break here, with another star –'

'What?' I hadn't noticed that. 'But that's *now*.'

'Aye. Something bad happening, and 'tis far from over.'

'There's still worse to come?'

'I'm afraid so. Yes, it's going to get *much* worse before it gets better.'

'But it will get better?'

'Aye. Eventually.'

I gazed at her, wanting more, but that was all I was going to get.

'The well developed Mount of the Moon stands out. You're sensitive and intuitive, with a leaning to the spiritual.'

'Mm.' Well, I knew that. 'That's characteristic of Water Hands, though, isn't it. What I've never been clear about is the marked difference between the two Heart Lines.'

'A tough façade has developed – the right hand – but beneath that façade you are soft and yielding.'

She was good. 'Any advice about that?'

'You need that tough façade, you need it badly, but don't let the soft, yielding you be smothered. 'Tis the real you. Be the real you sometimes, especially when you're dealing with people who love you and want what's best for you, even if you don't agree with what they say.'

I knew exactly what she meant.

'Now, why did you seek me out?'

So I told her what had happened in Colchester.

She listened without interrupting. Only when I'd finished, she said, 'I think you're right. The man you beheaded was possessed by Alfwin Host-thief. But you need to talk to Brother Hamon, the Exorcist. You can't? Well. I'll take him the news the Colchester night-walker's been beheaded – '

'But not by me! Don't mention me, whatever you do!'

'No, right. And I'll tell him 'twasn't Brother Edmund at all but Alfwin Host-thief's son, see what he says.'

'How do *you* know him?'

'How do *I a witch* know him? He turns to me when he comes up against something he's not equipped to deal with. Like when something was banging about and smashing things in the Bishop's Palace. Hamon thought it was a ghost, when 'twas simply a young girl being held captive by one of the swarm of priests and clerks that infest the place. Soon as she was released and sent home to her

mother, the banging and smashing ceased. Have you ever come across that?'

'I've heard of it. In Scotland they say it's a girl's familiar spirit expressing feelings she has to repress.'

'Aye, they do. You're from Scotland?'

'My father was. I'm from Spain.'

'Ah. I think there's a lot of that happens in the Clink prison, but with all the wailing and banging going on in there day and night, you'd never notice. Did you know the name Clink, which most people take for the sound of chains and keys, meant originally House of the Dead.'

'Really?'

'Aye. 'Twas built as a place where priests and nuns fallen foul of the bishop could be locked away to die. It's still used for that purpose by Bishop William, but now there's a special cage for whores and there are the cells where Brother Hamon keeps *his* people. Ones he believes are possessed, or undead. Like that nun last month. Possessed and raving – I heard all about it, though he wouldn't call me in, he never calls me in for nuns. But the devil wouldn't come out of her, so before Bishop William could tax him about the poor creature, he staked her and buried her with it still in her. And her head in a separate ossuary the bishops have kept throughout the centuries for all such heads.

'He had your Alfwin Host-thief in one of those cells. Alfwin wasn't possessed. I knew him – as a whore, not as a witch – he lived in Stoney Street – but Brother Hamon considered him ripe for undeath. He told me so.

'Listen, I've got to go. That woman there's waiting for me. I'll discuss this with Brother Hamon and perhaps you'd like to come and see me again, say the day after tomorrow.'

'I'll do that. Goodbye, Muriel. And thank you.'

My feet led me north towards the river and through Horseshoe Alley to Horseshoe Stairs, where a wherry took me up river and dropped me off at the Savoy.

What was I doing? This was madness.

I stood under cover of the hot-sausage stall. From there I could see the great gate without myself being seen, and watched and waited.

For what?

Don't ask me. For the Three Weird Sisters to take a hand?

'How you doing, darling?' It was the sausage man. He remembered me.

'I'm fine. And I think I'll have another of your delicious sausages.'

I took it, and was about to pay him when I saw a boy I thought was Humphrey.

He came close and passed me. It wasn't Humphrey, but he was wearing the same livery – Gaunt's.

'Excuse me, could you tell me if Humphrey is on duty today?'

He saw the sausage and bread in my hand, understood that I couldn't ask the guards.

'You're a bit over-dressed for a whore, aren't you, love?'

'That's because she's not a whore, young William.'

I spun round. It was my saviour, Geoffrey Chaucer, again.

'She must be, sir. Hanging around out here avoiding the guards and eating sausage in the street. And she had a rendez-vous with Humphrey de Colcestre!'

'Things are not always what they seem, William. You leave this to me. Have you paid for that delicious-looking sausage?' he asked me.

'Why? Would *you* like one?' I asked with a grin.

'Yes. And William can pay. It'll teach him to be more diplomatic in his dealings with beautiful strangers.'

'Another the same for this gentleman,' William told the hot-sausage man, ruefully. And found he had to pay for mine as well.

William went his way, a poorer but a wiser boy, and Geoffrey and I returned to the jetty, where we sat on the bench and finished eating.

Then, wiping his beard, he said, 'You're quite the player, aren't you?'

Uh?

'When I saw you in Paris last month, you were using yet another name – Fermosa, if I remember rightly – and you didn't recognise me. You didn't even speak English.'

'I wasn't in Paris last month. I've been here all the time since last we met.'

'Ah, Mariana. You can't fool an old spy like me. Or not so easily. As I told you last time we met, you are very distinctive, very memorable ... I went to your house – off Clink Street – as soon as I returned from Paris. You were away, had been away for a couple of weeks. They said you were in Essex somewhere. Chich, was it? And no doubt you *had* passed through Essex – then taken ship for France somewhere near Chich? *Chich* ...!' he repeated contemptuously.

'But I was in Essex – not in Chich, perhaps, though I had started there. I spent some of that time in Colchester.'

'Doing what exactly?' He was humouring me. 'Hunting down young Humphrey?'

'Hunting down the undead.'

He laughed. 'You certainly have a vivid imagination. Which nicely complements your acting skills.'

'I cannot continue this conversation with you, Geoffrey. A gentleman does not call a lady a liar.'

'No, but he might, in an unchivalrous moment, call a whore one.'

Were those tears I felt in my eyes? I never cried! Furious with myself – and with him! – I had liked this man so much! – I snapped 'Goodbye, Master Chaucer.'

He didn't go. But then where could he go, without a boat?

'I shouldn't have said that. I apologise. And I wish to remain Geoffrey to you, as you will remain Mariana to me. Agents like you – and me – are few and far between. We need to work together, not against each other – even if – indeed, especially if – our respective paymasters are working against each other. You know who I represent. May I ask who you act on behalf of?'

'You may ask ... Geoffrey.'

'But you will not answer.'

'I cannot.' If I told him I had no paymaster, was not acting on behalf of anyone, he wouldn't believe that any more than he'd

believe I hadn't been in Paris for more than a year. Perhaps I should leave it at that.

On the other hand, he was a professional. If I could convince him that this Fermosa was someone else, perhaps he could find out *who* ...

'Next time you're in Paris, Geoffrey, ask her where she was born, where she spent her childhood, and who with. I was born in Los Alcazares, near Cartagena, and spent my childhood there, much of it in the sea, the Mar Menor. And my companions, apart from my father and grandparents, were the slave Khadija, who acted as my nurse, and Rabbi Yacoub ben Amar, who acted as my teacher and whom I knew as Uncle Yacoub.'

'Interesting. But first of all, how do I know you are telling the truth? And secondly, how will I know you are telling the truth when in Paris you tell me a different story?'

I sighed. 'You're right. We need something simpler than that.' I opened my bodice, revealed my breasts.'

'My lady!'

'Ah ha! "My lady" is it, now?' I laughed at him. 'Look. Look closely, don't be shy! Surely a man of the world like you has had close acquaintance with a *whore's* breasts before ...? You see these lines, these scars, running across them?'

'My lady ... you've been whipped!'

He was shocked, but I was not in the mood to let him off lightly.

'What is all this "my lady" suddenly? Whores get whipped. Now, next time you're in Paris, get Fermosa to bare her breasts ...'

'That should be easy enough. For a silver sou she'd bare all.'

I stared him in the eye.

He blushed.

'It seems you do not have the same deep-down respect for her you have for me. In fact, deep down, you *know* that she and I are not one.'

He smiled. '*A priori*, that does indeed seem to be the case, my lady. Very well, I shall carry out this little experiment – with pleasure.'

'I'm sure. And you, be sure to let me know – *a posteriori* – the outcome of your pleasurable little experiment.'

'That too will be my pleasure. In the meantime, I would appreciate being permitted to go on addressing you as Mariana.'

'I should like that, Geoffrey.'

Our talk turned to poetry, and to Will Langland.

'It may interest you to know that I met and became friends with Long Will, what, ten days ago? Guess where.'

'In Colchester.'

'Right first time. And I shall be going to Cornhill to visit him tomorrow. He is taking care of a man I rescued when he was being hunted by the *posse comitatus* with hounds and mastiffs. They thought he was a night-walker, one of the undead, and a killer of young whores.'

'But he wasn't.'

'The poor creature couldn't kill a cockroach. If you would like to join me at Long Will's tomorrow, you'll be able to meet him.'

'And satisfy myself that you and Fermosa are not one and the same. But Mariana, if that is so, and I do now believe it to be so, then you must be very, very careful, for she is your double, your doppelganger.'

'Thank you for warning me. And the more you can find out about her, the better.'

'I realise that. Now, may I ask what exactly you were hoping to achieve at your post by the hot-sausage stall – apart from keeping warm and having something to eat?'

'Yes. And maybe you could help me with that, too.'

'If I am not careful, I shall soon find I've got myself another master.'

'Two masters is probably safer than two mistresses.'

He laughed. 'I'm sure it is. But I don't have one mistress.'

'And I'm sure we both wish to keep it that way.' I wanted to ask him about Blanche, but what should I refer to her as? Hardly the White Widow! 'Geoffrey, is Blanche d'Évreux still in residence at the Savoy Palace. I want to talk to her.'

He gazed at me. 'You've met her highness?'

'I met her first in Avignon. I actually spent many hours talking to her, and came to know her rather well.'

'Did you indeed. Under what name?'

'Don't start that again!'

'I meant Lady Marian, Doña Mariana, Master Jack ... '

'She knows me both as Lady Marian and as Doña Mariana.'

'I see. But no, I don't believe she is, though she is still in England. How about Lady Joan FitzAlan? She was enquiring about you the other day.'

'*FitzAlan?*' Oh, no.

'The sister of Sir Richard FitzAlan. She's the Countess of Essex – and owns most of it! Including, I imagine, much of the land around Colchester and your village – what was its name? I'll arrange a meeting with her.'

With *her*? With FitzAlan's *sister*? What if her brother is there!

Then the ferry came, but Geoffrey did not board it. He had come down to the pier to see me safely away from the dangers this area held for me, not only by the palace, he would believe, but the whole waterfront area and the slums around Whitefriars and Fleet Street outside the Wall if I was foolish enough to try to walk back to the city. I was sure he considered me foolish enough for anything. *Daffy* enough.

We gazed at each other as the ferry pulled out into the darkness and the swirl of the river.

I was also sure he enjoyed my company.

He waved and turned away, back up to the Savoy Palace. And Lady Joan FitzAlan.

* * * * *

When I reached home, Ferchard was sitting at the table I'd started using for my astrology and other studies before I left for Chich and Colchester. He was waiting for me.

'Marian. Sit down.'

I sat down opposite him. My papers and books had, I noticed, been cleared away and replaced by various documents and papers I didn't recognise but which obviously belonged to Ferchard. No problem. I could always get another table. And anyway, I now had my very own room behind the Green Unicorn!

'How are you, Ferchard? We didn't get a chance to talk yesterday.'

'Physically, I'm fine, thank you. My spirit, however, is troubled.'

'Not over me again, I hope?'

'Aye, lass, over you. Who else? Do you remember what I told you and Martin before you left?'

'All too well. And I think –'

'Thanks to your folly, what you think is now neither here nor there. Your folly and your – what shall I call it? – your wantonness? Your shamelessness? You know that I received a letter from Martin and the Prior of St John's Abbey? Yes, of course you do. You were there when Martin dictated it. Branded to keep your tongue still.'

'Ferchard, just who do you think you're talking to?'

'I'm talking to the daughter of my friend and brother Anndra.'

Anndra is Andrew, my father, Sir Andrew MacElpin, but Ferchard and I were speaking the Gaelic together, as we always did.

'The daughter for whom I have assumed responsibility,' he continued, 'as Anndra would wish and expect. I think we can safely say that were he alive now, his shame would know no bounds. And neither would his anger.'

'He sold me into slavery and started all this.'

'We've had that conversation. He had no choice. Since that time, you've had countless choices, countless opportunities to be your father's daughter, to be Lady Marian. But no, you are a whore by training and profession, and you cannot change. And acting *in loco parentis*, I have to take certain decisions.'

'Just a moment. This, in Colchester, is the first time I have worked in a bordel since Avignon, three years ago. I had no choice then –'

'You had little choice in Avignon, I agree. Though I suspect there existed alternatives another girl would have searched for more assiduously.'

'A girl who had not been sold into whoredom at the age of fourteen and become inured to it, maybe. But that is beside the point. Now, in Colchester, Martin, unable to bring me straight back to Southwark, offered me the choice of a nunnery or a brothel. Naturally, I'd have preferred not to have to make such a choice, to have returned here at once. But, given the choice, I accepted the brothel. Not only because the thought of a nunnery horrifies me,

but because I hoped that by being there on the spot, I might be able to help catch a murderer who has been terrorising the area.'

'Aye, I heard about that. But again, no doubt other means could have been found.'

'Again, the choice would depend on one's upbringing. You would find it easier to play the soldier than to play the priest. I find it easier to play the whore than to play the nun.'

'And did you catch the murderer?'

I couldn't tell him. 'There are two, actually. One has now been destroyed – decapitated. The other, a killer of prostitutes, is still out there in the dark somewhere. I need information on this other kind of night-walker – it appears to be some kind of vampire – and that is the sole reason I'm here. I need to talk to people who might know, might be able to help.'

'Marian, stop. I'm not interested in your vampire. What concerns me is your behaviour, and all the silly lies.'

'What lies? And let me say that what concerns *me* is your assuming such a degree of authority over me, a grown woman. And your deputing that authority to an oaf like Martin while making derogatory remarks about me in front of him and your drinking partner, English.'

'Don't you look down on me, lass!'

'I don't look down on you for drinking. I understand that it's a way of life, a way of coping with life and death. A poetic way:

*'Meum est propositum in taberna mori,
ut sint vina proxima morientis ori.
tunc cantabunt letius angelorum chori:
Sit Deus propitius huic potatori.*

*(I aim to die in a tavern,
with wine at my dying mouth.
Then a choir of angels will merrily sing:
May God be merciful to this drinker.)*

'The Archpoet,' I went on. 'I came across his songs in Paris with Raoul and the others.'

'Hmph ... So what *do* you look down on me for in your infinite wisdom?'

'I don't look down on you at all, Ferchard. Not for anything. I might wish you used words like "slut" and "whore" less frequently, but –'

'And what words would you suggest I use?'

Ah. There he had me.

And he wasn't finished. 'I hear Duke John's issue by his whore Katherine don't like being referred to as bastards.'

Well, they wouldn't. I bit my tongue.

'The two questions – what lies, and why I assume and depute authority over you – are one,' he went on. Then, after a pause, 'Let me tell you a story. Do you remember le Boeuf? Within hours of your first starting to investigate Montrouge, he knew of it. And he wondered why. Wondered who you were, what your interest was.'

I'd had my mouth open to accuse Ferchard of informing him, but closed it again. If it had been Ferchard, he'd have known who I was. And anyway, if I remembered rightly, Ferchard had been absent for two or three days at Montrouge's obsequies, and didn't reappear until the investigation was already well under way.

Ferchard, having watched my performance with a grim smile on his face, continued. 'He asked Martin of Chich, who was in Paris at the time on business, which included Montrouge business, to investigate *you*. Martin proceeded to do so.'

I had repeated my fish-like opening and closing of the mouth at the first mention of Martin, but now determined to keep it closed until Ferchard had finished. With my mouth and lips I must have looked ridiculous.

'Martin, you should know, is a smuggler – among other things. He goes backwards and forwards between Essex and France all the time. He has friends everywhere from Nantes to Bruges. And a particular friend was – *is* – P'tit Jean, the new Sire de Montrouge.'

Ferchard paused. His eyes, I noticed, were not on my eyes, but on my mouth, my lips. That damned gag *had* made my mouth bigger! But I only wore it for one day. Perhaps it was having to start using capsicum on my lips again at the Shag that had done it.

'All this,' he went on – (all what? I was lost) 'though it may surprise *you*, is not in the least remarkable to those who know how

such people work. However, following you around as he did, he realised that this "lady", this "student" was little more than a common whore.'

'But – !' burst out of me. Then I closed my mouth again.

'Sleeping with fellow-students ... well, all right, except that, of course, you were *not* a student, you just pretended to be one, dressing in man's clothes, which no lady would ever do, especially no lady such as he had taken you for. But having a public affair with Thomas of Pizan – so public you accompanied him on at least three occasions to the royal court! – and being openly the mistress of – or better, the favourite whore of – "the Albanian"? He could no longer simply assume that when you visited whore-houses you did so in the course of your investigations. He went and asked. At the Adriatica, which you visited several times, he was informed that you had a contract with the abbess – what was her name?'

'Mère Veronique,' I said, and could have kicked myself.

'Right. You had a contract with Mère Veronique, and would be starting work there at some future date – sooner rather than later, she hoped. At La Fille d'Or, the abbess – ?' He waited.

'Mère Mireille.' What did it matter? No longer able to look him in the eye, watch his eyes playing over my lips, I looked down at his feet, the pointed toes of the yellow *babouches* he'd brought with him from Andalucia, and kept my eyes there.

'Mère Mireille told him, looking down her nose, that you were not available. To the likes of him, he assumed she meant.'

Why would Mère Mireille and Mère Veronique lie like that? Because they didn't wish to discuss the real reason I'd been there, of course. And also, it had to be admitted, there was a grain of truth in what Mère Veronique had said. She had offered me a job – they both had – but it was Mère Veronique I'd promised to work for, if ever I did work in Paris. Which I never would, but did she understand that? And come to think of it, she also might have believed I was having an affair with the Albanian – who just happened to own the Adriatica, along with most of the girls who worked there.

'But by this time, he'd decided you were not Lady Marian MacElpin or Doña Mariana de la Mar at all – how could you be, behaving like that? – but some village girl who, coincidentally, he'd

known in his youth and whose name was also Marian – Marian atte-Marsh. You had, according to him, been abducted at an early age, sold to a ship's captain and shipped off to Spain, never to be heard of again. Until he found you in Paris, newly arrived from the brothels of Spain and on your way back, no doubt, to your native England.'

'Ferchard, this is all nonsense.'

'I know that, and you know that, but nobody else knows that. And his story is very plausible.'

'People down there know that. Marian atte-Marsh was badly scarred on her right hip and flank as a result of an accident in the local smithy. The blacksmith, who remembers her and the accident, swears I am not her.'

'Does he now? That *is* interesting. And I'm on your side here. If I thought for one moment you were not Anndra's daughter I would have no further interest in you.' He let that sink in, let me imagine what would happen to me in that case ... 'At some point, Martin was at the Montrouge town-house – P'tit-Jean was not there, but le Boeuf was, and two priests, both known to you. One, a Canon –'

No! It was not possible!

' – had got wind of charges being brought against a witch – you. That a warrant was being issued for your arrest on a charge of witchcraft.'

'Martin – or le Boeuf, or someone – *must* have made all this up.'

'No one made it up. The only thing they made up was when they claimed you *belonged* to Martin. And even that became fact – yes, *fact*, lass – when two priests – your two priests – signed a document attesting to his ownership of you. That document exists.'

'His ownership of me? *Martin owns me?*'

'Aye, lass. He does. Now will you let me go on?'

I lowered my eyes, focussed once more on his *babouches*. I couldn't listen to any more of this, but neither could I simply get up and walk away. I needed to hear the rest of this farrago of lies, and to know how much of it Ferchard believed.

'The charge of witchcraft, the Canon told them, was against a Spanish woman named Mariana de la Mar. The first thing they had to do, he said, was find you a master, someone to speak for you.'

'Why Martin?' I asked, looking up. 'Why not *you*?'

At the look of fury on his face, I lowered my eyes again, fast.

'Because they believed – all Paris believed, it seems – that you were my concubine, that you had no right to the name MacElpin, the name of a Scottish lady, Lady Marian MacElpin, who, according to Martin – and everyone believed him, why wouldn't they? – lived even then in Southwark. But that, using a false identity, claiming to be a lady, was just one more charge being brought against you. As was transvestism or – worse! – shape-shifting by means of witchcraft between male and female bodies. The truth of that would be established when you were put to the question. So, not me, because I was obviously to some extent an accessory. What the Canon and le Boeuf said they needed was a whole new identity for you – and the obvious one – as you yourself remarked earlier – was that of professional whore; and it was then Martin confessed that he knew your background, knew who you really were: a brainless slut from some God-forsaken village at the far end of nowhere who played with fire because she was too stupid to understand it burnt but was no more a witch than any four-legged bitch wandering the streets was. Perfect! And her name? Marian atte-Marsh. But would Martin attest that he was your owner? He would. They went to the office of the *procureur*, the authorities accepted a large bribe and prepared a document stating that Marian atte-Marsh belonged to Martin of Chich, bearing the signatures of these two priests and the seal of the Lord Provost of Paris. Martin was told to keep you on a tight leash. It was difficult for him to do so, because by this time you were consorting openly not only with the woman Niniane des Sept Soeurs – who by all accounts *is* a witch as well as being a notorious whore – but with the Emperor himself.'

I'd had enough. 'And are you "on my side" here?'

'No, lass. The document exists. The original is in Paris. Martin has a copy – I've seen it. And you should be thanking Martin on bended knee every day for the rest of your life – '

'What?'

'You'd have been put to the question and what was left of you after that would have been burnt at the stake. Instead of which, you continue your life in my charge as though nothing has happened, thanks to Martin's kindness and generosity. No, for me the worst is

your behaviour, playing the whore all over Paris when I truly believed you'd turned over a new leaf – '

'I was not!'

'Nonsense, lass. I have no doubt a great deal more was going on that has never been drawn to my attention. And there is the incontrovertible fact that you led the whole of Paris to believe that you were also sleeping with me. When you bothered to come home and do so. Making me a laughing stock.'

'Is *that* what this is all about? A lot of malicious gossip making *you* a laughing stock? No concern about *me*? About *my* reputation? It was *me* that they – '

'*Your* reputation! This *was* your reputation! This *is* your reputation! They didn't have to invent the brainless whore from the village by the sea! She already existed. They just gave another name and village to her. And now you are employed full-time at the Shag, in Colchester. Or so Martin informs me. Is that true or not?'

'Well, yes, but – '

'A straight Yes will do. The simple truth for once in your life ... Martin also informs me that he signed a contract with this Henry Bawd in my name – *in my name*, lass – he is not asserting *his* ownership of you – a contract committing you, Marian atte-Marsh, also known as Mariana de la Mar, to working there for a period of three months, automatically renewable to one year should you still be in residence there when the three months have passed and the fourth begun. Naturally, you will fulfill the terms of that contract. I have never been in breach of a contract, and I do not propose to start now.'

'*You – you're sending me back to the brothel?*' I couldn't believe it. All right, I wanted and needed to go back, but I'd been expecting to have to persuade him, to beg him, to let me return to Colchester, and that he would only allow me to do so as a lady.

'Of course. It is the path you have chosen, and have committed yourself *and me* to.'

'I'll need a few days here before I go back. I told you – '

'You go back tomorrow. Do you not realise that you're a runaway, a fugitive, *again*?'

I had one last trump I could play. 'The Countess of Essex, Lady Joan FitzAlan, wishes to meet me. She will send a message saying when and where.'

Now he was surprised. '*Sir Richard's sister?*'

I wish everyone would stop saying that. I need to keep them far apart in my mind – and even farther apart in reality.

'Does she know about you and him?'

'Of course she doesn't!'

'Ah. So this is some other matter. Then I suppose –'

I couldn't resist it: 'A straight Yes will do.'

He glared at me. A glare from Ferchard will freeze water. I froze.

'In that case, naturally, you will stay here until she has finished with you. Indeed, it might provide you with some kind of excuse when you return and have to face the wrath of this Henry Bawd.'

'Henry Bawd is dead. The undead killer, the one I decapitated, tore Henry apart.'

'Did you say *you* decapitated?'

'Yes, but that was a slip of the tongue. I'm upset. I was ordered not to tell anyone, anyone at all. If the Crowner hears that you know about it, I'll have my tongue cut out.'

'Aye, well, unlike you I can hold my tongue. No one doubts your bravery, lass, but if the fool didn't want you blabbing, he should have ordered them to keep you branked.'

'Aye, and if they had, I wouldn't have been able to dress as a boy and run away.' Keep him sweet – his mood was softening. Was it my "bravery" or was it the thought of me moving in lady-like circles?

'Did you know branking – the real thing, with a spike – was invented in Scotland?'

Here we go again. And they're so proud of it!

'Yes, Papa told me that one day when I was being cheeky. Said if we were at home in Scotland he'd have them put one on me.'

'You see? And that was when you were young and innocent. Can you imagine what he'd be saying now?'

I wasn't winning this argument. Best thing now was to lose gracefully.

'He'd be saying "Send Undead John to seek out a gag for the lass," I imagine.'

'You *imagine*? That doesn't need much imagination. A gag with a spike, yes. And when the messenger from the Countess arrives, send him straight to me. *I* will open her letter.'

Oh, God, no ...

Ferchard, of course, went off out.

I spent an hour in the kitchen with Khadija and Undead John. John was much happier in a kitchen with a woman than in a tavern among men, and they'd become fond of each other. Still, having no language in common they were delighted to spend some time talking through me, getting to know each other better and solving some of their little communication problems. Like John wanting to buy the cheapest of everything when he went shopping and Khadija being angry with him because she didn't want the cheapest, she wanted the best. And the question of who was in charge in this house, which seemed to matter a great deal to John and which Khadija couldn't answer, not only because she didn't have the language to do so, but because she *didn't know*.

When John asked me that, I thought long and hard before I answered. It was my house, and mostly my money that was being used to run it – yes, it was still *my* money even if I no longer had access to it! But on the other hand ... Not only did it look as though I wouldn't be around for some time to come, but it was a fact that I did as Ferchard told me – more or less – and tried to please him. All right, the harder I tried the less I succeeded. Look at what he'd just told me about Paris, where I'd done my very best to keep out of trouble and behave like a lady. And conversely, Ferchard most certainly did not do as I told him, and would be horrified at the mere suggestion that he should.

So who was in charge?

At that moment, Khadija, who had been watching me think and knew me so well, said. 'What was his question?'

I told her. But she had guessed.

'If you have to stop and think about that question, you're stupider than even I would ever have believed, and it's time Sidi Fucker took his belt to you and put you out of your misery.'

I laughed – not at her quite innocent mispronunciation of Ferchard's name – I was used to that – but at her version of logic, which always made her unanswerable. John asked me what she'd said.

'She said Sir Ferchard is.'

'And you, my lady?'

Was he asking whether I agreed? Or was he asking what *my* position was? I remembered when he had asked me if it was true I was a whore.

Answer everything, now. 'Khadija is right, of course, John. And as regards me, for the foreseeable future, I shan't be living here. I may pay the occasional visit, but you must both get used to a household that doesn't include me – in any capacity. And John, you don't need to address me as "my lady". No one else does.'

He waited.

What for?

'I am Mariana. Say it.'

'Mariana.'

I smiled.

'But what if – what when – when someone comes to the door asking for Lady Marian?'

'She's not here. She's away, on her travels.'

'Even if you *are* here?'

'Even if I *am* here.'

'Even if you're standing here in front of us.'

I laughed. '*Especially* if I'm standing here in front of you! To all such people, people who come calling, I am Mariana la Puta, Mariana the whore. Don't look so shocked, John. You wouldn't have asked me – when was it? Two months ago? – unless you'd already got to know me well enough to believe that of me. Oh, and there's a letter which may arrive for Lady Marian early tomorrow. If it comes, you accept it and hand it to Sir Ferchard, you understand? *Not* to me.'

He nodded.

'And the same applies to all letters addressed to Lady Marian. Now I'm going upstairs, where poor Yahia has been waiting for me all this time. Good night, John.'

'Good night, Mariana.'

'*Buenas noches*, Khadija.' I kissed her cheek.

'What did you tell him?' she asked, in Arabic. Though we said the everyday phrases in Spanish, as we had at home in Spain where my grandfather hadn't even known Arabic, Khadija always preferred to *converse* in Arabic.

'I told him Sidi Ferchard was in charge.'

'*Hamdallah*. Praise be to Allah. And you're going to obey Sidi Fucker from now on?'

'I have always tried to be humble and obedient.'

She laughed, and made a spanking gesture with her hand.

'Make her laugh, John. She doesn't laugh often enough.'

And with that I went upstairs, where Yahia spent the rest of the evening massaging and oiling me.

Oh, how much I missed him – and only him! – when I was away!

When I arrived at Will Langland's house next day, Geoffrey Chaucer was already there.

'Ah, 'tis Lady Meed,' declaimed Will – and Geoffrey burst out laughing.

When he had quietened down a bit, I said, 'Perhaps I should go outside and make that entrance again. And this time, we might all say Good Morning.'

'Not necessary, my lady,' said Will. 'Come in. Sit down.'

'Thank you.'

It was a bare bench. I sat down beside Geoffrey. Will was sitting on the floor.

'If you know Geoffrey,' he said, 'then you will know we must make allowances. As we must for all poets.'

'But Lady Meed!' Geoffrey chortled. 'You know. Meed. Profit. Payment. Reward. Will has her paying the Good silver pence for their labours, and corrupting the Corruptible with purses of gold. She's the woman with the magic bag of fresh-minted coins who keeps the world – everything – going.'

'I see. And why is that so funny?'

'Start with Will. Why did you call Mariana Lady Meed?'

'In a matter of hours, I got to know her well enough to predict that when –'

'In *Colchester*, Geoffrey.'

He acknowledged the point with a nod. 'Go on, Will.'

'Well enough to predict that when I tell her my poor wife is working herself to death to support both me *and* Tom Watt, she will immediately produce gold nobles out of thin air, solving the problem at a stroke.'

'And why is that so funny, Geoffrey?'

'I didn't know of your propensity for magicking money out of nowhere. I knew only of your reputation for being – I quote: "a Spanish whore". It is Lady Meed as whore that is so funny. Or the whore as Lady Meed.'

And now Will started laughing, too.

I sat in what I hoped was dignified silence, and waited.

Our two poets were now arguing the point.

Tom – he who had been Brother Edmund – came in, smiled, sat down beside me, and waited too.

Finally, they reached an agreement. Lady Meed could be a high-class whore, a rich courtesan. Such women were often liberal with their ill-gotten gains.

At this point, I joined in. 'Why do you class their gains as "ill-gotten"?''

Both opened their mouths. Both closed them again.

Silence.

'And did you have any particular whore, courtesan, in mind? Apart from me, that is.'

Will looked at Geoffrey.

Geoffrey said, 'Will was thinking of his wife, who – though hardly high-class – she works Gropecunt Lane, just round the corner here – does provide these two idlers with money.'

'I am not an idler!' protested Will. 'I am too long and thin to do manual work, and my poetry ...'

'*Your wife goes out whoring?*' I was astounded

'Need is a hard taskmaster.' At his most lugubrious. 'It makes beggars and thieves and whores of us all ...'

What could I say to that? 'And who were *you* thinking of, Geoffrey? If you say you were thinking of me, I'm leaving.'

'No, don't do that. I had in mind – never repeat this to a soul – my sister-in-law. Who, it must be said, despite her great beauty – or

perhaps because of it – *is* a whore. Why do I say that? She was married when she began her notorious *affaire* with my master, who shall remain nameless.' Long Will sniggered (as well he might: Geoffrey's master was John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster, *de facto* Ruler of the Realm) but Geoffrey went on: 'You, Mariana, are not married, and therefore your actions, while reprehensible, are in a sense innocent. You are selling your body for money, yes, but you're not playing the harlot. Now, where was I? Oh, yes. Katherine is famous for her generosity with all who cross her path. Even me. When the old King died, young Richard didn't want to know about me. Not that that mattered, because being a King's Man at the moment is a purely honorary position.'

'Why not?'

'Why not what? Oh. Because I was known to have been on good terms with Alice Perrers. You had to be when her star was in the ascendant. You had *not* to be, now her star was falling. But I didn't lick her arse as they say because she had the King's ear. I *liked* her. Still do.'

'You licked her arse because you liked her,' I said, straight-faced.

He gazed at me. 'Words, unpolished and unedited. You see why we have to re-read and revise everything we write?'

'Yes. So what am I to understand here? That both Katherine – your sister-in-law – and Alice Perrers played Lady Meed?'

'That would be a very good thing for you to understand, and would let me off the hook I caught myself on. Thank you, Mariana.'

'My pleasure. Geoffrey, do you have a message for me?'

'I do. You will receive a written invitation from Lady Joan this morning. It may already have been delivered. And the lady you asked about will contact you.'

'Excuse me, Lady Marian, but you didn't take Geoffrey up on what he said about *you*.'

'What he said about ... oh, I see.'

'*That*,' said Geoffrey, 'is but one aspect of her multi-faceted personality. She is also the confidante of Emperors, a student of theology, a belly-dancer –'

'Geoffrey, please.'

Will looked at me. 'It makes one wonder that such an obnoxious little ferret and gossip-monger should also be a poet, doesn't it, my lady.'

'It does. But is he a good poet?'

'A very competent composer of the poetry of entertainment, for what that is worth, yes. But *good*? He knows little of the poetry of edification, the composition of which is in itself a good work. I suspect that penning the kind of as-you-like-it stuff Geoffrey pens is as much a sin as being a whore.'

'He means I am prostituting my talents. However, as I never make a farthing out of it, that would only make me one who whores for pleasure, not one who does it for pay.'

'Which is surely worse,' said Will. 'I can't believe Kitty would ever go out whoring if she didn't have to.'

'And you were telling me about Katherine's generosity to you, Geoffrey.'

'Ah yes. 'Twas her got me my place on Lancaster's staff, as well as a sinecure in the City on which I and my Philippa can comfortably live.'

'So there you are,' said Will, triumphantly. 'Lady Meed can be a whore.'

Feeling I must live up to that – and because I was in a hurry now to go home – I took a gold noble out of my purse and gave it to Tom. 'Tom, give this to Kitty when she comes home. Tell her it is to pay for your board and lodging till I return. Do *not* give it to Long Will. You can, usually, trust a whore. You can *never* trust a poet.'

With Geoffrey laughing and Will staring at me, mouth wide open, aghast, I took my leave.

THE WHITE WIDOW

The following day I went straight to the Green Unicorn.

I didn't speak to anyone, just went into my own little room, changed and left. I wanted to be in boy's clothes this time for my meeting with Muriel.

There was no sign of Rosa Love or the other girls, but Muriel was up and welcomed me with a tisane of various herbs.

'I like the clothes. Your dress like that often?'

'A habit I picked up in Paris.'

'Nice. But don't people see? I mean the way you walk.'

I laughed. 'I try not to walk like that when I'm dressed as a boy.'

'I suppose they take you for a badling. Now, listen. The court sentenced Alfwin to death by hanging for plotting rebellion, for murder, for robbery, for rape, and for stealing the Host, which in their eyes – it was the Bishop's court – was by far his worst crime. And Brother Hamon went along with that on condition that after the hanging the corpse be staked and buried down at the sign of the Cross Bones, in unconsecrated ground, along with us whores.'

'He was staked and buried? Not burnt?'

'Not burnt, no. Not that it would have made any difference. Either was too little, too late. Before Alfwin was taken down from the gallows, his soul had already flown to the body of his son and taken possession of it. And it is difficult to see how that could have been avoided.'

By sealing his soul in, I thought.

She looked at me, then went on with what she was saying. 'I discussed the whole question of revenants with Brother Hamon, and this is what we agree on.

'When a person dies, the soul can go through the tunnel of light to whatever awaits it there. This is what *should* happen.

'Or the discarnate soul may hang around, unable to move on, a shade, a ghost, either anchored to a particular spot or floating free as a bird but congregating in unseen flocks wherever blood is shed.

'Or the soul may remain attached to the dead body. The body will then become a revenant if it is possible for it to emerge from its grave. Hence the deep graves, the heavy grave-stones, the cairns and so on.

'Or the soul may attach itself to another body, one still alive or but recently dead. This may occur if the person's own body is unusable – staked or whatever.

'In the two cases where a soul quickens a *dead* body, imparts a semblance of life to it, the creatures are not vampires, like the ones we hear of in the Balkans and Venice and Bohemia, but putrid and disgusting eaters of human flesh. Nevertheless, they are dead and cannot be killed again, not in any ordinary way. What causes this? According to the Church, a curse from a bishop or a mitred abbot – or from a parent – or excommunication. Or suicide. Or being a heretic or a witch. This traps the soul. It can only be released by a priest at the grave with the body in it. Or so Brother Hamon maintains.' She paused and grinned. 'But that is all nonsense, for the body no longer returns to the grave ... Sealing an evil soul within its body, though? I'd give a great deal to be able to do that.'

Another mind-reader.

'I saw it done once, that's all. In Paris. My problem now is not Alfwin. It's some other undead creature – a vampire? – not any of the ones you described – that is attacking young women and girls, prostitutes mainly so far as I know, and killing them by tearing open their throats and draining their blood.'

'You mean sucking their blood. Drinking it.'

'No, apparently not.'

'Pouring it out upon the ground, then. That's something completely different from the simple night-walking feeder on human flesh you beheaded. I said of the two cases where a soul is occupying a dead body that they *are dead*, dead revenants from the grave. But vampires are nothing like that. They are *not dead*, they are the true undead.'

'So Alfwin Turner does not qualify as undead.'

'No. Alfwin Turner was in possession of a dead body.'

'Hence the stink.'

'Exactly. Vampires don't stink.'

'You have met one? Smelt one?'

'No. I'm merely passing on the lore of the dead and the undead as it was handed down to me. The one killing these poor girls in the wilds of Essex – has it ever been seen?'

'I don't think so. It was being confused with the night-walker I beheaded. Now that's been dealt with, perhaps ... But I think I may have seen him. It.' And I told her about the man on the beach.

She took a moment to digest this, then said quietly, 'That's no vampire. It's a wraith, a spectre ... It may be well-known in the area ... You should ask Ma Lethbridge about it. She was for a while part of a coven of Essex witches – very powerful ones.'

I nodded. But she was staring at me. Could she tell that I knew about Marell and the Undying? All she said was:

'And now you must go.' But then she added, 'Be very careful, Mariana. Twice ice-cold hands have held you close; third time lucky.'

Twice? Ah, yes. The revenant and the wraith. But I could have done without that "third time lucky". The first two times had been lucky for *me*.

I walked out of Maiden Lane – waving to Rosa, who was talking to a cully – and hesitated at the junction with Dead Man's Place. I didn't want to go home, or even back along Clink Street, in case Ferchard saw me, so I turned right and bumped into an elegantly dressed man.

I was about to apologise – it had been my fault – but he was already striding away towards the Castle on the Hoop. And in my hand was a note.

"Look for me on Paul's Walk after Sext."

Blanche. It must be. And Sext – midday – gave me plenty of time. But what and where was Paul's Walk?

I decided to take a wherry across to Queenhythe, and try St Paul's Cathedral. If Paul's Walk was not in the Cathedral precincts, surely someone there would know of it?

I followed in the footsteps of the secret messenger, up to the Castle on the Hoop and the Bank End Stairs, but he had gone.

St Paul's is huge. From the river, it looms over London like a man-made mountain, dominating the city in a way Notre-Dame never does, no matter which direction you see it from. But once you land at Queenhythe, the view is lost, hidden behind the clustered houses and shops and churches, until you pass the fish market and come out into the cathedral precincts. I was glad I was a boy today.

I looked around. Who to ask? Not a religious or rich burgess. Or ... ah, over there. Two whores, both quite young – about my age – one blonde, one who'd had her head shaved. I remembered what Sancha had told me. These two were taking a great risk.

As I approached, they looked me up and down. The blonde said, 'You want to come round the corner with us? Both of us? No? One of us? Me? Kitty?'

'Oh, come on, Meg. You blind? That's a girl.' The poor baldy grinned at me. 'Ain't you, love.'

'Sorry, Meg, but yes, Kitty's right. Aren't you taking a terrible risk working here?'

'You only ever tout where they tell you to, you and your man'll starve to death. You just have to keep your eyes peeled, be ready to run when the hornies show,' Kitty explained. 'Anyway, what can we do for you?'

'I'm looking for Paul's Walk.'

'It's inside. All along the nave. You have a look, you'll see people walking up and down, yacking.'

'The weather's nice today, so there won't be that many inside,' put in blonde Meg, 'but when it's cold or wet the only ones outside are me and Kitty.'

'Thanks. Here.' I gave them each a silver penny, which disappeared under their skirts in an instant. And entered the cathedral. And stood there face up-turned in awe. This was by far the biggest and most imposing building I'd ever been in. As I tried to make the comparison, I suddenly realised that I'd never actually been into Notre-Dame in Paris. Would I ever get another chance?

I was standing in the centre of the church, under the great tower. To my right was the choir, to my left, the long, long nave stretching into the distance, with people walking up and down it, in pairs and

groups, chatting, dwarfed by the soaring vaults of the ceiling far above them.

I set out along the nave towards the portico at the west end of the building. I was alone. I stood out. But would she recognise me dressed as a boy? I doubted whether I would recognise her. She would be heavily cloaked and veiled.

'Ah, mais voilà, ce jeune homme-ci, je l'ai vu à Paris, et maintenant je le vois à Londres. Quelle chance.'

That should be her, but it was a man's voice.

I ignored it. Walked on up the nave.

And a voice in my head said, *Keep walking!*

Blanche.

I kept walking.

Behind me, the man called *'Attends-moi!'*

There was a kerfuffle and a bang behind me. The man? And someone took my arm. Blanche. 'Go to the Bell on the Hoop. Now. Get a private room there.' She pushed me towards the exit at the west end, and in seconds I was outside.

Where were those girls? Ah – only Kitty. I ran over to her. 'Do you know the Bell on the Hoop?' She nodded. 'Can you get me there, fast, but keeping out of sight? Someone's –'

'This way.' She grabbed my arm and we ran round the east end of the building past a cross – 'St Paul's Cross' she told me, 'and that –' she pointed – 'is the charnel house. We can get out behind there.'

The charnel house? Full of talking heads?

In a moment we were at the end of West Cheap, where it leads into the shambles and the meat market. She pulled me through, her poor bare feet and my elegant shoes slipping and sliding on the slime and shit and entrails, and there was Newgate ahead of us. Out we ran, the guards taking no notice of her as she was hand in hand with me, and turned left into a maze of alleys, where we stopped for breath.

'The Bell's outside Ludgate, but if we'd gone that way you'd have been spotted for sure. This way we can come at it from behind while they're still searching for you round the Cathedral.' She studied me. 'What you done?' She waited. 'Apart from dressing as a boy. That'd get you a whipping if you was one of us.'

'I am one of you.'

She grinned. 'I thought you must be. Got a master with money, eh? Keeps you to himself.'

'Well, not exactly to himself. He's got me working in a brothel in Colchester at the moment. Then I had to come up here for a few days and he wanted me to pass as a lady –'

'You call that passing as a lady!'

I laughed. 'I'll be in real trouble if he sees me like this. But it's not him I'm hiding from, it's some man from Paris who –'

'Paris?'

'I used to work there. That's – that's where my master found me. This man who's after me now is nothing but trouble, and I'm supposed to be meeting someone – a rich – ah – client – at the Bell on the Hoop.'

'Right. Well, you can't have him following you there. And does your master know about this rendez-vous at the Bell.'

'No.'

'So the boy's clothes. Well, you're a one and a half, ain't you. Come on, then.'

She led me by the hand, and in five minutes we were in an alley that ran down beside the Bell on the Hoop.

'Will you have trouble getting back into the City?' I asked her.

'Hope not. We part on the corner there. You turn right, go in the first door, I turn left, slip through Ludgate and back to St Paul's.'

'Here,' I said. 'One thing I'm not short of is money.' I pulled half a gold noble out of my purse and pressed it on her. Her eyes were like saucers.

Then suddenly she gasped. 'Hey! You're Lady Meed!'

How ...? 'Kitty? Oh, no! You're Long Will's Kitty! But he said you were working that road with the awful name!'

'Gropecunt. Yeah, I've got a regular spot there, outside the cockpit. He gets through a mint of money though, so sometimes ... Listen, you left a gold coin for me yesterday. You can't possibly afford another one.'

She was right, actually, thanks to that bastard Ferchard. Even so – 'You're taking it.'

'Well ...' She obviously desperately needed it. 'But I might get searched at the gate or – or anything could happen before I get home.'

She was right. 'I'll bring it to your house as soon as I get a chance. Don't worry if it's not for a few weeks – I'm being sent back to work in Colchester – but you'll get it. It's yours.'

'What's your name?'

I laughed. 'It's *not* Lady Meed! Geoffrey Chaucer knows me as Mariana.'

'Mariana. That's lovely.' And she kissed me – on the lips. Then blushed. 'I don't usually kiss other girls, but you make such a sweet boy!'

And she was gone, bare feet dancing over the filth like a bald fairy in a pig-sty. I was going to have words with William Langland!

* * * * *

I half ran into the Bell on the Hoop. Would Blanche be there? She'd told me to take a private room, but what if she'd already booked one?

No, I should just do as she said.

I asked a woman I took to be the taverner's wife for a private room for a couple of hours. 'I'm expecting to be joined by a lady. My name is Cutting, Jack Cutting. She's called Blanche – after the good Duke's first wife.'

'Good Duke ...' She was about to spit, then checked herself. The "good Duke" was all-powerful these days and she had no idea who I was.

A potboy took me to a small room where a fire had been laid in the fireplace. 'You want the fire lit, lady?' he asked.'

'No, thank you. Just bring a carafe of your best Bordeaux and two goblets.'

When he'd gone, it struck me: *lady*? Either he was an exceptionally perceptive potboy or I was becoming too voluptuous to pass as a boy any longer, no matter how tightly bound my breasts. Kitty had seen through my disguise. Muriel thought I could only pass as a badling. *Badling*? I assumed it meant an effeminate,

but I must ask Geoffrey or Long Will. Time to cut out the pasties and pies again, though.

He came with the wine.

'Why did you call me "lady"?''

'I wasn't thinking. Sorry.' He was fearful of a beating if I told the woman downstairs.

'Don't worry, lad. I am a lady. I just want to know what gave me away.'

'Well, I – I followed you up the stairs. No matter you were doing your best to walk like a boy, boys just don't ... you know.'

'Yes, I know. Here.' Another silver penny gone. 'Did anyone else notice?'

'I don't think so, mistress.'

'Well, don't tell them. All right, you can go.'

Five minutes later, Blanche walked in.

'What a performance!'

I laughed.

'I can run a spy-ring, but I could never be an agent myself. The secret is to keep things simple. Me, I make them ever more complicated.'

'You mean your original message could just have said to meet you here?'

'Exactly. But how was I to know some sodomite admirer of yours – of you as a boy! – would chance to be poncing up and down Paul's Walk at the very time ... ? Oh, I give up. Anyway, you're here now. Does anyone know?'

'A girl who helped me escape and showed me the way. She doesn't know who I am.'

But she would. And once she'd described the scene to Will ...

'Who did you ask for, Blanche?'

'Jack Cutting. Who else? But then I was asked if I was Blanche. You shouldn't have said that.'

'I said you were named after the "good Duke's" first wife.'

'That should put them off the scent. I was fifteen years old when John's Blanche was born. So, Marian. This is the first time we've sat down together quite alone and in completely informal

surroundings. As I didn't want anyone – and I mean *anyone* – to know of this meeting, it was difficult to organise.'

I smiled.

'All right, yes, and I made it more difficult. But let's make the most of it. Now. You remember I told you about the Emperor Charles on his death-bed? What I didn't say was that he did name a man whose woman you might prove to be. Martin of Chich. A petty smuggler whose connection with you remained a mystery until La Dame de Montrouge – whom you know as Lule or Fleur, another of *les Sept Soeurs* whom you encountered in Paris but now very much the great lady – let drop one day in company which included an agent of mine that you were not you at all, but a whore who belonged to one Martin of Chich. That there was a record of this in the Provost's office in Paris. So I had an agent in Paris obtain me a copy of it. The document, which is absolutely genuine, was witnessed by two priests, a Canon of Saint-Benoît in Paris, and Père Pierre de Mesurier of Saint Aubin. But how did Charles come by this knowledge, when it happened after he'd left France? One explanation would be that Martin of Chich was telling the truth: you really did *already* belong to him.'

'I did not.'

'Well, you certainly did from that time on. The document with the signature of those two priests is available for anyone to examine there in Paris. We can only assume that Charles was informed of this.'

'And I am named Marian atte-Marsh in this document.'

'Marian atte-Marsh, yes, a common whore from some obscure English village, known to pose as the Spanish courtesan Mariana de la Mar. No mention of Avignon, fortunately, or the name de la Manga, or you might not be here now. Marian, did you already know of this document?'

'I heard of it for the first time yesterday. From Sir Ferchard, who had it from Martin himself. Who is in possession of a copy of it.'

'He would be. And was any explanation offered?'

'Yes, some nonsense about me being charged with witchcraft, and Martin, along with these two priests and a certain Le Boeuf – all in the service of P'tit-Jean, the new Sire de Montrouge – saving me by means of bribery and forged documents.'

'Yes, that is more or less what my agent discovered. And the reason I did not wish to pursue the matter in front of Princess Philippa.'

'Right. Yes. Thank you.'

'But be careful. That document is not a forgery, and your attempting to dismiss it as one is foolishness.'

'Of course it's a forgery.'

'Of course it is not. All four signatures and the seal are genuine.'

'Ah. Yes, I see what you mean.'

'But we have no more time for that. Let's move on to what you achieved in the wilds of Essex.'

'I got a place – as Marian atte-Marsh, yes – at a brothel outside the wall in Colchester, hoping to learn something of either the revenant who tears apart priests and monks, or the killer of young whores.'

Blanche waited.

'The revenant is no longer a problem. They hope.'

'So I hear. Apparently someone decapitated the creature. And the only person known to have been in the vicinity at the time is a girl from a local brothel who rejoices in the name of Daffy Marian. Or was it Fish-lips?'

She was studying my lips.

What could I say?

I didn't have to. She smiled and said, 'I find your lips beautiful. Whoever gave you that sobriquet – and I am quite sure it was a woman – was jealous.'

Jealous? *Helen*? Of *me*? Be serious, Blanche! 'I was never given that name. It was simply a suggestion –'

'My agent was at the Shag a few days ago – the day you absconded, I understand. He will remain in the area, and make contact with you at some point after you return to your – ah – duties. Your codename is still "Demoiselle d'Écosse". If he gives you instructions, you will follow them implicitly. No discussion. You understand?'

'Yes, but –'

'And no buts. Right now, I think we can say you did a good job on that first one. A heroic job. Tell me what you discovered about who he was, who he had been.'

So I told her what I had learnt in Colchester and what Muriel had told me about him that morning.

'Ah yes, Muriel. An interesting woman. From the north of Scotland, originally. She disappeared when they were on the point of charging her with being a witch.'

'And has she been in London ever since? How long ago was that?'

'I'm not sure. I know she fled north, not south, and spent some years in the Shetlands and Norway. How and why she moved from there to Southwark is another mystery. I would guess that she incurred the wrath of some powerful lord or bishop who didn't dare put her to death – for the reasons we've been discussing – and instead consigned her to a ship and ordered the captain to set her ashore at his final destination.

'But now let's get back to your Colchester night-walkers. When you said the killer of priests was no longer a problem, you added, "they hope". What is this "they hope"?''

'They don't understand these things. They may have reburied the head along with the body. The body may emerge from the tomb, head in hands – or the head may simply be dug up by someone intent on evil and become a "talking head".'

'There's little fear of that. The twice dead are dead indeed, head and all. Originally, he was in control, like Maalot was – yes, I heard about her – and was able to take over his son's body as Maalot was able to take over her daughter's. Not any more – thanks to you. But if you really fear this happening, then you must take the head down under the sea. You're a swimmer, a sea maiden. Take it down into deep, deep, water and feed it to the fish.'

'You know so much about me. Do you also know what happened at the end of a long day in the sea while I was staying in Chich with Martin's family?'

'No. Is it important?'

'Very, or so I believe.' I told her about the man on the beach, the Cloak of Invisibility, and that he didn't leave until sunrise, when, it seemed, he could no longer stay.

She was open-mouthed. 'And you have no idea who it was you fought, and escaped from? Oh, you were lucky to have the sea right there behind you!'

'I realise that.'

There was a long pause. Then: 'Mariana, the time has clearly come for me to tell you how all this started. I was asked to come to England – asked by one of the highest in the land – to investigate and arrange to put a stop to these *demonic* murders – his word. His own investigators, both lay and spiritual, were getting nowhere. Why are you smiling?'

'I assume it is the murder of priests and monks that was upsetting him. It could hardly be the killing of a few young whores. So – your task is finished.'

'You mean the highest in the land are unlikely to concern themselves with "the killing of a few young whores". *Bien*, you are right, of course. But one of their own, Lady Mary Balliol, was murdered, and another – we will leave this one unnamed – had a narrow escape. She would never have lived to tell the tale had she been alone.'

I really seemed to have impressed Blanche!

She told me about a few other ladies who had also been killed (always ones with a reputation, *bien sûr*, and some the lemans of various prominent noblemen) then she returned to the cloak my attacker was wearing. 'It is indeed famous as a Cloak of Invisibility. Those who know call it the Mantle of Arthur. Its last known wearer was the wizard Merlin. But there is no such thing as a cloak of invisibility.'

'I saw it! He disappeared!'

'Tell me exactly what you saw. When he first appeared, what did you see before the cloak opened?'

'Only the cloak. Upright – and gliding across the beach towards me, as though there was a man inside it, but he didn't touch the pebbles with his feet.'

'A man – an ordinary man – would have. Of course. And made a noise.'

'Exactly. I backed into the water – up to my knees. Ready to leap backwards and swim if he came in after me. He didn't. Just stood there at the water's edge.'

'And you could see nothing within the cloak?'

'Nothing. Just blackness. Maybe his eyes, burning. Yes. But only that in the blackness – much blacker than the sky or the beach, or even the cloak.'

'Do you think there was a body in there? Your feeling.'

'Yes. It wasn't simply nothing, like emptiness, which can be filled, or darkness, which can be lighted up. There was *something* in there, something dark and invisible, but – I'm sorry, I'm not making any sense.'

'Oh, you are. Now, though, you are describing what you saw, that first time, before you swam away from him. A spectre. A hooded cloak or robe or burnous that contains – it depends on the beholder – a skeleton, a spectral body, nothing at all. The second time, you *touched* each other.'

'It wasn't the same. Now he was no longer a spectre – a wraith. When his cloak fell open and his arms came out and grabbed me, they were real arms, thick strong arms – and his face! Ugly, like a wulboar –'

'But a man?'

'Oh yes, a man. But not the same. Not the same eyes. And not as tall, but heavier, stronger.'

'Not the same man, you say. But the same cloak?'

'Oh, yes. *And the same man*, but he had ... changed into someone, something, else.'

She gazed at me.

'What you met on the beach was indeed a spectre – or wraith, as you say. Who told you about that?'

'Muriel.'

'Only sorcerers – wizards, and some few very powerful witches – can become wraiths. The wraith is an evil version of the original wizard with all of his powers but no substance ... You know what a doppelganger is? I don't mean a double, another person who looks and sounds exactly like you. That is pure chance. Apparently, you have one such in Paris, a certain Fermosa.'

'How do you come to know everything about me even before I do?'

'You're one of the many people my agents – the Emperor's agents – take an interest in. They thought you'd returned to Paris. I discovered they were wrong, that you were here. Nothing sinister

about that. What we're concerned with now, though, is *real* doppelgangers. A spectre, the wraith of a powerful sorcerer, retains his or her full powers. Hence the shape-shifting – the second body, the one you grappled with – and the translocation.'

'Translocation?'

'How he disappeared. A little like astral travel – which you have experienced, I understand. Lucky you. I've never mastered that.'

'Oh, nor have I! It was Niniane. She took me with her, left both our bodies in that room and – there we were at Montfaucon.'

'Was Niniane more *substantial* than you?'

'Yes, she was. People could see her. They couldn't see me.'

'Listen, Marian. During astral travel, the body remains behind, only the astral body, the soul, call it what you will, travels. This is what you experienced. The other you, the you that travelled, was insubstantial, not a real body. Here in England, it is known as a fetch. In translocation, by contrast, the *real* body travels and relocates elsewhere, as it were by magic. Nothing, no body, is left behind. That is what your wraith seems to be doing. Now here, now there. Or, from your point of view, now here, now not here.

'A doppelganger on the other hand ... A doppelganger is a real, or virtually real, second body. Now here – and now there, simultaneously.'

'But –'

'Wait. This is something a sorcerer can do ... Now, imagine that a sorcerer is killed, or simply dies, when his doppelganger is out and about ...'

Not difficult to imagine. '*That* is what a wraith is?'

'So I was taught, once upon a time. This is arcane lore. Now I must go and seek out adepts who conceal themselves almost as cunningly as they conceal their knowledge. However, you are the person we shall need, of that I am already certain. For the moment, though, I'm afraid you will have to return to Colchester and be a good girl – which in your case means a bad girl – while I set everything up.'

* * * * *

Back up Stoney Street to Clink Street and home. And Ferchard.

'Ah. Marian.

'Ah. Ferchard.'

He was not amused. 'Khadija is making some mint tea. Would you like a cup?'

I nodded.

'Then go and tell her. In fact, you can bring the tea in and serve it.'

No mention of a letter from Lady Joan.

I went to the kitchen. Yahia jumped up, delighted as always. I promised to go upstairs with him for the rest of the evening as soon as Ferchard was finished with me.

Khadija gave me the tray and I took the tea through to what we thought of as our salón. There, I knelt and poured as I'd been taught to in Granada. It was the first time Ferchard had seen this performance. He was clearly impressed and I had little doubt I'd be doing it on a regular basis from now on.

I handed him his cup and stayed on my knees as I had been trained to do. Would it put him in a good mood? Or would it simply make him feel all the more like a pasha with a slave-girl?

He sipped his hot tea and put the cup back down on the tray.

'A note came from Lady Joan FitzAlan at midday. She will expect you tomorrow afternoon. You are fortunate. It might have stipulated *this* afternoon. Then what would have happened?'

Silence.

'I asked you a question, lass.'

'Perhaps it would simply have confirmed her in her belief that I am a lady and not at her beck and call.'

'Hmph ... I'll not accompany you.'

He hadn't been invited. Ha.

'Take John.'

I nodded. That suited me. Anyone except English!

'You'll travel back to Colchester with English the following morning.'

'No.'

'On one horse, because you'll not be travelling as a lady but as what you are, a whore being returned to her brothel. And dressed

accordingly. English will be carrying letters from me to Martin and to the new – ah – proprietor. He will deliver them in person, because the contents of the letters are naturally not for your prying eyes. Martin will let you know when the three months are up whether you'll be staying on there for the full year of the contract. If he happens to be in Colchester at that time. But should that not be convenient for him and your stay there overruns the three months and into a fourth month, then the full year clause will come into force automatically. Is that clear?

What could I say? "*Yes, but totally unacceptable*"? "*A pox on you, your letters, and Martin's convenience*"? It was becoming clearer and clearer to me that if we fought this out in a court of law, I had no chance of winning. Quite the reverse. My reputation as a whore would be made public knowledge, and I'd have no hope of ever being anything but that – a whore in a brothel – or a prisoner in Ferchard's house.

Ferchard's house? I hadn't thought about the house. He'd taken and hidden all our – *my* – remaining *lettres de foire* – letters of exchange – and changed all our gold and silver deposits from our names to his name. But had he done anything about the house? Wasn't that in my name? I was sure it was. Lady Marian MacElpin. And there would be nothing he could do about that without my seal and signature – unless I made a fool of myself in a court of law and everything of mine was officially handed over to him.

No, this was not the time for arguing.

For a moment then I hated him. I actually wished he would die. Then I thought that, if he did, this might be the last time I ever saw him. Or when I said good-bye to him and left for Colchester. He was old.

Or the last time I ever saw Khadija. Or Yahia.

I couldn't bear that.

There is always a last time. The last time I saw Papa. But "saw" is not what I mean. The last time I spoke to Papa, left him sitting there and walked away to ... to do what?

The last time I spoke to Sebah, my grandmother.

The last time I spoke to Yacoub.

The last time I spoke to Pedro. Is Pedro still alive now? Is Yacoub?

There is always a last time.

'I asked you a question.'

'I – sorry. What was the question?'

'I asked you if that was quite clear.'

If what was? 'Yes, quite clear.'

'You will leave with English, then, early the day after tomorrow.'

'Yes. Would you like me to pour you some more tea?'

ALICE PERRERS

Little need be said about my less than felicitous meeting with Lady Joan FitzAlan, Countess of Essex, and of Hereford and half-a-dozen other places. She was in her early thirties, I knew, but both her appearance and manner were that of a much older woman. Though to be fair, she'd probably always had the beady, lashless eyes and long beak of a nose that made her seem even more birdlike than Marell did with the scaly yellow talons that served her as hands.

'Lady Marian. Sit down. Jane, give Lady Marian a glass of wine. A comfit, too. Though they are death to the teeth ... So, Lady Marian?'

'Please, just Marian.'

'Ah yes, I was coming to that. While we are alone together – I wanted a few minutes before the others arrive for us to become acquainted ... So what, tell me, *is* your claim to the title Lady? Are you married? Widowed? Is there – was there – a Sir Something MacElpin?'

'There was, but he was my father. A Scottish knight.'

'And did he tell you you could call yourself a Lady?'

'I don't believe the subject ever arose. He died when I was fourteen.' (In Spain, where I was known as *señorita*, and later as Doña Mariana, and more commonly Lalla Maryam – Lalla is Lady in Arabic – but she didn't need to know all that!) 'My guardian is my father's old friend and brother-in-arms Sir Ferchard de

Dyngvale, and he insists that I should be, that I *am*, Lady Marian MacElpin.' (Oh, how I wished that were still so!) 'And that I should comport myself as such,' I added lamely.

She studied me. 'Perhaps things in Scotland are a little different, but here in England the daughter of a mere knight – one not even a baronet – has no right to the title Lady.'

Why should I argue? I didn't care. But she was getting right up my nose. 'How do you know he was not a baronet? Anyway, what *is* a baronet?' I demanded. No "my lady", *no nuffing* as Clarice of Cock Lane might say.

She peered at me. I suddenly realised the poor thing couldn't see very well. And regretted my attitude.

'Did you wish to consult me about your eyes, my lady?'

'*My eyes?* Why on earth should I wish to do that? There is nothing wrong with my eyes!'

Oh, dear.

There was knock at the door, Jane opened it, and a liveried footman entered. I was saved.

'My lady, there is a messenger here from the Savoy asking whether Lady Marian has forgotten that she also has an audience with Princess Philippa this afternoon.'

I have?

'*She has?* Then she had better leave at once. And *run*. It does not do, *Lady Marian*, to keep princesses waiting. Or indeed to be impudent to such as the Countess of Hereford and Essex and Northampton.'

'But I –'

'Goodbye, *Lady Marian*.'

It only took us a few minutes, and at the Palace the older and apparently mute messenger passed me to a footman who took me to a private chamber where I found – as I'd expected – Blanche, not Philippa.

'*Mariana! Querida!*' she greeted me in Spanish.

For the first time, she clasped me to her; and she held me as if she meant it.

'Bianca – it is good to see you again,' I responded, rather cheekily. The conversation would obviously be informal and in Spanish.

'And you. Mariana, I have learnt more, and need to talk with you again before you return to Colchester ... You have a basic understanding of Kabbalah, if I remember rightly. Did your teacher ever speak to you of the other equal-and-opposite half of the Tree of Life, the half that points down, like the roots of a tree?'

'No, but mm ... I think I see what you mean.'

'It has been called the Tree of Death, but that is simplistic. Let us just take it as said for now that there is an equal and opposite world of the dead – and undead.'

'By "dead" in this context you mean shades, those who have not passed on – the undeparted dead?'

'Yes. What do you know of Merlin?'

I was taken aback by this sudden change of subject. 'Merlin? He was a wizard. But I always thought he was a child of the light, that he was on the side of King Arthur and of the good.'

'What happened to him?'

'I don't know. Wasn't he placed under some kind of enchantment and buried under a great standing stone where he remains till this day. You're not going to tell me I met Merlin that night on the beach, are you?'

'Merlin's doppelganger. Merlin's wraith.'

'I don't believe it.' But I did believe it.

'Listen to the story as it has been handed down within one of the several Mysteries of which I am an initiate: that of the White Goddess ... Roughly eight hundred years ago, Merlin lost his heart as only an old man can lose his heart to a beautiful girl. A water-nymph. I was going to say a foolish old man but there is nothing foolish about losing your heart to a beautiful girl. As the old King lost his to Alice Perrers – whom you will, I understand, be meeting shortly –'

'But I'm back off to Colchester tomorrow!'

'She will arrange it. Just don't you go causing trouble.'

Moi?

'Now where was I? Ah, yes. It is what Merlin then did that was foolish. For Nimuë, also known as Niniane, was not just a simple

water-nymph, she was the sister of Viviane, the Lady of the Lake, and a powerful sorceress in her own right ... I see the name Niniane caught your attention. I, too, wondered whether the Niniane we both know and love could possibly be several hundred years older than she seems. The coincidence is greater than you might at first suppose. Our Niniane is known as Niniane des Sept Soeurs and does indeed have six sisters, two in France, the others in Venice and Constantinople. The Lady of the Lake was also one of seven sisters, so Merlin's Nimuë or Niniane might well also have been called Niniane des Sept Soeurs ... That they were both one of seven sisters does seem to be true, and is certainly a remarkable coincidence. What is not true is the rumour circulating in certain circles – the circles *I* move in – that they were and are one and the same person.'

Now she had me wondering. And I had learnt to be sceptical about coincidences – especially "remarkable" ones.

'Merlin knew of her powers,' Blanche went on. 'Of course he knew. But that did not deter him from lowering his shields when she said he didn't love her, didn't trust her. And once she was in, she bound him with an all-but unbreakable spell and buried him beneath that menhir in Brocéliande – a great standing stone that only she or one of her sisters could move.

'The question is *Why*. Why did she do this? Why *would* she do this? Neither she nor her sisters had anything to gain. One possible reason is that she, too, had lost her heart, that she was as much in thrall to some other man as Merlin was to her. That she would do anything for *him*, just as Merlin would for *her* ... Can you make a guess as to who that man might have been?'

'I think so. Merlin was Arthur's mentor, the mage behind the throne, so the man is likely to have been an enemy of Arthur's. But do we know exactly *when* Merlin was spell bound?'

'Some time before Camboglanna – the Last Battle, the battle in which Modred died like the dog he was and from which the dying Arthur was carried away to his eternal rest.'

'Then perhaps it was Modred.'

'Perhaps it was.'

'You do not know?'

'I guess, like you, and my guess is the same as yours. But what happened then? Did Merlin ever die? Niniane left him alive in that tomb, not dead. It may be that we are not dealing with the undeparted or the undead as such, here, but with an eight-hundred-year-old, potentially immortal, revenant from a living grave. Merlin himself taking revenge on his tormentors – the water-nymphs. But I don't like that theory. And anyway, it doesn't fit the facts.'

'I agree. What you hinted at before makes more sense: that eventually he died in that tomb while his doppelganger was out walking the night.'

She nodded. 'That Merlin was both in the tomb and out of it. In which case, we are dealing with an authentic spectre, a wraith still possessed of much the same powers he wielded as a living man.'

'It couldn't be another – less powerful – wizard?'

She smiled at my naïveté. 'This is the very area in which Arthur and Merlin flourished. Forget all that nonsense about Camelot being somewhere on the Scottish border or in Scotland, or over in the west of England, near Avalon. Camulodunum, the city of Camulos, a Celtic god, which Arthur knew as Camelot, lay in the heart of the territory occupied by the invaders, the Angles of East Anglia and the Saxons of Essex and Middlesex and Sussex. This, the Deben, the Orwell, the Stour, the Colne, the Blackwater, the Crouch, the Thames itself, was where they were flocking in and had already settled in their tens of thousands during the misrule of Vortigern and Ambrosius Aurelianus. And it was from his fortress, his city, of Camelot, with its great Roman Walls – the walls we still see there today – that Arthur fought and overcame them and sent them fleeing back across the North Sea whence they came, not from the top of some bare hill hundreds of miles away. The forests and marshes around here were home to Merlin for many years, and the Island of Canvey, on the Thames estuary was his place of seclusion, his retreat ... Now another girl has been killed, this one on Mersea Island, the other side of the Colne estuary. A girl who looked like you, apparently. He picks on whores and on girls with green eyes who look like water nymphs; you are both.'

'And the people here have no idea who is doing it?'

'People here, like people everywhere, tend to blame the nearest unpopular outsider and then think they've solved the problem – in

this case, on Mersey Island, some poor wanderer who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.'

Like poor Brother Edmund, now Tom Watt.

'They beat him to death with their staves and clubs. How is Brother Edmund?' As always, she was ahead of me. 'My agent followed Kitty that day at St Paul's, found Will Langland and Geoffrey Chaucer entertaining a certain Tom Watt who, it transpired, had been rescued from a *posse comitatus* in Colchester by – guess who? I must say, Marian, that the more I know of you, the more impressed I am by your sheer zeal for righteousness, and your uncanny ability to re-establish it.'

I felt myself blushing, I who never blush!

'Speaking of which, did I ever tell you that while you were reading the Emperor's hands he was reading yours?'

'I knew it!'

'But you didn't ask? Too timid? No, not you. Overawed, perhaps?'

'Yes, then, that first time, of course. I fully intended to ask him later, though, but the right moment never came.'

'He told me of your bravery. Of your craziness. Yes, I am aware now of the sobriquet *la Loca*,' she laughed. 'I wasn't then, and I don't think he was. But – and this is why I mention it now – your outstanding characteristic is not your bravery or your craziness – or your propensity for causing trouble! There are other people quite as brave as you, and other people who are even more the Fool personified than you are. And other people who cause as much trouble as you do wherever they go – though for the life of me, I can't think of one! No, your outstanding characteristic, he said, is your kindness. He had never met anyone, he said, who would go through so much, risk so much, to help the helpless, defend the defenceless ... I thought it was his love for you talking, that for the first time in his life he was putting a woman on a pedestal. An old man being silly. Like Merlin. But I see now he was right. Only you would have saved Brother Edmund – *Tom* – and at such great risk to yourself. Just the thought of those baying hounds – I would have left Brother Edmund to his fate and fled to the nearest house!'

'You couldn't have stopped the hounds in their tracks?'

She gazed at me. 'If I'd done that – if I were able to do that – they would have burnt me. A death far worse than being torn to shreds by a pack of dogs ... Why? Could you have done that? Stopped the hounds in their tracks?'

Now it was my turn to gaze and to ponder my response. At last I said, 'I know the spell. But I've never tried it.'

'From your days in Cuenca, eh? Like reading the Feet and Tails. Well, if ever you find yourself out in the wilds somewhere, quite alone, surrounded by starving wolves and with no human audience, then ...'

I laughed. 'I'll try it.' Time to change the subject. 'How do you come to know so much about England and to be so at home here?'

'Did I ever mention my cousin and mentor, Jeanne de Bar?'

'Yes. When we were in Avignon. She was Edward II's niece, wasn't she? So part of the royal family here as well as in France.'

'She preferred England, felt more at home here, but she'd grown up in France and duty called her back to the *Compté de Bar* not long before I became Queen. Then ... then, when I was widowed, she took me under her wing, protecting me from much of the scandal and helping me with my occult studies. In 1353, she was asked to return to England to help care for *le roi, Jean II*, the French King who had been taken prisoner at the Battle of Poitiers and was being held for ransom in London. She took me with her.

'When she died in 1361, I returned to live in France. But by that time I'd been in England eight years.'

'So of course you know England.'

'England, yes, because I used to travel about – I was young then – but the people, too. I'd been on familiar terms with the old king, Edward III, and Queen Philippa since Jeanne introduced me to them. And with his children, though I always got on better with Lionel and John of Gaunt than with the eldest son, Edward, Prince of Wales, or the eldest daughter, Isabella, de Coucy's wife – yes, you knew her – Pippa's mother. She and Edward always struck me as rather *ruthless*.'

I laughed. 'Princess Isabella was terrifying.' I'd never met Edward, the one known as the Black Prince. If his sister was anything to go by – and his reputation in France – I was lucky.

'Not that Gaunt can't be ruthless, too. He can. But in him it is something he *can* be, not something he *is* by nature. Now, where was I? Time is passing. Ah, yes. Merlin. Another idiosyncrasy of Merlin's by which we may know him was – *is* – shape-shifting. He has been known to appear as a wood-cutter, a brute with an axe and a great bristly beard – which is how you saw him that night. And as a beautiful boy.'

'As a woman – or girl?'

'No.' She smiled. 'Death seems to have turned him into something of a misogynist. However, he is rumoured to appear from time to time as a monstrous black dog –'

'Black Shuck.'

'Ah, you've come across that story.'

'Yes, but not that the creature is Merlin. They say in Essex that Black Shuck is not a killer but a harbinger of death.'

She shrugged. 'What you need to know is that Merlin is a master of protean shape-shifting – of moving from form to form in the blink of an eye. And of disappearing completely, which is what I am coming to now.'

'The translocation you mentioned last time we spoke.'

'Yes.'

'That would make it virtually impossible to do anything to stop him.'

'It does seem that way. But what we have to remember is that it's not Merlin himself but his doppelganger which is now here, now there, shape-shifting and translocating. A doppelganger adrift in space and time, anchorless, rudderless, and in a sense mindless.'

'You are cheering me up.'

'Ancient lore, handed down through the Mysteries, teaches that a doppelganger will always reflect exactly the form of the original. And that in the event of the original dying while the doppelganger is out and ganging –' she grinned – 'it will retain the form of the original at the time of death.'

'So if – if for instance the original is beheaded?'

'*Exactement*. A wraith that carries its head around with it –'

'Or a talking head.'

'You're really very good at this. But our difficulty here – one of our difficulties – is that we have no idea when – or even whether –'

Merlin in fact died. How long was he there in that grave before he died? When he died, was he skeletal? His cloak nothing but dusty tatters? Or had he retained his original form, and if so *how*? When the doppelganger fed, did this sustain the original in his grave?"

She was right. We had no idea. 'And in that case, maybe he is still alive ... in a sense.'

'Yes, but how do you explain what you encountered? What you saw – and *touched*.'

'You mean, because if he is still alive, then the doppelganger will reflect him as he is now.'

She nodded, letting me think aloud.

'And how *would* he be now,' I went on, 'after nearly a thousand years in the grave? Even with some form of etheric nourishment?'

'I hate to think. But he wouldn't be invisible. No, what you saw was a wraith, a spectre. Which presumably means Merlin died at some point. The doppelganger's own form, if it allows you to see it, will be Merlin at the time he died. Cadaverous. Or already skeletal.'

'But because he was a shape-shifter ...'

'Which takes us back to where we started. Next time I see you, though, I'll know more, and shall, I hope, be ready for you to be conveyed to Canvey Island.'

'I've been warned not to go to Canvey Island. Especially anywhere near Dead Man's Point. By Marell.'

'Ah, Marell. Yes. And that's no doubt good advice, coming from the horse's mouth, so to speak. But in the end you may have to. I'm off to Harwich tomorrow, to take ship for Bruges. I will return by the same route and stay at the White Hart in Colchester. By that time, I'll have arranged for you to leave this bordel of yours permanently.'

'I don't understand.'

'You don't need to now. I'm not sure myself yet how it will all unfold. But you'll be coming with me.'

'Blanche. There is a girl who works with me –'

'No.'

'It was her, Lucy, who killed Harold Turner, not me. I just cut his head off afterwards. Listen.' I told her all I knew at that time of Lucy's background, and said: 'I want her there on Canvey Island

with me. Without her I'm not going. With her at my side, I'll feel safe.'

Blanche gave in. 'All right, I'll arrange for both of you to leave your bordel and come with me. Satisfied?'

I nodded. 'You just signed Merlin's death warrant.'

She laughed. We kissed, she summoned a footman, and I left.

Now I intended to make my own way back to Colchester and the Winged Lion dressed as a boy. Once there, I would become Marian atte-Marsh again and return to work at the Shag. I did not expect a warm welcome.

When Ferchard and English had left for the evening, I slipped out without a word to anyone but Yahia. He had a note to give Ferchard after two days saying I'd returned to the Shag on my own. Just that.

I went straight to the Green Unicorn. I needed boy's clothes, but a different outfit from the one I'd been wearing earlier, one better suited to travelling; and I needed a cloak.

I changed my clothes and was about to leave when someone banged on my door.

'Mariana? I know you're there. Open the door.'

Susanna. I opened it.

'Marell wants you. Now.'

What could I do? I followed her down the stairs and round and in through the entrance.

'She's in her room.'

I went across and peered in.

She was waiting for me. 'No, don't sit down. I had a visitor earlier, a young fellow called Walter – Walt. You remember him?'

Walter? Oh, no ...

'His master, Sir Richard FitzAlan – the Earl of Arundel – wants you at his townhouse tomorrow evening. You know where that is?'

I nodded, though I had no idea.

'Be there. And bring the purse he gives you here, to me.'

While I was still in a state of shock and trying to decide whether to brazen it out or bend with the wind, she said: 'Mariana, I saw you. You were a whore in a brothel yourself. You'd been gagged, and were in trouble. Was that happening when I saw it, or is it still to come?'

She must have seen it in her crystal globe! 'You can't tell *when* something happens?'

'Only if it's connected to something else I know about. You didn't answer my question ... Put your tongue out ... Right out.' I thought she just wanted to look at it, but she grabbed hold of it –

'Aouagh!'

– digging her long sharp claws in and tugging it even further out!

'Stay still.'

'Gugh, gugh –'

She released my tongue. 'It wasn't spiked?'

I shook my head. No, but her claws had made deep holes in my tongue!

'So, where is this brothel?'

'Col-Colchester.'

'When I ask a question, you answer me. Tell Susanna to step in here for a moment.'

I went to the door. 'Susanna? Marell wants you.'

Inside, Marell said, 'Sit down, Susanna.'

There was only the one chair, facing Marell's chair.

Susanna looked at me. I shrugged and nodded. She sat down.

'Susanna, this slut seems to believe she's something special. She's not. I don't never want to see her wearing boy's clothes again, and I don't never,' speaking to me now, 'want to see you putting on airs. Ladies do not run errands for the likes of Alice Whytington. Well, *do they?*'

'No.'

'No, mistress.'

'No, mistress.'

'Right. You can go now.'

'Thank you, mistress.' My tongue was bleeding and I needed to spit, but she wasn't finished with me yet.

'Wait! The purse the Earl of Arundel gives you tomorrow is to be brought here to me, you do understand that? I'll be dealing with Lady MacElpin from now on, as I told you earlier, either direct, or through the Worm, if she prefers. All right, you can go.'

I fled.

The Worm? And what did she mean, *dealing* with Lady Marian? Had she been in touch with Lady Marian? How, and about what?

Get a grip, Mariana. You *are* Lady Marian!

'Mariana?' And there in front of me was Peter again, grinning from ear to ear.

He'd overheard all that!

'Oh, Peter ... no.'

'Oh Peter, yes!' Susanna again. 'Mariana has the star chamber now. Show him where, Mariana.' Then, as Peter grabbed my arm, 'Wait! You pay first. Too easy to slip away from out there. Tuppence will do.'

'*Tuppence?*' But he fished out a groat and gave it to her.

She smirked. 'Stars cost more, don't they, Mariana.'

'Yes, Susanna.'

Once in the room, we turned to each other. I said, 'Listen, Peter,' and simultaneously he said, 'Listen, Mariana.'

He laughed. I didn't feel like laughing. But I let him speak first.

'I've been searching for you. Waiting for you, since I learnt they knew you here. That you practically work here.'

'I don't.'

'Oh, don't start that. You're such a liar you keep on with it even when –'

He'd heard that conversation, so what was the point? 'Well, perhaps I do, sometimes,' I interrupted. 'But I'm telling the truth when I say that I am Lady Marian MacElpin and that all this is – is not what it seems.'

'Liar. Get undressed.'

I glared at him.

'Or shall I call Susanna and Marell?'

'Peter, listen –'

'I've been waiting for this moment ever since I saw you in that whorehouse in Paris and was given the brush-off.'

Clearly there was nothing to be done but to get it over with. What was one more, especially a handsome young courtier like him, after some of the gutter-dwellers I'd had to service over the years?

I undressed. Slowly.

He stripped like a maniac, then sat on the bed holding himself and grinning as he watched a girl emerge from the male cocoon.

Afterwards, it was as though I'd been delaying him. 'We must hurry! Even Lady Alice runs out of patience eventually.'

'Lady Alice?' Oh, no. Not now.

'And you've kept her waiting *weeks*.'

'But –'

'Now, Mariana.'

What could I do? 'Where? Across the river in London?'

'Across the river, yes, but not in London. In Essex.'

'Essex?' Well, that was something. If it was on my way, then ...
'In Colchester?'

'No, much nearer than that. But on the way there. Why? Do you know Colchester?'

'Oh. No. I passed through it once on my way somewhere. Harwich? I remember it was a very old city.'

'Yes. Well, we need to hurry. You'd better dress as a boy again.'

'No. I'll dress as a lady. I prefer to be presented to Lady Alice as myself, Lady Marian Mac –'

'Stop! Just stop that! Lady Alice knows perfectly well who you are.'

'How can she? You don't seem to.'

He was dressed. I was still naked. His glaring eyes roamed over my body. No love now, no lust even. *No nuffing*. Just anger. And contempt. Yes, *contempt*.

'Lady Marian is not in London. Is probably not even in England.'

'How do you know this?'

'I was at her house. Looking for you, but also asking after her. And that is what they said.' He leaned closer, lowered his voice. 'A little bird told me she was in Paris.'

'Was or is?'

'Presumably is.'

'Right. We'll compromise. I'll dress as Mariana, but before we leave for Essex we're going to my house to straighten this out.'

'No!'

'Yes! Or I'm not coming!'

'All right, then, if you insist on making a fool of yourself. But hurry!'

I hurried.

I took him straight in through the front door. Nobody. Silence. I led him to the kitchen, where John, having heard intruders, opened the door suddenly and confronted us. 'Ah, it's you m – Mariana.' He'd been going to say "my lady" but –

'Is Lady Marian here?' Peter demanded.

'No, sir. I told you, she's away on her travels.'

'Oh, John, don't be so –'

Again Peter interrupted me. 'In France? Paris?'

'Probably, sir. We haven't been told. At least, I haven't. The master might know. Or Mariana.' He nodded towards me.

'The master. You mean Sir Farquhar.'

'Yes, sir.'

I was gazing at the two of them in horror. I couldn't believe this.

'John, stop playing games and tell him that *I* am Lady Marian.'

'You – you want me to tell him that? Seriously?'

'Take no notice of her, John. Come on, you.' He took me by the arm and pulled me towards the door, and as he did so we both saw Khadija making spanking motions with her hand and grinning like a demented monkey.

Peter made the same gesture. They both laughed. Even John laughed.

I gave up.

No! I still had one last hope. 'Where's Yahia?' I asked Khadija in Arabic. She shrugged that infuriating shrug, so I asked John in English.

'Out. Sir Ferchard and Master English took him with them. They often do when – when Lady Marian's not here.'

Now I really gave up.

We walked down to the river and took a wherry across. We walked in silence. Night had fallen and it was very quiet. The odd cry in the distance, the water swirling and slooshing as we drew near it – the tide was high – the rustling of rats and other bigger scavengers, mangey dogs and little humans, street children with huge eyes that

see in the dark. In Paris I'd befriended some of the *gamins*, but it hadn't happened here. I wondered why not. Was it because here they were more cliquey, moved about in gangs like packs of dogs or swarms of rats. They scared me. In Paris, they hadn't scared me.

Or was it me? Were the two cities and their street kids much the same? Was it I who was different, I who had changed? Would I have put up with this nonsense from Peter – and from Marell – and from Martin! – a year ago, two years ago? Had I lost my nerve, my confidence? Was I no longer the fighter – the *killer*, yes! – that I used to be? Scared of nothing and no one? And now scared of a few spooky street kids in the dark. Slavery hadn't broken me. Being a whore in Cuenca – and in Avignon – hadn't broken me. Being tortured by the late "good abbé" and his men hadn't broken me.

Was it Ferchard who was slowly breaking me?

Breaking me like he might break a wild pony, because he believed that was his duty to God and man and – most importantly – to my dead father?

On second thoughts, though, I could become very fond of that Tommy Tucker, and even of poor Megson, the slug-boy. What Megson needed was a month by the sea. A month *in* the sea. No, perhaps not. He might turn into a sea-slug. But the sea-slug might metamorphose into a mer-boy – and the mer-boy into a handsome merman – '

'I found the house the first time, just as you told me, by the Castle-on-the-Hoop.'

We were on the boat now, and Peter had broken the silence, was talking about his first visit to my house.

'But was informed that it was owned by a Lady Marian MacElpin. I wasn't admitted. But then why should I have been? Anyway, she was out, or so I was told by a servant, in very bad Spanish. She'd been invited to the Palace. Big black man. A eunuch, by the look of him.'

Yahia.

One didn't need to spin stories when they made it all up for themselves. But he was off again.

'Then Delia told me about you. And I realised what the Midget told Martin was right, that you worked there. But there's more to you than this.'

'You mean I'm not *just* a whore.'

'Yes.'

He was impervious to irony.

'You were also Jack Cutting. Jacques Coutin,' he laughed, 'was famous – infamous! – in Paris. The sergeants were after him. The priests were after him. The Albanian was –'

'The Albanian was *not*!'

He grinned.

I blushed.

'Lady Alice was given your name by – let's simply say that your name came with the highest recommendations from two quite separate and utterly reliable sources. You are known. And you can be trusted with confidential missions ... So now we know who you are and what you do. More or less.'

This lad was too bright, too awake, to have as an enemy. 'I would appreciate it if you kept these – ah – theories to yourself, because –'

'Of course I will. I'm a King's Man now.'

'Really?'

'Yes. And King's Men are the soul of discretion. They have to be.'

We alighted from the boat and made our way up the hill behind the Tower past St Olaf's to the Fox & Goose in Seething Lane. And there before us was an enormous graveyard. *No, not that!* I'd thought this was about some simple errand in France!

But he took my elbow again and ushered me into the heat and noise and mouth-watering aromas of one of the best taverns in London.

It looked as though it hadn't changed since Saxon times, but the dilapidated wattle-and-daub exterior concealed a warm and welcoming taproom with great barrels of local ale – much of the London ale comes from Kent (I'd heard even Martin, who was pure Essex, admit that Kent was *the* place for hops) – and tuns of wine from Gascony via Bordeaux. I breathed in the warm smoky air and looked around, forgetting why I was there and who I was with as I tried to choose between the fresh-baked pies I could smell and some of the mutton I could see roasting out in the kitchen yard. Although it was summer, the weather was cold and wet (take me

back to Spain!) and I was always hungry. If I wasn't careful I would lose *la taille fine*, the narrow waist, that was my only legacy from La Negrillonne in Avignon.

We sat down. A serving-maid with a tray of drinks smiled at me and I ordered a cup of wine.

He opened his mouth to deliver what would no doubt be yet another sermon, but I forestalled him.

'Let's start with you, Peter. How long were you in Paris? Were you already attached to the English Court then, were you in France on their behalf? If not, did you have a private patron who was sponsoring your studies? And how did you come to be a King's Man?'

The girl brought me my wine and Peter an ale. I ordered a chicken pie on Peter's recommendation. He'd already eaten.

'I was in Paris for three years. My patron was Lady Alice. While I was away, she put in a word for me with Princess Joan –'

'The King's mother?'

'Yes. And when I returned to London I went to see Princess Joan at Kennington. Richard came in while we were talking and stayed and asked some questions about the Sorbonne and living in Paris and being a student ... I got the impression he envied me! Really!'

'Oh, I know. I met Princess Anna, the Emperor's daughter, and she was the same. A prisoner in a golden cage, poor thing.'

'What, when they came to Paris? How on earth did you wangle that? But yes, that's it exactly. I really felt sorry for him – me, the penniless clerk desperate for a place, and him the King.'

My pie came and I took a bite. English pies tend to be mostly pastry and onions, but this was full of chicken in a delicious sauce. And the way I was dressed – much the same as the slattern who served us – I didn't have to be lady-like about the way I ate it!

'That was six, seven months ago. Last autumn. There was a small group travelling to Boulogne next day to join Sir Richard Stury's team in negotiations with the French. I was sent with them. Just like that.'

He was watching me eat, amusement in his eyes. After this performance it would be even harder to convince him I was Lady Marian MacElpin. And would Blanche want me to? Who was

supposed to be running this errand for Lady Alice anyway, Lady Marian or Mad Mariana?

Peter took up his story. 'The negotiations came to nothing and now fighting has broken out again, but it was a fascinating experience. I got to know everybody, English and French. And they got to know me. Which is why I can't possibly return to France now on behalf of Lady Alice. I'd be arrested immediately, and would have to be ransomed – if I was lucky!'

'Lady Alice. Alice Perrers. She was the old King's mistress, yes?'

'Yes. Surely *you* would not condemn her for that?'

'Of course not.'

For a moment he studied me, then went on: 'My father has a small farm on one of Lady Alice's estates, Crofton, near Winchester. The local priest taught me my letters and Latin and French, and when I was thirteen drew Lady Alice's attention to me. We had a chat and, since then, she's sponsored my studies. It was her who funded those three years in Paris. She's a good woman, a kind woman.'

'And the errand?'

'I can tell you no more about the errand. Except that it will entail going to France, where you, like me, are quite at home.'

'Have you been talking to Geoffrey Chaucer?'

'Master Chaucer? No. Why? And how on earth do you come to know *him*? Oh, never mind. Listen, Lady Alice will tell you all you need to know.'

Gaynes is not far from London, but far enough to be right out in the country. We spent the night at the Fox & Goose and left at the crack of dawn after hiring a horse at one of the stables at Aldgate. All of which suited me perfectly. I was leaving in secret in the company of a man. After all, if any questions were asked, if I was pursued, it would be assumed I was travelling alone. And my companion was one who knew his way around and made everything seem simple. All I had to do was hang on behind him – riding side-saddle till we were clear of Mile End and the suburbs. Then I spread my legs.

The Essex I felt I knew consisted of Colchester, which was fast becoming my favourite town, and beyond Colchester the open

estuaries, salt-flats and marshes, wide sandy beaches and grey-green North Sea. Here, though, in the south of Essex not far from London, it was all peaceful villages surrounded by farmland and greenwoods, and prosperous-looking manor houses. Deceptively peaceful, as I and everyone else was soon to learn.

Gaynes was one such – like the chateaux I'd seen in France, and surrounded, so Peter informed me, by a large and well-run estate.

'And it all belongs to her? Lady Alice?'

'Yes. She used to own a dozen manors scattered here and there around the country. Now ... you know something of her story, I'm sure.'

'Only that she was for years the old king's mistress, and is now in disfavour.'

'In a nutshell, yes. And that may be all you need to know.'

We went through an arched gate of red brick – I love the red brick they use here – and up to the front of the house – partly more red brick, partly timber – where, just in time – it was beginning to rain – grooms took our horses and a manservant led us in and a maidservant led us along a short passage-way to a closed door. 'Wait here.' She walked away.

We waited.

Then a manservant came through. 'Peter? You've missed her. She left yesterday, for Norwich.'

'Oh, *merde*. Did she leave a message, Harry?'

'No letter, no. Just to tell you if you turned up that she would be away for at least a month. And who is this?'

'Just some whore Lady Alice wanted me to get hold of for her. Don't ask me why. It's confidential. But it's a job only she can do. All right, Harry. We'll stop here to rest for an hour or two and have something to eat and drink while I think about it and decide what to do.'

'I'll send some food and wine through. Shall I put the slut out in the yard? Will she need tethering?'

Really? *Tethering*? Like a horse? I noticed that even Peter found that funny.

'No, leave her here with me. I'll need to talk with her about where she's going to spend the next month.'

Harry went, and Peter predictably said, 'This is all your fault, Mariana!'

'If you had made any serious effort to find me, you'd know I work mostly at the Shag in Colchester, not the Green Unicorn, and that's –'

'You told me you didn't know Colchester, had just passed through it once –'

'All whores are liars.'

'I should have guessed. You seem to make a habit of working at two whore-houses simultaneously. In Paris –'

'I did *not* work at La Fille d'Or!'

'You worked for Mère Veronique at the Adriatica and for Mère Blanchefleur at Les Belles Poules.'

'I never worked at Les Belles Poules!'

'Of course you did. But at least now you admit you used to work at the Adriatica. And it'll definitely be La Fille d'Or you work at when you return to Paris. There's a very beautiful girl called Natalie who has some connection with the Fille d'Or – a relative of hers owns it – oh, Natalie's not a whore, she's rich and cultured, but she takes an interest – my friend Henri wrote me that Natalie will inherit the place – so she knows what's going on there, and apparently Lady Marian told Natalie's aristocratic aunt, La Dame de Montrouge – they are friends – that she would place you in the Fille d'Or sometime quite soon and that Natalie herself is in favour of them actually buying you outright.'

Unbelievable. Well, not about Natalie, I could imagine her saying that, and I could well believe that Mère Mireille and Mère Serafina at the Fille d'Or wanted to get hold of me, but all that nonsense about Lady Marian.

'Does Lady Marian know anything about the errand in France for Lady Alice?'

'She knows as much as I do,' I smirked.

'Because that must be finished to Lady Alice's satisfaction before you return to work in Paris. But what am I going to do with you for the next month?'

'I *told* you, I'm returning to the Shag in Colchester. And staying there. Sir Farquhar's orders. I'm supposed to be on my way now, today, but you kidnapped me.'

'Without a horse?' he scoffed.

'I would have had a horse. You gave me no chance to hire one.'

He studied me for a moment.

Then: 'All whores are liars, you said. I'll accompany you to Colchester and see whether, for once, you are telling the truth.' He grinned, suddenly. 'But there's no hurry. I'm free this week, so I suggest we spend a couple of days here getting to know each other better.'

Suggest? He was a King's Man, I was a whore.

It was four days before we set out on the road again.

That first night we stopped in the village of Boreham, at the sign of the Cock, and by the following evening we were in Colchester.

We left the horse at the stable on the London Road just yards from the Bull and the Winged Lion. Peter insisted on coming with me along Bere Lane to the Shag. He wanted to see me installed there, to know where he could find me.

But first, we would get him a room at Mistress Joan's lodging house

At the door, I looked up at the sign of the Winged Lion. What did it signify? The wings could be eagles' wings – the eagle, one aspect, my aspect I like to think, of my Sun Sign, Scorpio. But the Lion? My Moon Sign is Sagittarius ... However, both Mars and Jupiter were in Leo when I was born, and that to a large extent sums up my personality. My sin, the sin that defines me, is not *fornicatio*, fornication (fucking, in the vernacular) as some people who think they know me seem to imagine, but *acedia* – sloth, apathy. Idleness. I am naturally idle – ask Khadija! – and apathetic, preferring just to swim away from everything – that's how I grew up. However, when I believe I am called upon to right some wrong, to take action for some noble reason, then I move Heaven and Earth. And Hell. And of course bite off more than I can chew – but that's the Jupiter in Leo.

So yes, all right. A winged lion.

'What are we waiting for?' asked Peter.

I pushed open the door and walked in

HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS

There was no one about. I peered into the kitchen. Joan was there, cooking as usual. No sign of Marjorie.

'Ah, it's you. What do you want this time?'

'I need – I need to change. Is Marjorie about?'

'You think I run free changing facilities?'

'No, of course not. Oh, Joan –'

'Mistress.'

'Mistress. Don't be difficult with me. I'll pay for a room for the night. And a meal. And some of your best wine.'

'You're staying the night?'

I hadn't been intending to, but the thought of a bath and a good sleep in a comfortable bed after the long journey and before I started work ... 'Yes, if I may.'

'You can if you're Lady Marian.'

'Oh, I am! I am!'

'Then let me show you to your room, my lady.'

I followed. Oh, I liked Joan!

And we came face to face with Peter. In the livery of a King's Man.

She stopped short. 'Get back out in the kitchen,' she told me, over her shoulder. 'And stay there.'

'But – but he's – this is Master Peter Crofton. He's with me!'

Mistress Joan lost for words! Would she make a nasty comment about treating her house as a brothel, or would she welcome this King's Man as an honoured guest? The latter, I'd wager my house on it.

'Master Crofton.' She gave him a nod, then turned back to me. 'Will the gentleman be sharing your room, my lady, or will he require a room of his own?'

'Oh, we'll take the same room, the room reserved for "ladies", together.'

'Of course.'

She took us up there, and when Peter seemed satisfied with it, looked at me with a twinkle in her eye and said, 'Shall I send the girl up with hot water, my lady?'

'Oh yes, please. Enough for a bath.'

Peter put down his saddle-bags and stretched his shoulders. He grinned. 'All right, then. One night here playing master and mistress, then first thing in the morning –'

'Off to work. Yes, I know.'

'But for now I'll leave you in peace to have your bath while I go and explore the city and have a drink and a meal.'

I lay on the bed, fully-clothed, and waited. Sure enough, Marjorie came running up, knocked on the door, and burst in. 'My lady!'

'Hello, Marjorie. Any chance of a bath?'

'The water's heating. You get undressed and ... Have you finished there? At the Shag?'

'No, I – you fetch the water and we'll tell each other the news.'

'It'll be a few minutes. I'll light the fire while we're waiting.'

When she was busy doing that, down on her knees with her back to me, I asked her what she'd heard about me, what people were saying.

Without turning – she was busy blowing the flame, face right down in the fire and filling the room with smoke – she said, 'Nothing. Why? Should they be? Has something happened?'

Her poor face and eyes!

'I don't know. I've been away ten days. You remember when I changed and left?'

'Course I do. But – oh, you mean have they been asking after you. No, not here. Not anywhere, or I'd have heard.'

'That's good news. But now – not now, tomorrow – I have to go back to being Mariana the whore.'

'No!'

'You still believe I'm not Mariana the whore?' I smiled.

'Oh, yes. Oh, I don't know. Anyway, you and me, we said we'd see when you undress! Remember?'

I remembered. The difference between a lady and a whore.

She was grinning.

The other times she'd bathed me and dressed me she'd kept her eyes more or less averted. Not tonight. But I might make it. I'd worn shoes for two weeks, been cared for by Yahia, an expert. After tomorrow I wouldn't though, what with the beating I was sure to receive as soon as I arrived, and going barefoot all day everyday and doing some of the worst of the chores.

I passed the test. Sort of. She didn't like the lash marks across my breasts left by the Abbé Soxxal's whip, she found fading bruises and faint scars on my bottom, and she thought my hands needed looking after, but on the other hand, my back showed no sign of ever having felt the whip, and my feet were feet that went shod.

'Not all the time,' I said. 'You know that.'

'Enough to show you're – well, you're not just a common whore.'

What convinced her, finally, was that I was completely smooth and hairless all over. 'You have no hair *anywhere* except on your head!' she exclaimed.

'Is that the mark of a lady or a whore?' I laughed. In Granada, where I had been depilated, all the women in the harems I was familiar with, from the wives down to the lowliest slavegirls, had been depilated. In Paris, it was the mark of a whore – as Raoul, my lover, informed me, shocked – though I had since heard it was becoming the fashion among the high aristocracy as well.

'I don't know,' she said. 'I think it must be the sign of a very great lady. A princess at least.'

I laughed. She'd just earned herself another gold noble! Then I remembered that my days as Lady Meed were over.

When I was dry and dressed in a clean chemise I'd brought with me, I sent her to fetch a meal and some wine. I wanted to stay in my room and relax.

Then I made her stay with me and tell me her news while I ate.

'Any more murders?' I asked.

She grimaced. 'They say the one who was killing priests has been caught and killed. Killed *again*, some are saying – you know what I mean.'

I knew. 'And the other one? Have any more girls been killed?'

'Not since poor Edith at the Angel. And that whore – sorry – at the Blue Maid, and a shepherd girl down on the marshes. Those were the last ones. You knew about them?'

I nodded. 'And you? How's Joan been? In her usual good mood?'

She laughed. 'She's been pretty free with the slaps. She even slapped *you*, I remember now! Oh, what must you think!'

'I think I wasn't your lady when that happened, I was Mariana the whore. And I'm sure I deserved the slap she gave me.'

'Oh, you did!'

I laughed. 'So if I'm speaking like I think I'm the Queen of England when I'm just a whore, and you think a good slap will stop me ...'

'It did when Mistress Joan slapped you.'

'There you are then. But let's pray it won't happen again.'

She was so sweet and innocent. Everyone slapped her, and she never got to slap anyone.

'I'm going to sleep now, Marjorie. Wake me early, and – oh, yes. I'll need a skirt and bodice of yours again. Don't worry, I'll pay you for them.'

'Oh, it's not that, it's just – I haven't got anything clean.'

'Better.'

'Just leave all your stuff here. I'll hide it.'

'Thank you so much. Good night, Marjorie.'

'Good night, my lady.'

But I didn't sleep. I lay there waiting for Peter, and thinking about what lay in store for me in the morning. A beating from Dan? More time in the gag? My greatest fear was of being branded – the usual penalty for fugitives. That I couldn't bear. But as I didn't belong to the Shag, perhaps I would not be legally a fugitive, merely a runaway? Would what happened to me be up to Martin? He would have me branded, and laugh. I should flee straight back to London now before anyone knew I was here! Peter wouldn't mind that. But to do what? Marell had realised I was a whore and

had decided to treat me as such, not simply as Lady Marian's personal maid and messenger.

In addition to all this, I had stood up Richard FitzAlan, Lord Arundel, confidant and right-hand man to some if not all of the Royal Uncles – *and* I had failed to return to Marell with the purse.

I never wanted to see Southwark again. If it wasn't for Peter, I would go straight on to Harwich and France! And Spain! Go home! Spend the rest of my life swimming in the sun-splashed waters of the Mar Menor!

Wearing Marjorie's clothes – this bodice was even more revealing than the last one she'd given me – and some more cheap earrings and bangles – I nearly got that slap, lady or no lady, when I told her I'd lost the other ones somewhere! – I left the Winged Lion with Peter. But of course, he couldn't be seen to be with me, him in his royal uniform and me dressed like that. He held back, waited for me to get ahead and pretended not to be with me, so I stood tall and proud and walked my dancer's walk, flaunting myself as people expect a whore to do, and because we were outside the Wall and in the brothel area, no one minded, and apart from some pats and a couple of pinches on the bottom and a few men asking where I worked – I told them! – no one bothered me. Very different from what had happened within the Walls.

Then I was at the Shag, and with Peter there it was going to have to be a grand entrance, not the back gate.

I opened the front door and walked in.

Clarice and Kat were down on their knees cleaning the floor.

'Marian!' cried Kat, delighted, and jumped up and hugged me.

'Well, look who's here,' muttered Clarice. But even she was smiling.

'Hello, Kat!' I hugged her back. Realised Peter was still pretending and hadn't followed me in. 'Clarice. What's happening? Quick! A bit of news!'

'Sir George owns the house now,' said Kat.

'Sir George,' Clarice sneered. 'He doesn't even own his own balls, let alone us.'

'Lady Helen?' I asked.

'No, not yet. But it's in the air. Sancha's running the place. All right for some.'

'Uh?'

'You. You're a friend of hers. Lucky one.'

'Oh! Right. No, not really. I hardly know her. It was just that I spoke Spanish ... What did they say about me?'

'Sancha kept it secret at first, so nobody knew you was missing. See? That's a friend. If you'd come back after a week no one would've been any the wiser. But a few days ago, her nibs herself was here, and where was you? So the whole truth come out. God, she's got a temper on her! You're to be beaten and branded and –'

'I'm going! Don't tell anyone I was here!'

'Wait! Didn't I tell you you're the lucky one? Yesterday, this big handsome gent walks in – *he's for me* I think – but no, he's bearing letters. Sancha takes him into her room, they're there for half an hour drinking wine and chatting, then he saunters out without so much as a backward glance for me and Jenny standing here naked as the day we was born.'

'Probably one for the boys,' I say to console her.

'Must've been, if he didn't notice Jenny,' says little Kat.

'You shut your mouth, cheeky little slut.'

I laugh – I love these people – then remember we're talking about me being beaten and branded! 'But what's *he* got to do with *me*?' I wail. 'I'm off!'

'*Wait*. Sancha told us afterwards he was from your master –'

'What, Martin?'

'No! In London! Sir something or other. Your *real* master.'

Oh, no. Oh, *por Dios*. My *real* master. Even I was going to start believing that soon. I mean when everybody else in the world believes one thing and you alone believe another, who's likely to be wrong? It must have been English, bringing the letters I didn't bring. And no doubt searching for me all along the way.

Then both doors opened simultaneously. A man came in from outside – Peter? No, it was William Oldehalle, I knew him – and Jenny came out of the kitchen.

Jenny looked at me, but being the professional she is, said simply, 'Master Oldehalle, how are you? We've got Clarice here ready and waiting, or young Kat, if that's your mood.' Then

noticing that his eyes were on me, added, 'Marian, Sancha wants to speak to you – quickly, now!'

'In the kitchen?'

'No. In her room. And move yourself! She doesn't like to be kept waiting!'

I moved myself.

'Will Marian be long?' I heard Master Oldehalle ask.

'Marian won't be available until this evening. I'm sorry, sir. Kat, would you like to go upstairs with Master Jehane? I'm sure you could learn a thing or two from him.'

I knocked on the door of what had not so long ago been Master Henry's room.

'Come in!'

I went in, not knowing what to expect.

'Mariana! *Ven aquí!*' And then we were in each other's arms, sobbing and laughing in Spanish and English, till finally she began to make sense. 'I thought I'd lost you! We all thought you'd gone after another of these undead and ... Then Lucy said you'd had to go to London, and I was so angry with her for not saying so immediately –'

'You didn't punish her?'

'No. Oh, I wanted to. I would have. I should have! I just didn't think a beating was a good way to start off as whoremistress. Then yesterday afternoon, a man came from your master in London bearing letters. One was addressed to the new whoremaster, another to the new owner, and a third to Master Martin. We sat here together and opened the first one, and he read it to me.'

'Have you got it? Can I read it?'

She frowned at me.

She was right. It was addressed to her, not me, and the contents were private.

'*Me perdonas?*' I said. I'm sorry.

'*Te perdono.* I forgive you. This once. But if you value my friendship, you will respect me and my position here – and demonstrate that respect.'

'Of course.'

'Of course, *mistress*. Especially in front of the other girls.'

'Yes, *mistress*.'

'The only thing in the letter that you need to know is this. He informed me that you'd been summoned to London and had to leave in a hurry. He didn't want you punished for running away. Lucky you! Lady Helen wanted you branded! But he makes a point of saying I'm free to punish you as I see fit from now on for insolence or disobedience.'

Well ... yes. What else could he say? Either I was one of the whores here, or I wasn't. And if I was, I had to be treated as one of them.

'And he commends our use of the gag. Insolence, he says, is your besetting sin.'

Oh, Ferchard. You won't be satisfied, will you, until I'm frightened to open my mouth.

'Well? Is he right?'

If speaking my mind – and having a mind to speak! – is insolence, and that is a sin, then – 'Yes, he's right.'

'Good. You will obey me. You will obey Jenny, who is my deputy – though you don't need to call her mistress. And if ever you feel the need to go vampire-hunting, you will inform me and obtain my permission before leaving. Are we quite clear about that?'

'Yes, mistress.'

'All right, you can go. Tell Jenny you're to start work immediately and to be worked hard to make up for lost time. How do you think Master Martin feels about ten days without any money coming in from you here?'

I hadn't thought of that. But thinking about it now, I could safely say the worse he felt the happier I would be.

'Run, when you're told to do something!'

'Oh – sorry.'

'Mariana.' I turned back at the door. 'I'm happy you're back. Now be a good girl, and don't let me down.'

'I won't, Sanch – mistress. I'm happy too, to be back here with you – all of you.'

Ten minutes later, I was standing with Clarice and Pippa ready and waiting opposite the emtrance. Nothing was happening. Better. So we had a chance to talk some more and Clarice told me about a visitor Sancha hadn't mentioned.

'He was from the nuns up Stratford-atte-Bowe, the very day you left. He went in with Sancha and we weren't supposed to hear a thing. Only after he come out Jenny offered him a free one. He looked round, and he chose me. Wanted a real woman. So of course, after the first time, and we was lying there, him recovering and me, you know, I asked him what was happening. He said the nuns didn't like having a whore in charge, they wanted a man, only they didn't have one free what they knew they could trust. "So what'll happen?" I asked him. "They'd sell the place if they got a good offer." Well, you know what that means, don't you.'

I knew what it would mean if I had still had access to my money – I'd much rather buy this place than, for instance, the Green Unicorn in Southwark – but thanks to Ferchard, that was now out of the question.

'Lady Helen?'

'You can bet your arse on it.'

I liked that. It was more picturesque than bet your house or bet your horse. I'd say it to Marjorie. That should convince her I'm no lady!

Then the door opened and Peter walked in, resplendent in his royal livery.

'Run and get Jenny!' Clarice told Pippa.

Peter looked us both up and down. I realised he was comparing us. Choosing. The bastard.

Then Pippa came back with Jocelyn, who bobbed a curtsy to Peter and sked him if he would like a cup of wine or a snack first, or brought to the room if he was impatient to get started.

'I have not yet broken my fast, so I'll sit over there and eat whatever you have to offer while I watch these charming ladies go about their business.'

'Oh, we don't go about our business down here, sir,' piped Pippa.

'Shh!' Clarice slapped the child's head.

'What?!'

I stroked her shoulder. 'The gentleman means watch us being beautiful and trying to attract the men who come in.'

'Oh, that. Me and Bertha have been practising standing like you always do when you're out here – like you are now.'

I saw Peter grinning, looked down at myself, looked at how Pippa was standing. 'You're better at it than I am, sweet.'

Clarice snorted.

Jonette came down the stairs with a man I didn't know, said goodbye to him and joined us. 'Mariana! Oh, I'm so glad you came back!'

'Bertha knew she would,' said Pippa.

'How could she know?' sneered Clarice.

'She said Mariana will always come back. Will you always come back?'

'You can bet your arse on it.'

Another snort from Clarice and a guffaw from Peter as Jocelyn emerged from the kitchen with his breakfast.

She waited while he took a gulp of wine, then asked if he had made his choice.

'Hmm.' He looked us all up and down again. Twirled his finger in the air, meaning he wanted us all to turn round.

Naturally, we all did so. This was a King's Man. We'd have done so whoever he was, so long as he had a silver groat in his hand.

He carried on eating and drinking and – I assume – studying our backsides. For all I know, he might have been intent on his food.

After what seemed rather too long, Jocelyn said 'You can turn back round now, girls.'

We did so.

'Tell me about them,' Peter ordered. 'How long have they been here?'

'Clarice – that's Clarice, the blonde on the right – she's been here longest. Then Mariana and Jonette, the two dark-haired beauties have both been here some time. The newest is the lovely little one, Pippa. She's only been here about three months.'

'I see. And are they all good girls? Not trouble-makers?'

'Oh no, sir. Any girl who causes trouble here gets soundly beaten.'

'Good. Any report of uppity whores always upsets the young King very much.'

'Of course! God save him! If you'd like to choose one, sir, I'll have her beaten while you finish your breakfast, make absolutely sure she not uppity.'

'Not necessary. I'll take the little one, Pippa, just as she is. But that one there – what was her name? Maria?'

'Mariana, sir.'

'She has an insolent look in her eyes. I strongly advise you to have her thrashed on a regular basis.'

Bastard!!!!

'All right, come on, Pippa.' He took her hand and they went up the stairs together.

'I'll tell Sancha,' said Jocelyn. 'Wait, no, on second thoughts you can tell her yourself, Mariana, seeing you're such good mates. All right?'

'Yes, yes, all right. I'll tell her.'

'You're in for it,' said Clarice. 'That was a King's Man. What he says is a royal command.'

'You do ask for trouble,' Jonette said. 'You should keep your eyes down always when there's someone in authority around. I don't even look Mistress Sancha in the eye any more.'

What could I say? Then two youths walked in and Jonette and I were in business.

For a couple of weeks, nothing happened. I worked, Lucy worked, we all worked, keeping the men and boys of Colchester sated and happy. Nothing except being thrashed by Dan – Sancha had no choice – and being made to wear the gag again for referring to Martin as "that bastard" in Sancha's hearing.

It was while I was wearing it, and out with Clarice hooking cullies leaving the town through South Gate – it was midsummer now, and the evenings long – that a chapman called us over to see his wares. He had ribbons and buttons, bangles and earrings – a working girl's delight. Clarice started trying bits and pieces on, but in my gag it was difficult for me to join in the fun even though I wanted things for myself and for Marjorie.

'Those earrings are perfect on you,' the man told Clarice. Then turned to me. '*Et pour la Demoiselle d'Écosse ce truc-là.*' And for me this little box for holding rings or other trinkets.

La Demoiselle d'Écosse? This must be one of Blanche's agents.

I pulled up my skirt and opened my purse – the things whores can do that no other woman, let alone lady, would dream of doing!

I held out a few pence in one hand and the bangles and earrings I had picked up in the other.

'Three pence.'

I nodded and gave it to him, and he gave me the little box.

'*Elle parle français?*' he asked me, glancing at Clarice. Does she speak French?

I shrugged and shook my head. I didn't think so.

'Who is the ugly cow beside you,' he asked in French, 'wasting my time fingering everything and buying nothing?'

I was shocked. Then realised he was testing her. She clearly understood nothing.

'The lady you met in Avignon will be staying at the White Hart as from Monday. She will be using the name Bianca Francesa de Navarra. Doña Bianca Francesa de Navarra. You will meet her there on Tuesday morning. You will come dressed as a lady and ask for her in Spanish. She will be expecting Doña Mariana de la Mar.' He turned away to talk to two young girls in English.

'Can you lend me a penny?' asked Clarice.

Up went my skirt again, and out came a penny. She paid for the bangles she wanted and we walked back towards the house.

'What was that all about? All that French?'

I tapped the gag and she laughed. Then two men approached us. Where did we work? Just over here, good sirs.

We went in, Dan took the thing off me while the two men stood there laughing, then we all headed upstairs.

* * * * *

Next morning I explained something of the situation to Sancha – without naming any names. She said I could leave early Tuesday morning and be free all day, but if I needed to go away for a longer period I must let her know.

So, early on Tuesday I entered Joan's house as a whore and emerged two hours later a lady. Thanks to Marjorie, who always seemed to enjoy "dressing me up like a lady", as she put it.

But there was no Doña Bianca Francesa at the White Hart.

I went out through through Hed Gate and back to where I'd spoken to the pedlar, outside St Botolph's Priory. He was still there.

At first he didn't recognise me, in all my finery. Then, 'Ah, *la Demoiselle d'Écosse*. The lady in question has had to return to France. She will contact you in a few weeks.'

A few weeks?

'In the meantime, you should *not* – repeat, *not* – expose yourself to any danger. Do not go out alone – as I see you are doing now – and do not go out *at all* after dark, even in company.'

'And?'

'That is all.'

He turned to a girl who was eyeing me suspiciously – *even in these clothes?* – and who looked as though she might be from the Blue Maid – so I made a sarcastic remark in snotty lady-like tones about the quality of his goods and swaggered off.

Again the days and weeks went by. How can one distinguish them? But I remember the morning when, with very little happening and the girls who lived in all sitting around in the kitchen, I was suddenly trapped into finishing the mostly fictitious story of how Martin had saved me from a whipping in Paris.

'All right, all right,' I laughed 'but I started that story ages ago and I can't remember –'

Bertha remembered. 'You were cold and hungry and disgusting –'

'I was *not* disgusting!'

'You said you were,' argued Jenny, 'and we believed you! Aren't we supposed to believe this story?'

'You believe as much as you want to believe, Jenny.'

'I believe it!' cried Kat.

'What, the story, or that Marian was disgusting?' asked Clarice.

But Bertha was not to be put off. 'And you came into a square full of people and a big fire and two men grabbed you and – and then –'

'What a memory you have, sweetheart! Yes, I'd come, by chance, upon the home, the headquarters, of *L'Albanien*, the King of the Paris Underworld. And that square was his *Cour des*

Miracles, where the blind saw, the dumb spoke and the legless stood and walked.'

'How?' 'But, Marian – !' 'He was a *saint*'?

'*Saint*? No! Quite the opposite! But "How?" was my question exactly. And the answer was simple. They were all beggars, and they'd all been pretending. When they returned home to that square, their Cour des Miracles, they stopped pretending ... "And what have *you* been pretending?" the Albanian asked me when he noticed me, a stranger among the throng of beggars and thieves and pimps and whores.'

I wanted to say I'd been pretending to be a whore, but in the present company, in the kitchen of that small brothel outside the ancient walls of Colchester, I had to say: 'I told him I'd been pretending to be a lady. *Une grande dame*. "Then stop pretending," he said. 'No one is allowed to pretend here. Take her and scrub her, Denise, and let us see her for what she truly is.' So this Denise, and some other women built like wrestlers, took me away and cleaned me and dressed me as a whore and brought me back to him. He looked me up and down appreciatively. "What are you, girl? What are you really?" "I'm a whore, sir." "A whore and a dancer. I can tell a dancer when I see one walk. Dance for me, whore." So I danced for him. And then I slept with him. The King of Thieves.'

'And yet he didn't protect you when they were going to whip you?'

'He had hundreds of whores, Bertha. He owned brothels. The Adriatica, the very one I'd been looking for, belonged to him ... I danced for him and slept with him night after night for a month, two months, I don't know, it was a dream. But waking-up time came. It always does. He took another woman to his bed, a yellow-haired goddess from the far north, and when I asked him "What shall I do?" he said "Do what you were going to do the night you stumbled upon our little Cour des Miracles." "I was going to go to the Adriatica, sir." "Excellent. Tell Mère Veronique I sent you." And he turned away from me without a kiss, without a touch, without another word.'

'Men!'

'So I went to the Adriatica, to Mère Veronique, and worked there the rest of the summer and all through the winter.'

'But what *happened*?' 'Yes, you still haven't told us why they were going to *whip* you!'

That was because I still hadn't thought up a credible tale. All right, whores got themselves whipped every day in the great cities like Paris and London, Venice and Rome and Prague, and of course Avignon, so any tale I told would have been credible, but I wanted an exciting crime, something special, something that added to my personal mystique – and was also not too foreign to the small local world where these girls passed their lives.

Suddenly I realised that I would do best with something related to my quest here in Colchester. And I remembered the old bed-ridden and all-but-dead witch, Maalot, who possessed her poor daughter, Malina ...

'There was a woman working at the Adriatica,' I took up the story again, 'who was sometimes quiet and shy and did her duty as all good girls should. But at other times, she had a feral look in her eye and men feared to go with her, even those men whose desire is to be dominated and hurt. I'm sure you have some of those in Colchester,' I laughed.

They all groaned and made faces except Clarice, who said, 'I *enjoy* dealing with them!'

'All well-run brothels have at least one woman who does. If she frightens them so much they wet themselves, that's fine. But if the look in her eye sends them fleeing out terrified onto the street, that is not so good.

'Anyway, it turned out that Malina – such was her name – was being possessed, for longer and longer periods, by an ancient, dying witch who, when she finally got put to bed with a shovel had no intention of sleeping quietly down there in the cold wormy earth. Oh no. She was going to move into poor Malina and take up her home there permanently.'

'Marian, this is becoming a horrible story!'

'Then no-one will mind if she stops it right there,' said Sancha, coming into the kitchen. 'I want three girls outside ready and waiting – now! – and one of them will be you, Mariana.'

That finished that.

* * * * *

It was next morning, I think, while I was cleaning upstairs, that Kat came running up and told me Mistress Sancha wanted me. 'Now! *Fast!*'

'All right!' I laughed, and ran down to see what was wrong.

'The Bailiff is coming,' Sancha informed me.

Oh, no! Oh well ...

'You get that gleam out of your eye. He wants you dressed and in the kitchen for "a little chat". Sounds like trouble to me.'

When the Bailiff arrived, he ordered everyone else out of the kitchen – "and no eavesdropping!" – and sat down opposite me at the big table.

'Let's start from where we left off, shall we, at the end of our last chat. Then, you had an audience, now you don't, so we can dispense with the comedy. After that little chat, my main concern, as you may imagine, was resolving the problem of how undead Harold/Alfwin came to lose his head, and how that head came to rest in the grounds – the hallowed grounds – of St John's Abbey. I was sure you knew more than you were prepared to say. I wanted to question you further. But you disappeared – ran away, became, strictly speaking, a fugitive from justice. Why? You'd done nothing wrong. Far from it. The Crouner had even given you the reward – twenty gold nobles – a fortune for a whore like Marian atte-Marsh. So you'd run off with it to make a better life for yourself. Who could blame you? Then I made an interesting discovery.

'Before you left, you gave the purse of gold to Jocelyn for her and Pippa. Now that was not something Marian atte-Marsh would ever have done. It was totally incredible. So who was the whore Mariana *really*? Was she not Marian atte-Marsh at all but a rich courtesan who could sniff at a few gold nobles? It was with this in the back of my mind that, while questioning Prior Geoffrey and that gate-keeper – unpleasant fellow – '

'They both are.'

'Hm. So, while questioning them about the undead head – '

'May I interrupt again?'

'Whenever you wish to. You never know, you might contribute something useful.'

'In that case, forget it.'

'Do you know that the first time we spoke, when you were pretending to be the whore Marian atte-Marsh, you made a point of addressing me as "sir"?'

'I was not pretending to be "the whore Marian atte-Marsh", as you so graciously put it. I was being – and I pointed this out to you at the time – myself.'

""Myself" being?'

'For these purposes, Mariana de la Mar.'

'Well, Mariana de la Mar, I apologise for that foolish remark about you contributing something useful. Please ask the question you had intended to.'

I kept him waiting.

He waited.

I had the feeling he was coming to know me.

I relented, as he had known I would. 'What became of the head?'

This took him by surprise. 'Why do you ask?'

'Because it should not be reunited with its body under any circumstances. Nor should it be left out in the open to become a "talking head". It should be stored in a secure charnel house with other heads or buried deep, by itself, in unhallowed ground. Or weighted and cast into the sea.' He was gazing at me. 'Or so I hear.'

'And which would you recommend?'

'Oh, definitely the latter. Heavily weighted and in deep water.'

'*Or so you hear ...*' He wasn't smiling, but I could see in his eyes that he was amused. 'The head and body were buried together in the Judas Field, the unsanctified burial ground out by the Magdalene Leper Hospital on the road to Hythe. Where Harold had been buried first time round.'

'Same grave?'

'Yes, but dug deeper this time. Are you going to tell me the thing, whatever it is now, Alfwin, Harold, may rise out of its grave and walk the night, head in hands?'

'Like St Oswyth.'

Now he did grin. 'Don't ever let a priest hear you say a thing like that. Comparing a Saint to an undead eater of human flesh indeed!

But, yes. You knowing of St Oswyth certainly lends some credence to the "atte-Marsh" part of that particular – what did you call it? – sobriquet of yours.'

'With Alfwin out there ready to rise up out of the grave, head in hands, you have more important things to worry about than my sobriquets.'

'You're serious.'

'I am.'

'You know about such things.'

'I do.'

'Then let me continue my story. While I was questioning the Prior and the gate-keeper about the head – they knew nothing, it was found there one fine morning in all its foulness, desecrating the holy place – a thought came to me. Had Martin of Chich ever brought a woman to the gate with him, and if so, could it be said that she desecrated the holy place by her very presence? I asked them, and was told that the first time Martin brought the creature – they both shuddered and crossed themselves – to the Abbey with him, he introduced her as a lady – Lady Marian MacElpin. She was no lady. That was obvious even then. But – I quote – "that she was a succubus out of Hell only became clear when he brought her a second time wearing a gag, and she squawked and gibbered like the demon she was, all pretence at humanity abandoned on this holy ground.'" He considered me. 'Does all this ring true?'

'Oh, yes. Was young Brother Terence there? I'll be the stuff of his nightmares for the rest of his life.'

'The stuff of his dreams, probably.'

I smiled.

'Have you seen where I'm going with this?'

'I believe so.'

'Good. Now, if I were to suggest that Lady Marian MacElpin was there behind the Angel the night Henry Bawd was killed and that she was also present when Harold/Alfwin was decapitated, what would your reaction be?' He waited. I outwaited him. 'After all, you would know,' he went on. 'By your own admission you were there when Henry was killed. So, yes or no?'

'Yes. Lady Marian was present when Henry was killed.'

'Ah ha. Now, would it be a wild guess on my part to suggest that she – Lady Marian – subsequently followed Harold/Alfwyn home and beheaded him, then conveyed his head to the Abbey gate and chucked it over?'

I grinned.

'What?' he asked.

'I like "chucked" – "chucked it over". It makes it sound as if she was enjoying herself.'

'Oh, I'm sure she was. After all, she'd received nothing but the grossest ill-manners from the good monks, and had herself not been permitted to sully their holy soil.'

'That wasn't her. That was the whore. Me.'

'I went to the trouble of interviewing anybody who might have witnessed someone carrying a head round by the Wall between East Street and Botolph Street or along Botolph Street during the hour or two following the death of poor Henry. I found two old gossips who'd been hobnobbing at the well on the corner of Bere Lane and Botolph Street. They saw a whore who had lost her skirt in the course of her evening's activities "running home to a beating, poor thing", one said. "To the beating the slut so richly deserved," corrected the other. Fascinated, I asked whether this whore had been carrying anything. Oh yes, they both agreed: something heavy and round in both her hands, clasped to her chest. Whatever could it have been, they wondered. I left them to their guessing. But you and I don't need to guess, do we.'

'No.'

'And you and I both know who was running around the streets that night with no skirt on, don't we.'

'Yes.'

'And to return to an earlier point, you and I both know that while Mariana – the role you were playing last time we spoke – made a point of addressing me as "sir", the person you are playing today makes a point of not doing so.'

'I am not "playing" today.'

'No? We'll come back to that, for I have another little tale to tell you. This one is set in Paris.'

I sighed and rolled my eyes.

He smiled. 'Becoming predictable, am I?'

'You and several others. But do go on.'

'Thank you. As Bailiff, I have few agents at my disposal, but I do have friends that from time to time I make use of. I asked one who was going to France on business to winkle out all he could about a certain Lady Marian MacElpin who had been living in Paris. He returned yesterday. Some people, he told me, claim that Lady Marian does not exist, that she is – or was – simply a name used by a Spanish courtesan called Mariana de la Mar. Others said she did exist, she studied at the university there, for which purpose she posed as a boy named Magnus MacElpin – her brother, real or imaginary – and that Mariana de la Mar is a whore who happens to look almost exactly like Lady Marian. This story is supported by the fact that some whore who is the image of Lady Marian is still in Paris now, though Lady Marian herself left Paris almost a year ago. This whore calls herself ...' He looked at me.

'Fermosa,' I said.

'Please don't tell me you were in Paris last week.'

'Of course I wasn't. I was here.'

'*Deo gratias*. So we do definitely have another person who looks like you.'

'So I hear.'

'So you hear ... May I suggest that you are Lady Marian MacElpin. That the whore in Paris is who she says she is: Fermosa.'

'You may.'

'I may what?'

'You may suggest that.'

He laughed. 'A notion corroborated by the testimony of Marjorie, who –'

'You *bullied* Marjorie?'

'Would I do a thing like that? The mere mention of the whipping-post outside the Moot Hall was more than enough to have her assuring me that the whore Mariana was not a whore at all, she was a lady, Lady Marian, and ... and some talk of yet more gold coins being distributed with apparent abandon. So, Lady Marian – you don't mind if I call you that – ?'

'Why should I? It makes a refreshing change after some of the other things you've called me.'

'I was wondering, Lady Marian, whether you could – well, I am sure you can, but whether you *would* – confirm for me the identity of Mariana de la Mar and Marian atte-Marsh. Are both of them in fact *you*. Or is either of them, in fact, this Fermosa?'

'What would your best guess be, Master Bailiff?'

'I believe Mariana de la Mar and Lady Marian are one and the same. I suspect that Marian atte-Marsh is a name awarded to Mariana by someone – Martin, perhaps? A sobriquet, no more. And that Fermosa has little or nothing to do with this story ... Well?'

'I think your solution might be a good working hypothesis. But where do we go from there?'

'You tell me. What is Lady Marian doing posing as a whore in a cheap brothel out on the borders of the Essex marshes?'

'Shall we simply say the unlikelihood of that represents a serious flaw in your working hypothesis?'

'No, my lady. I think I would like a little more than that.'

'Then let us add a detail to the various premises underlying your hypothesis and ask what is Lady Marian doing working as a whore in a cheap brothel on the borders of the Essex marshes *at a time when not one but two revenants are walking the night killing innocent people right there?*'

He thought about that. 'I see. Yes. One down, one to go. But the one to go kills girls such as Mariana so I hope and pray Lady Marian will be very, very careful.'

'She will have support for this next one that you can know nothing of.'

Again he considered me.

'Then let us hope this support *is* support, and not just important people using her as live bait.'

I tried not to let him see how close to the mark he had hit. This bailiff was a very clever and extremely perceptive man.

'Let's drop the "her", shall we, Master Bailiff? I have come to trust you, and will contact you immediately if I need assistance. The undead murderer of young women and girls is moving south –'

'Ah yes, the girl on Mersea Island. But no one knows about that yet.'

' – and the assistance I need may be in the Maldon area or further south – Canvey Island. Or so I hear.' I smiled.

'Just let me know where and when, my lady. And rest assured, your secret is safe with me.'

He opened the door. Now others would be listening. 'I have finished with Mariana. She is free to start work, Sancha. Thank you for your cooperation.'

'You don't want to take her upstairs for a while before you leave, Bailiff? On the house.'

'I would love to, but I can't, I simply can't. Bye, girls.'

I smiled and got to my feet as the girls chorused their goodbyes.

Sancha's voice broke into my reverie. 'Mariana! Get stripped off and out here – fast! I've got men *waiting*!'

And that same week, a couple of days later, Lady Helen walked in with Sir George, looking as if she owned the place.

For an hour or so, I went on working while she was busy with other matters, then I was sent for. She was in Sancha's room, and with her, standing up, were Sir George and Dan.

'You and I are going to have a little talk, Marian. But because I'm going to be doing the talking and I don't want any insolent interruptions, you'll wear this gag. My nice new one. Dan, put it on her.'

As he lifted it up to my face, I saw the spike. No! But before I could do or say anything, he had pressed it into my mouth, tearing my top lip then jabbing into the top of my tongue. My scream turned into a squawk then just soundless sobbing as I held my tongue rigidly still.

'Right. Dan, you return to your post at the door; and George, you can go and play with one of the girls.'

They went, and she turned to me. 'You should have been whipped and branded, but your master in London intervened. An old man, I understand. You obviously have him curled round your little finger. I'm going to London soon. I'll be seeing him while I'm there.'

She was gazing at me, trying to gauge the impact of her words. They had little impact, all that concerned me was this instrument from Hell that they had put round my face and in my mouth.

'Glub,' I said, and squawked again.

She smiled.

'I wrote to him, informing him of Sir George's intention to buy this place and inviting him to visit me at my cousin's town-house in order to discuss your future. He wrote back by return, saying he would be honoured.'

The smile was complacent.

Well, why not? I'd be honoured, too. She was perfect. I only wished I was like her.

Be yourself, Papa had told me once. Don't try to be anyone you're not.

What was she going on about now?

I didn't know and I didn't care. My tongue hurt too much.

My trouble, Papa, is that I don't know who "myself" is.

What was that? She wanted to buy me from Ferchard and Martin, have me belong to the Shag? To her?

Ferchard wouldn't.

But I wasn't sure any longer. It was true he seemed ready to wash his hands of me, so if the price was good enough he might be tempted. Now all our gold and silver deposits were solely in his name, I was nothing to him but a source of anxiety and upset.

Come on, Blanche! I always thought it would be you who sent me back to Avignon or Cuenca, or even right back to Cartagena, to Doña Leonor, who was, I remember you insisting, my true owner because my father had sold me to her in the first place. Now, though, it is you who will save me, if anyone does.

Then Sancha was there and pulling me out of the room and through to the kitchen. 'She says you're to keep that on for the rest of the day. You better stay in the yard, out of the way.' And she pushed me out through the back door.

I went and sat down in my corner again and kept my tongue very still and thought about where my life had gone wrong. So much to think about! It was impossible. All I could do now was take each day as it came, discover as I went along what the Three Weird Sisters had in store for me ...

But what had happened? Had I fallen asleep in front of Helen? I must have done.

I slept again.

Then woke with a cry. I had moved my tongue. But hours had passed. It was evening now. I changed position, sat more

comfortably, swallowed blood and held my tongue so it was clear of the spike.

And slept once more. And found myself watching a boy on a beach. A beautiful boy with a young girl, hardly more than a child. I knew that beach. And I knew that girl! It was Balthild's daughter, Linette. The hair was wet and looked darker – she'd been swimming – but those hazel eyes, that smile. It was twilight there. Her friends had gone home, but she wanted to see what it was like to swim in the dark, swim by moonlight, and the boy had said he would stay with her, she'd be all right.

Only she wouldn't be all right! This was the beautiful boy Blanche had mentioned! This was Merlin!

'No!!!' I screamed.

And Merlin looked at me. He could see me in my dream, knew I was watching him.

Then Linette screamed, too, as the beautiful boy turned into a tall, thin man in a dark cloak, towering over her.

'No!' I screamed again. 'Let her go and I will come to you, there on the beach where we met before.'

'When will you come?'

'In – I don't know. Give me some time. A month.'

'Come on Alban Elued. After the sun sets.'

Alban Elued? The Autumn Equinox. I remembered my father throwing pebbles into the sea as the sun set ... 'I will be there.'

'I, too.'

'Run now, Linette! Run!'

And Linette, who had been gawping at me – *could she see me?* – fled for her life, up the beach and into the gathering darkness.

* * * * *

They left me out there until bedtime, then Jocelyn called me in and took the gag off me and gave me water – I couldn't eat, I couldn't speak.

Jocelyn? What was *she* doing here?

I gestured the question.

She looked embarrassed. 'Another man,' she said.

I raised my eyebrows. *What happened?*

'Same as happened to you. Whores are stupid, everyone knows that. Else, why would they end up whores?'

That was a good question, and no doubt she was right – Ferchard would certainly agree with her – but what did she mean, "same as happened to you"? I waited.

'I had enough to set me up for the rest of my life, same as you did – and now I haven't got it, same as you haven't.'

'What happened?' This time I managed to say the words.

'I knew this man, a good man, steady; so I thought between us, with the gold for a start, we could have a good life. Stupid whore. And I knew! Before I married him, I knew! When he said my Pippa was a little slut and he didn't want her making out she was *his* daughter, she could just go back to the whorehouse she came from ... I should have stopped it there and then. Only Pippa didn't mind, she wanted to come back here, she was bored at home, so I said all right ... Now he says he's using the money to set up on his own – he's a fishmonger, specialises in porpoise-flesh – and says there's no money to spare for the house, for food and fuel ...'

So she had to come back to work. Stupid? Yes. Same as happened to me? No, not really, not with those twenty gold nobles. But almost exactly the same as happened to all the hundreds of pounds in gold I had on deposit. And now I have nothing and Ferchard has it all and he sends me to work here. Oh yes, whores are stupid.

Before I slept, I ran the whole incident with Linette over again in my mind. It hadn't been a dream. Merlin had turned back. Tomorrow I would inform the Bailiff ...

In the morning, my tongue was still in a terrible state. I sat in the kitchen, receiving sympathetic words and glances from the other girls until Sancha came through. She had me open my mouth, said in Spanish 'May the bastard whose idea that thing was rot in Hell!' then repeated it in English for the others.

'I need to speak to you.'

'Yes, come on,' she said and beckoned Jenny to follow us.

Once we were in her room, I said 'I have to speak to the Bailiff. It's urgent.'

Sancha looked at me doubtfully.

'If the Bailiff is angry because I've wasted his time, I'll put that fucking gag back on myself.'

Sancha hesitated, then nodded. 'Jenny, you go and find him. Wear a cloak. And you wait here, Mariana. I have things to do.'

So I sat there and waited. I was wearing only my short smock, which was hardly appropriate now he knew who I was, but he'd seen me in it before ... in fact he'd seen me *not* in it before ... and there was nothing I could do. I sucked my poor tongue gingerly, swallowed, and cursed Lady Helen.

After an hour or so, the Bailiff arrived with Jenny and Sancha in tow.

'Good morning, my lady.'

'There's no reason to mock the poor creature,' protested Sancha.

He looked at me. I gave a slight shake of the head.

'No. You're right. I apologise. But I'm not accustomed to being summoned to an audience with a common whore. Now, what can I do for you, Mariana? And it had better be good.'

'Jenny, fetch the Bailiff a cup of wine.'

'Just a moment, Sancha,' ordered the Bailiff. 'Mariana, is this a private matter?'

I shook my head.

'You want Sancha here?'

I nodded.

'And Jenny?'

I nodded again.

'That wine, Jenny!' muttered Sancha, and Jenny hurried out.

'He – the murderer – oh, I can't speak properly –'

'Jenny told me about your troubles with this new and very effective gag, Mariana. Just take your time.'

'He has turned back. He was on Clackton beach last night.'

'How do you know?'

I shrugged and made that-doesn't-matter gestures. 'Check that Linette, daughter of Ned Smith at Great Clackton, is unharmed.'

He was staring at me. 'But my lady, how –'

'Will you stop that!' snapped Sancha. 'Can't you see the poor girl is – ?'

'You stop!' he snapped back. 'Lady Marian is doing what she has to do here – '

'But please don't tell anyone else about me or about Clackton beach and little Linette.'

'How do you know Linette?' he asked.

'Her mother, Balthild, used to be a whore, here at the Shag.'

He looked at Sancha.

'Balthild? I knew her as a child,' Sancha told him, 'with that Susanna. Master William took her in when her parents died ...'

'I see. All right. I'll come back tomorrow. How do you wish these two to treat you, my lady?'

'As Marian atte-Marsh. But, please, no more gag!'

'Sancha, tell Lady Helen that if I find Lady Marian has been forced to wear that thing again, I will close this place down. You understand?'

'Yes, sir.'

When he'd gone, she sent Jenny away and sat down with me. 'You and I need to have a long, long talk, *chica*. Here, drink this wine – he didn't touch it – perhaps that will help ... '

I drank it down slowly, bathing my tongue in each mouthful.

'But for now get back to the kitchen and tell Josse you'll be available for work this afternoon. And remember the Bailiff said nothing about not using a stick on your ladyship's bottom.' She grinned when she said it, but she meant it. And she followed me through to the kitchen, where Josse was back cooking as though nothing had happened while Pippa and Kat sat watching her.

'Josse, Mariana can't use her tongue but that doesn't mean she can't work. Keep her busy. She has lost hours and days to make up for. I don't want her master taking her somewhere else because she doesn't earn enough here.'

She turned and went, and Jocelyn said: 'Get that smock off, Marian, and go and wait in the hall. If I see you in the kitchen again before we close the front door for the night, I'll send you straight to Dan.'

Pippa and Kat grinned.

'What are you two grinning at? Pippa, fetch me *my* stick!'

'No, Ma! We weren't grinning, we –'

'Can we go and work with Mariana instead?' begged Kat.

'You mean go and gossip in the hall. No. But what you can do is go to the door and do some touting, the two of you, bring in some men for Marian and the others. In your smocks!' she yelled after them as they went racing out naked.

There was no shortage of men that afternoon, and I'd been working continuously for several hours when Jenny came to tell me Sancha wanted me in her office again.

I was busy douching myself.

'That's piss you use, isn't it?'

I nodded.

'I use vinegar. It's easy, there's always some in the kitchen. Sancha uses piss, though. And Jonette.'

'Really?'

'Come on, hurry up.'

'Should I clean myself?' I tried to ask. 'Put something on?'

'*What?* Oh, don't try to speak, just go, don't keep her waiting. She's in a filthy mood and someone's going to end up being thrashed or my name's not Martha.'

'It's not.'

'It is.'

'Oh, no.'

'Run!'

I ran.

It was Martin. The grin when he saw me like that made all his previous grins seem half-hearted.

'Marian atte-Marsh. I see you're back at work at last.'

I nodded.

'Say "Yes, sir", you slut,' snapped Sancha. 'Or "Yes, master".'

'Yes sir.'

'I just bumped into my friend Hugh. You know who my friend Hugh is, Marian?'

I shook my head, and Sancha stepped forward and slapped my face, hard.

'No, sir,' I said, my hand to my cheek.

'Hugh Furneys, the Bailiff. He told me over a drink or two that you had *summoned* him here and given him some drivel about the undead whore-killer being in the Clackton area, and Balthild's daughter being attacked.'

I couldn't believe it! But when he went on, I knew it was true, that I'd been wrong.

'He sent a messenger to Balthild. Her daughter Linette's been ill, hasn't been out of the house for days. And another girl has been killed, this time the daughter of a knight. Need I say she had a reputation for being a slut?' He paused. Did he expect an answer? As far as I could tell, every girl in Essex had a reputation for being a slut – at least every girl that gangs of yobs like Martin would notice and rape.

'You know where this happened?' he asked me.

I shook my head. Then, 'Sorry. No, sir.' Please, not to the south of Colchester, in the direction of Canvey Island!

'It happened near Maldon, halfway to Canvey Island. Hugh said to tell you he washes his hands of you. Oh, and he asked me if you were in fact in any sense "a lady".' Martin laughed. 'I told him the truth was that your mother'd been a local whore named Liza atte-Marsh and your father some Spanish sailor washed up here. Is that not so?'

'Yes sir.'

'Speak clearly, slut!' roared Sancha.

I flinched, but she hadn't tried to slap me again.

I sucked my poor tongue, swallowed and said as clearly as I possibly could, 'Yes, sir. It is so.'

Sancha wasn't letting me off lightly. And she was right. In her position, I'd already have had me beaten to a jelly.

He snapped his fingers at me. 'Now get out and get on with your work!' And he gave my bottom a sudden resounding slap.

'Ow!!'

'Out, I said!' Another slap, even harder.

I squealed and ran, clutching my bottom.

And bumped into Jenny. 'There's a man here waiting for you. You're the only Mariana here.'

'Who?'

'Me.' A deep voice. No livery, but very grand, very rich. Was this from Blanche? Or just another cully?

He looked me up and down. As well he might. I was naked and, while the room I worked in was dark, here in the light I was disgusting.

'Mariana de la Mar?'

Everyone was staring, but now all eyes opened wider.

'Yes?'

He waved Jenny and the others away, out of earshot. 'Are you the one they call La Demoiselle d'Écosse?'

'I am.'

'An agent of Doña Bianca's?'

I nodded.

'Then you will know her full name.'

'Bianca Francesa de Navarra.'

'You are to come with me, now.'

'I can't. I –'

'You can and you will. Who is in charge here?'

'Mistress Sancha.'

'Where can we find her?'

'In that room. But my master is there too, and – and I –' and I burst into tears! What was this? *Me? Tears?*

'Martin of Chich?'

I nodded, sobbing.

'Just the man I want. Come.' He took me by the arm.

Jenny dashed in front of us. 'You can't –'

'Out of my way.' He threw open the door. 'Martin of Chich?'

'What the devil? Marian, I told you –'

'Sit down. And you, woman – what's your name? – Sancha? I doubt it.'

He was right about that.

'I have here a *carte-blanche* warrant from the Duke of Lancaster. Can either of you read? You, Martin? Here.' He passed over the warrant. 'Should I so choose, I can order this place closed down as of *now*, and you both incarcerated indefinitely on charges of plotting against the Crown. Which in your case at least, Martin of Chich, wouldn't be far off the mark, would it.' He took back the warrant. 'So. Are we going to do this the easy way or the hard way?'

'That, I take it, was the hard way,' said Sancha.

She had spirit. I hoped she would still be my friend after all this.

'Hold your tongue, woman!' snapped Martin. Always the gentleman. 'Are you going to introduce yourself, sir?'

'To a churl like you? I introduce myself only to my peers. So, the hard way then. Where's that girl?'

'Jenny?' I said. 'She's – '

'Tell her to bring in a couple of my men.'

'Wait,' said Martin. 'At least tell us what this is all about.'

'*About?* It's about you, Martin of Chich, accepting five gold nobles and signing and sealing this document which states that you have no further interest in or hold over Mariana de la Mar, also known as Marian atte-Marsh, and that all previous documents tying her to you are hereby null and void.'

I wanted to look Martin in the eye and gloat, but found I couldn't. They'd almost broken me.

'And you, Sancha – real name? ... *Real name!*'

'Catalina.'

'Catalina *what?* In your case a public whipping would precede the permanent imprisonment. Not here. In the Clink. You know it? *Daily* whippings can be arranged in the Clink ...'

'Catalina Martinez.'

'You, Catalina Martinez, also known as Sancha, will likewise accept five gold nobles and make your mark on this other document, which states that any and all existing contracts between the proprietors of the Shag and Martin of Chich regarding Marian atte-Marsh are hereby null and void. In your case, the five gold nobles will of course be handed over to said proprietors along with one copy of this document. Do you both understand?'

They nodded.

'Now, there is another lady working here. One Lady Lucia Hartley, daughter of the late Sir Arthur de Little Clackton. She will be accompanying us. No gold or documents are required as she is no longer under contract to this establishment. She is a free woman – indeed an aristocrat – being held and abused here against her will. And that is a crime. Do you have anything to say?'

They did not.

'Go and put something on, Mariana. You can hardly go out like that. And bring Lady Lucia. I will stay here with these two unsavoury specimens.'

'Please. Don't be hard on Sancha. She's a good woman, and my friend.' Suck and swallow. 'Martin, on the other hand, is about as unsavoury as –'

'I find you hard to follow. I take it you are trying to tell me you look kindly upon Sancha but cannot abide Martin. Is that right? I am afraid that what happens is up to them, not up to me. If they sign the documents without any trouble, they will be free to carry on with their little lives as though nothing had happened. Except that you – and Lady Lucia – will no longer be part of those lives.'

'Thank you.'

I turned and went, desperate now to get some clothes on, and praying this gentleman didn't turn to watch me go and see Martin's hand marks emblazoned across my bottom.

'Just a moment,' he said, addressing my back. 'I brought cloaks with me for you and Lady Lucia – in case. Call Jenny.'

'Jenny – come here, please.'

She was there, at the door.

'Jenny,' he said. 'I brought two cloaks with me. Fetch them. Quick!'

Why couldn't he have said so before?

And she was back with them, holding them out.

'They're not for me, one is for Mariana, the other for Lady Lucia. Run and give it to her.'

'Lady Lucia?' It was the first time I'd ever seen Juicy Jenny totally at a loss.

'Lucy,' I said, taking one of the cloaks for myself and throwing it over my shoulders.'

'I don't believe it,' she breathed. She was so beautiful wide-eyed.

'Believe it, girl – and run!' snapped this wonderful man. 'And you,' he said to me, 'fetch anything you need to take with you – you will not be coming back – and wait for me outside with the Bailiff.'

The Bailiff? Oh, no!

I went upstairs past the staring girls with what dignity I could muster, clutching the cloak around me, and met Lucy coming out of her room.

'You did it!'

I nodded and grinned.

In my room, I decided not to bother with the few rags that were all I had in the way of clothes. I'd be fine in the cloak, which was new and elegant and very warm. My belt and purse, with my money and ring. The cheap trinkets I took back downstairs in my hand.

As I expected, Bertha and the two other little ones were there looking upset.

'Mariana!' Bertha accused me of desertion with her gorgeous eyes.

'I can't help it, sweet. I'd love to stay here with you but I *have to* go. He's a *very* important man.'

'Who *is* he?'

'I don't know.' Suck and swallow. 'But I know he's not the sort of man people like us can argue with. Sancha tried and nearly got taken away for a public whipping.'

'Do her good,' muttered Clarice. Then snapped at Jocelyn: 'You tell her I said that, I'll kill you.'

'Here Bertha, Kat, Pippa – some earrings and things you can share out between you.'

Kat took them, while Bertha gazed at me. 'You're never coming back, are you.'

What could I say? 'You never know, sweet. There's a thing called the Wheel of Fortune. Have you heard of it?'

She and Kat shook their heads solemnly. Pippa was busy trying on the bangles I'd given them.

'Life's like a big wheel. When you're down, things'll get better, count on it. But when you're up, be careful.'

'All you can do, love,' Clarice put in, 'is accept what happens, that's what she's saying. Good things happen, bad things happen. Anything can happen at any time, anything at all. But when things are bad they can only get better –'

'And when things are good, they can only get worse,' added Jocelyn with feeling. As well she might.

'You didn't even finish the story!' wailed Bertha. 'Now we'll never know why you were to be whipped and how Master Martin saved you.'

'Because it never happened. I was never going to be whipped – it was just that, a story.'

'You were never in Paris?'

'You never met the Albanian?'

'You never worked as a whore in France?'

'You're really a *lady*?'

The three girls were all staring at me in horror. I had deceived them. But I hadn't. I had to go on trying to speak ... 'Oh, I was in Paris. I know it and love it. The Albanian was just as I described him to you, and for a long time I was his favourite. His brothel, too, the Adriatica, and Mère Veronique, the whoremistress, are just as I told you.' Suck and swallow. 'Go to her if ever you're in Paris and looking for work – or to Mère Mireille at La Fille d'Or. Tell them I sent you, Mariana de la Mar. Or if you're in the south of France, go to Mère Bertelote at La Negrillonne in Avignon. I worked there, too. A good story is always mostly true ...'

'Will you go back to France?' asked Kat.

I thought about it. 'Yes. Quite soon.'

'Will you come back here?' asked Bertha.

'Yes,' I said, without thinking. And knew that that too was true. If it hadn't been before, I'd just made it so.

'Now I must go.' I gave the three little ones a hug and a kiss, then all the others who were there. Tears flowed down bruised but beautiful cheeks. We whores are a sentimental lot.

Outside, the Bailiff was waiting for me, and Lucy was chatting with a group of armed men.

'My lady ...' he began.

I glanced at him, looked away; said coldly, 'You washed your hands of me.'

'Would I could unwash them!'

Unwash them? I studied him. I liked him, had always liked him. And I was so in need of comfort and a friend.

'I am unwashed. Perhaps if you touched me ...'

'*Touched* you?'

I let my cloak fall slightly open, enough for him to see that beneath it I was naked.

He slid his hands in through the gap, thumbs on my waist, hands on my hips.

'Do you,' I asked him, 'remember poor Henry that morning at Joan's house?' Suck and swallow. 'He asked Will Langland what Lady Marian was wearing beneath her cloak – ' My tongue was *hurting* ...

'May I help?'

'Please.'

'And Master Langland asked sarcastically whether Henry really imagined a lady like that might be wearing nothing under it. I remember that, of course. But *you* weren't there.'

'I was. I was hiding on the stairs.'

'I sent that slut Marjorie up to look for you!'

'We stood on the stairs together, listening and giggling.'

'I've spanked her bottom for her before, but nowhere near as hard as I'm going to spank it this time.' And his fingers slid down over my bottom.

'That "slut" is my friend.' Suck and swallow. 'You ever lay a finger on her again, and I'll wash *my* hands of *you*.'

'She is under my protection.'

'Sounds good. I only hope it lasts longer than it did for me.'

'Hmm. Is there anything I can do to make that up to you? Anything at all, my lady?'

'I think if you punched Martin on the nose ...'

'I can't do that! I'm the Bailiff.'

'"Anything at all, my lady" I mimicked, 'and the first thing I suggest – "I can't do that! I'm the Bailiff!" ...' I had to stop.

He waited patiently.

'What's the problem? I'm quite sure Sancha would swear blind he struck you first.'

'My lady, you never cease to shock.'

His hands were lovely, but Blanche's man was coming. I pulled away from him and closed my cloak. 'I will be back, Hugh. One day.'

'Mariana? Lady Lucia? Shall we go? I'll give you your copy of both documents later, Mariana.'

'Thank you. I'd like to call in at the Winged Lion. I have some things there ...'

'Where?'

'The Winged Lion. It's by the Bull, outside Head Gate,' Hugh, the Bailiff, told him. 'We'll be passing it. I'll show you.'

'Very well, Bailiff. But only for a moment, please.'

It took us just two minutes to get there. I wanted to go in alone, but Blanche's man insisted on accompanying me. Did he think I would run away?

'Do you have a name?' I asked him as we went through the door and found ourselves alone together for the first time.

'I am Sir Lionel Hawtrey.'

'Mariana!' It was Marjorie. She stopped dead as she took in my cloak and the clothes of the gentleman at my side. 'My lady. I'm sorry.'

'Nothing to be sorry about.' I led her towards the stairs, leaving him behind.'

'Should I give him some wine? A pastie?'

'No. He's in a hurry. Come.'

We ran up the stairs together and into her little room.

'You're not staying then?'

'No, I can't. I just came to pick up one or two things. The rest you can have. Anything that's too grand for you, sell, and buy something you like.'

My boy's outfit was in the bag I'd left with her. I'd take that. What else ...? 'Nothing else, I don't think. Just my purse of coins.'

'Here.' She held it out to me. I didn't have to check it, I knew it would all be there. 'Take out another gold noble, Marjorie.' I watched her take it and laughed.

'I don't like it when you're a lady.'

'Why? You're scared to slap me?'

Whack! She slapped me so hard she nearly knocked me over.

I put my hand to my cheek. Now she did look scared – but still furious.

'Well ... I asked for that.'

'You did! And you got it ... '

We stared at each other.

'Who did your other cheek?'

My other cheek? Oh, yes. 'Sancha. The whore-mistress at the Shag.'

'When you're a whore you're real and we're friends.'

'Oh, Marjorie!' I pulled her to me, hugged her, and she clung to me. I held the hug till she released me, then said, 'Marjorie, you're real *all* the time. I love you. I have to go now, but I'll be back one day.'

'As you, not a lady. Promise.'

'As me. I promise.'

Then she wanted to carry my bag for me.

I held it away from her. 'Whores carry their own bag, remember?'

She laughed. 'That slap did you good. The way you were when you came in, you'd have let me carry it.'

'You'll make a good mother. But I'm glad I'm not your daughter.' I stroked my burning cheek.

Downstairs, I found Lionel drinking wine and deep in conversation with Joan. I sat down with them.

'My lady.' Joan ran an eye over my cloak. 'It's good to see *you* again.'

I smirked. 'Marjorie doesn't think so. She prefers Mariana the whore.'

'She would. Birds of a feather ... Wine?'

'Yes, please.'

She served me wine and a pastie, and Lionel what was obviously a second pastie.

'Are poor Lucy and Hugh standing outside in the cold all this time?' I asked Lionel.

'Lady Lucia to you. And Hugh? That's the Bailiff?'

Joan caught my eye. She was highly amused at my being on first names terms with the Bailiff. 'Marjorie! Bring in Lady Lucia and the Bailiff.'

'And the other men,' I said. 'Give them a drink, too.'

'Mariana – ' Lionel began.

'Did no one ever tell you it's no fun drinking on your own?'

'He wasn't on his own,' said Joan. 'Or are we so superior today we don't notice people like me?'

'Oh – I'm sorry. I didn't mean – '

'I notice your face has been slapped – slapped *again*, since you *walked in*. Your other cheek's burning too now, and it bears a clear hand-print. We both know whose, we both know why. And if you're not careful, I'll give you the third – in front of this gentleman.'

'Yes. You're right, mistress. Lucy! Sit here, beside me. I'm so sorry you got left outside.' I sucked my tongue, trying to do so inconspicuously. 'I was upstairs and Sir Lionel clearly needs lessons in courtesy. Hugh, you sit here, between me and Mistress Joan.'

'I need lessons in courtesy? Did I not, but a moment ago, order you not to use the name Lucy?'

His eyes were cold and hard now. Belatedly I realised this was not a man I should cross.

'Yes, you're right, sir. Lady Lucia, I apologise.'

'Just don't do it again,' she replied. Making herself equal to him, but amused. Her eyes were not cold and hard like his.

Meanwhile, Hugh squeezed in beside me. He peered at my face. 'What happened? Your *left* cheek wasn't swollen and bruised when we rescued you from Sancha and Martin.'

Lionel, too, was staring. As was Lucy.

'Do you really want to know?'

'Yes,' they chorused.

'Well, it's very simple. The maid here – Marjorie – don't blush, Marjorie, be proud – thinks of me as a whore, and as her friend.' Suck and swallow. 'Upstairs, I started speaking to her in an arrogant lady-like tone and she – she sorted me out. I carried my own bag down the stairs.'

'I noticed,' said Lionel. 'She came behind you, empty-handed.'

'What does the law say about a slattern striking a lady?' demanded Joan.

'I'm not sure. It's certainly a criminal offence.' Hugh looked uncomfortable and glanced at Lionel, who was left holding the pig's bladder.

But he was up to it. 'Should a person of low estate strike a person of high estate, that constitutes a whipping offence,' he pontificated. 'At the very least. It may well constitute a hanging offence. That will depend upon two principal factors. First, the

nature of the blow. Clearly, a slap is rather different from a blow with a cudgel or a thrust with a dagger. It will also depend upon *how* high the estate of the victim may be. For instance, anyone who slapped Princess Joan, mother of the young King, God bless him, could count herself lucky if she were simply hanged.'

'Or the late Princess Isabel,' I said with great feeling but without thinking. Then added hurriedly when they all stared at me, '*Requiescat in pace.*'

'You knew her?' asked Hugh, who of course had heard Long Will boasting of my being *persona grata* at the Savoy Palace, whereas in truth I was *persona* very much *non grata*.

I nodded, but hurried on, not wishing to elaborate, and concerned about Marjorie with the way the conversation was going. 'But presumably the lady in question would have to lodge a complaint.'

'*You* are the lady in question.'

'No, Mistress Joan, fortunately for you I'm not. Listen, everyone.' And I went on, forcing myself to speak as clearly as I possibly could. 'This is the first time Marjorie's hit me, though she's been sorely tempted to on many occasions. Now she's broken the ice, I'm sure it won't be the last.' Suck and swallow. It was hurting badly again. Would I never learn? But I had to finish. 'To her, I'm a whore, which – as we are speaking of high and low estates – comes at the very bottom, lower far than serving-maid at a lodging-house.'

'Did you say "fortunately for you"? For *me*?' demanded Joan.

'Yes, I heard that,' said Lionel, and Lucy nodded. Whose side was she on?

I swallowed and said, 'But Mistress Joan, you yourself slapped me once – slapped me harder than Marjorie ever could! You have a hand like a hammer!'

'Hey, that's not fair!' protested Marjorie. 'I can slap as hard as she can!'

'Rubbish. Like the girl said, I've got a hand like a hammer.'

The girl. That was me. In front of Hugh and Sir Lionel.

But Marjorie was on her high horse now. 'I'll slap her again, she'll soon see who –'

'All right, you slap her again, then I'll slap her again –'

'Yeah! Then we'll ask her –'

'Not just *her*! We'll ask everyone! She's your friend and I want it fair!'

The two men's faces were watching the contestants as if it was a fight and they had bets on it. Lucy was laughing, and Lionel seemed entranced with her, so I nudged Hugh in the ribs with my elbow. He owed me. 'Do something! This is getting out of hand!'

'Just a moment, ladies. All four of you.' He grinned. And Marjorie, who had never been called a lady before and never would again, shrieked with pleasure. 'I want to know why Mariana said "fortunately for you" to Mistress Joan. What *did* you mean, Mariana?'

'I meant fortunately for her – Mistress Joan – I'm not a lady, so the person Mistress Joan slapped was not "the lady in question". No problem.'

'*No problem?*' She rounded on me. 'You were speaking in an extremely annoying, pretending-to-be-a-lady way!' Everyone smirked or laughed. 'I had no idea then that you were *really* a lady - or *claiming* to be one.'

Time to attack. 'No? The first night I ever spent here, did you put me in your best room? Your room for ladies?'

'Yes.'

'And did you personally carry my bag up the stairs?'

'Yes.' But Joan wasn't beaten that easily. 'All right, I was – I am – confused. We all are. So tell us: are you or aren't you a lady?'

'Of course she's not,' said Sir Lionel. 'She's a Spanish whore.'

He'd obviously got that from Blanche, but I was going off him fast. Now they were all looking at me. Waiting. What could I say? Suck and swallow. 'I cannot think of one single person in all the world who believes I am.'

'I do,' said Hugh, shocking everyone, especially me.

'You *did*. Then when Martin told you I was not, you believed him.'

'True. But what whore knows princesses of the realm and says Rest in Peace in Latin and –'

'All right, Hugh. You *suspect* I may be. But I still cannot think of one person in the world who would say they *know* I am.' Suck and swallow. 'Including you. So, no. In the eyes of the world I'm not. How does that rhyme I keep hearing everywhere go?'

*When Adam delved and Eve span,
who was then the gentleman?*

And who the lady? What you "are" is not what you are in the eyes of God, but what the world makes of you.'

'On that note,' said Lionel, 'it is time we left.' He rose from his seat. 'Come, my lady.' That to Lucy. 'And you, Mariana.' He snapped his fingers.

And so we left, Lucy on Sir Lionel's arm and me blowing kisses to Joan and Marjorie while Hugh ushered me gently out through the door.

Well, I would be back one day, I knew that for certain. Colchester, Hugh the Bailiff, the Winged Lion, Joan and Marjorie, the Shag, Sancha and the girls, Lady Helen and Sir George – and of course, Martin and Chich and Clackton and Balhild and Linette and the sea, oh, the sea! – were much more part of my life than Southwark and the Green Unicorn and Marell and Susanna would ever be.

OUT OF THE CAULDRON

We slept that night at the White Hart, where they knew me as a lady and also knew me as the Earl of Arundel's whore. If they had identified the two in their minds – and they probably had, given the state of my face – they were discreet about it.

The next morning, Blanche arrived from France via Harwich.

In a small private room with a lovely fire blazing in the hearth, Blanche, Lionel, Lucy and I sat together in silence. Lucy didn't know who Blanche was, merely that she was rich, influential, French and an authority on the undead. She had brought Lucy up to date and told her that Canvey Island was where we expected to confront Merlin Redivivus.

I liked that – *Merlin Redivivus*. Then I told them about my dream and its aftermath – the report that Linette had not been out of the house, and that the wraith had killed again, this time near Maldon.

What did this mean?

The silence went on. And on.

In the end, it was Lionel who broke the silence. 'I think I can safely say two things. No, three. First, that Lady Lucia and I have little or nothing to contribute at this point. It is up to you, my lady, to decide. Mariana must understand that she is important here quite by chance. She is nothing. A common whore in a milieu to which she is by nature quite unsuited. Second, that the Merlin doppelganger is without question conscious of, and in some form of contact with, Mariana; no doubt because she is typical of his prey – green-eyed and sluttish – and also because having no soul and little or no mind of her own, she is a puppet in his hands. Third, that, in

the light of the second, her arrangement with him for the Autumn Equinox must be taken very seriously by the three of us, regardless of the direction in which he appears to be travelling.'

'I agree with you in every particular, Lionel,' Blanche replied. 'May I suggest you take Lucia shopping, let her choose some nice clothes for herself – and something cheap for Mariana, too. All you need do is pay. Unless,' she smiled, 'Lucia should seek your advice on what suits her best. Oh, and don't forget the caps and veils. They are both well-known around here.'

When we are alone together, she looks at me and sighs. 'Well, Marian, this is quite a puzzle. I do not see that you need be there early, *before* Alban Elued, so we have a few days – ten – to dispose of. Should we head for Canvey Island and Dead Man's Cove, see if we can catch him there? Or should we wait?'

'I should prefer to wait. But surely Sir Lionel just said I should keep my views to myself, if indeed I could be said to have views in any meaningful sense. And you agreed with him.'

'Oh, I do – where Mariana de la Mar is concerned. He hasn't met Lady Marian, though he knows of her and admires her. Just never forget that to him – and indeed to Lucia – you are, as he said, a common whore. It is not a role you are playing here on this mission, Mariana, it is who you are. You do understand that?'

I nod.

She smiles. 'In private you may go on addressing me as Blanche, but in front of them you must from now on always address me as "my lady" and refer to me as Lady Blanche. The same goes for Lady Lucia.'

'Really?'

'Yes, really. I thought Sir Lionel had already told you that.'

'Well, yes, but –'

'You would do well to obey Sir Lionel in everything, otherwise you will find yourself in very serious trouble. I know Sir Lionel and he does not take kindly to such as you. Now, to get back to what we were saying. You would prefer to wait.'

'Oh, yes. If Merlin sees us anywhere south of Colchester – Maldon, Canvey Island – he'll know we are pursuing him. It will put him on his guard, make things doubly difficult.'

'I understand.'

'I'd rather go to Clackton soon, spend the time there becoming part of the scenery.'

'Lionel received a detailed report of the killing in Maldon while I was away. Same kind of girl – green-eyed, a bit of a swimmer – and same kind of reputation – seductive and a bit of a slut.'

'Where is Maldon?'

'On the coast not far from Chelmsford. About twenty miles from Colchester.'

'An easy journey.'

She laughs. 'Especially for one with the power to translocate. I'm coming to agree with you, Mariana. Yes, I shall call you Mariana from now on, even in private ... I arrived last night not from France, as Lionel believes – never let your left hand know what your right hand is doing – but from a fishing port called Margate or Meregate, on the north coast of the Isle of Thanet. There, I talked to a certain very powerful witch, who must for the moment remain anonymous. We shall call her Esmeralda. Esmeralda knows now about Merlin Redivivus, and she knows, too, of you. She agrees you are the right person to handle it. Possibly the only person who could handle it. She also agrees with you about Lucia. Myself, I admit I had grave doubts about bringing another girl in, but since I met her I have come to admire her.'

'Could this witch – Esmeralda – not come here and – ?'

'No. She says – and I agree – that her presence in the area would alert him. She has a powerful psychic signature. As do I, though to a lesser extent. I, too, shall remain at a distance. No closer than Colchester – though as he may be in or passing through Colchester, even that would probably be unwise. We may have to withdraw to Ipswich or Harwich, then when you go I will remain there.'

'And she will play no part?'

'Oh, she will, if she needs to. And I suspect she will need to, although she believes you may be able to manage without her.'

'Tell me, please, what you and she have in mind.'

'You spoke once of the Undeparted Dead.'

'Yes. Shades ... Is it true they crave blood?'

'So the authorities all say. They are those whose spirit has left their bodies – that's what makes them dead – but whose souls still linger here, discarnate.'

Discarnate – without a body. I liked that word. 'Ghosts, then.'

She nods. 'A wraith, too, is without a spirit of its own. However, wraiths don't suck blood, they pour it out upon an altar stone, or simply upon the ground, as a sacrifice. Like the old gods. Were the old gods really wraiths? They get their nourishment from shed blood, dissipated life, sustain themselves by ingesting, inhaling, call it what you will, the spirit of the living.'

'And when the wraiths shed blood, the undeparted dead gather round –'

'Oh yes – in droves ... Will he want to shed blood?'

Why is she asking me? 'Having met him, I think I can safely say that shedding blood is his main purpose in life. Or should that be in death? Mind you, my experience with great wizards, with mages, is limited.' I want to giggle, but manage not to.

'No, not many call in at the Shag for your services, I imagine. In Avignon, one never can tell.'

Blanche has an unsettling way of responding to the wrong point. Me, I swim on, whichever way the river flows. 'Oh, I don't know,' I say. 'Colchester seems always to have been on Merlin's circuit.'

'True. And I imagine there have been whore-houses in the slums outside the South Wall since the Roman legions were stationed here.'

'You think the Celts who founded the city hundreds of years before the Romans came didn't have whore-houses? And wizards?'

'I stand corrected. I'm sure they did. And I'm sure we would both have fitted in quite happily – would fit in quite happily, if we were whisked back through time. I mixing with the Celtic royalty, and you ...'

'Me slaving away in one of those whore-houses, yes.'

'Waiting for a queen or a wizard to come and save you. Though in that other life, you might have been the queen, I the whore.' She smiles. 'Now can we please get back to the point?'

'It wasn't me who –!'

'How is your tongue?'

'My tongue?' Oh. Yes. My tongue. 'It is better today, thank you.'

'Now can we get back to the point?'

'Glub – glub – '

She laughs (I love her laugh) then says, 'I've forgotten what the point was now with you chattering on about your profession and its illustrious history. Oh, yes. Well, one wizard does not imply the presence of others. They are notoriously solitary beasts and do not form covens like witches.'

'*That* wasn't the point, your highness.'

'No, your lowness, it wasn't, was it. So be a clever little slut and remind me.'

'Your lowness,' I laugh. 'I like that.'

'But you don't like clever little slut.'

'I'm used to "slut", and really don't mind it, not any longer. As for "clever", that, coming from you, I find blush-making.'

'Oh yes, clever. Charles also said of you, "As well as being a lady to put most ladies to shame, Mariana is a scholar to put most scholars to shame. But," he went on, "that is not how the world sees her. The world sees her as a whore, and will more and more treat her as such. Even worse, there are those who see her as not simply a whore but a witch. I do not want her treated as a witch ... Yes, I know, I have told you this before, but that is why, when this is over, no one – *no one* – will know the part you played in it, you and Esmeralda. For even as they praised and thanked you, they would hang you: "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." I repeat, *no one*. You are not to mention Esmeralda to Lady Lucia. You are not to tell Sir Lionel – he knows only that I believe you and Lucia have a chance against Merlin because of the proximity of sea water, nothing of our other plan. Anyway, he won't be there at night. I repeat, there must be no hint of any magic, any witchcraft, anything occult, being involved.'

'Aside from the fact that the victim is an undead wizard.'

'Aside from that one small point, yes.'

'And in his own form, unsubstantial.'

'And that other small point.'

'Will anyone believe that? You can't overcome such an adversary by sublunary means.'

'Do your job right, and all anyone will know is that the slayer of young whores has stopped or has been stopped – what do they

care? A few weeks, a year, without another slaying, and he'll have been forgotten.'

'And what about Lucy afterwards?'

'Why do you persist in thinking of her as Lucy. *Lady* Lucia from now on, please. And I mean always. Listen ... There are certain boys, just as there are certain girls, certain women, whose presence in a room, in a house, inflames men.. I'm quite sure that Lucia's presence, as a young lady and even more so as the effeminate boy she pretended to be, inflamed her brother and his drinking and hunting companions.'

'She didn't pretend to be an effeminate boy. She preferred to pass as a boy when she went hunting with her father – like I did when I was a student in Paris.'

'People might not realise that you – either of you – was a girl in boy's clothes, but there would always be feminine traits that made people wonder about you, class you as pretty-boys. Surely you have experienced that time after time.'

'Well, yes.'

'And you've worked alongside enough whores to be aware that incest with their fathers or brothers or brothers-in-law can be the first step on the road to the life they now lead.'

'It's not something they talk about.'

'No, the girl – or boy – will always be ashamed. The incest is unlikely to have been consensual, but she will always be told it is not the men's fault, that her very presence in the house inflames them. Often it is nothing more than the suspicion of incest in the minds of the other women of the household, or a lust that exists only in the mind of the father or brother or brother-in-law, of which the girl in question remained completely unaware – at least if she is very young. But let's be fair to Lucia and focus on you for the moment, rather than her. She spent all the best times during her earliest years with her mother and nanny learning to be a lady, then during the formative years following her mother's death with her father, learning now to be what he was, a hunter. Who did you spend your best times with when you were a child learning to be what you are. And I don't mean a whore. Think about yourself. Charles called you a scholar.'

Suddenly I see where she is going with this, and I am furious.

'Oh, no! Stop right there, Blanche. I don't know whether your beliefs about Lucia are fact or prurient guesswork, but when it comes to Yacoub ben Amar and me, I *do* know –'

'Yes, you do. Now stop shouting and use that brain. When Charles plonked responsibility for you down in my reluctant hands, I made a point of finding out all I could about you. I wanted to see for myself whether you were worth my time and effort. I already knew from Avignon that you could pass as a lady and as a scholar. It was the pleased-with-herself little slut I had also observed in Avignon that bothered me. Incidentally, the lady and scholar is the person I now think of as Lady Marian; the pleased-with-herself little slut is Mariana. Anyway, Rabbi Yacoub was already known to Charles, but he hadn't connected him with you. I did. And I made a point of finding out about your relationship.'

'We had no relationship!'

'Don't be ridiculous. Teacher-student is a relationship, as is father-daughter. The question is whether there might have been anything more to that relationship. But in order to avoid "prurient guesswork" – I like that, by the way – you can tell me the story of how and why Yacoub came to leave your home in Los Alcazares, and what your reaction was.'

'Of course.' But that "of course" is followed by a long pause as I try to marshal my thoughts and memories.

'He left when I was thirteen. I'm not sure why. The reasons he gave for not returning – each year he went on a tour of various cities where other kabbalists lived, but always returned ... The reasons he gave for not returning that year, for never coming back, seemed like excuses.'

She waits.

I can't go on. I know now what I have never admitted to myself before. He left because he loved me. He had allowed himself to grow too close to me, had allowed us to grow too close, as the owl told me in that strange dream I experienced the day Canon Herault and Père Pierre rescued me from "the good abbé's" men in Paris.

She knows the point my thoughts have reached. 'You made magic mirrors together. Did you ever suspect him of spying on you?'

'No!'

'No?'

'All right, yes. But he said he didn't and I believed him.'

'Why did he say that? Had you accused him?'

'No!'

'Don't get so upset. We are simply on a quest for the truth.'

'You'd make a good Inquisitor.'

'Inquisitors are men.'

'Perhaps in your next life?'

She laughs. 'I simply asked why he would deny spying on you if neither you nor anyone else had accused him of any such thing.'

I am busy wondering. But I know. 'Perhaps he did, occasionally, when I was swimming, and thought I wouldn't like it. But he would only have done it when the weather turned bad and he was worried about me.'

'What could he have done if you had been in trouble?'

'Nothing.'

'And now we have come to the swimming, there was another man, wasn't there. A fisherman.'

'Yes. Pedro.'

'You swam naked from this man's boat.'

'Yes.'

'Knowing that your teacher and your father might well be on the beach waiting for you, worried about you, and carefully looking the other way as you rose up out of the water like a young Venus.'

'Yes, but –'

'I don't believe there are any "buts". By that time, your rabbi adored you. He could not say No to you – which is how he came to teach you aspects of the Kabbalah that he knew should never be revealed to any woman let alone a girl of not yet fourteen summers, and to initiate you into various occult arts – such as the making of magic mirrors and planning-and-sharing dreams. You know that is so, don't you.'

'Yes.'

'And when you realised Yacoub was serious about leaving and not returning, what was your reaction?'

'Do you know?'

'No. But I can guess. Why don't you tell me? You're the one who *knows*.'

'I wanted to go with him.'

'You *begged* him to take you with him.'

'Yes.'

'And what was his response? That you were a silly child infatuated with your teacher?'

'No.'

'That you shouldn't leave your poor sick father?'

'No.'

'That it was impossible because you would be pursued and he would be burnt and you would be branded a whore?'

'More or less. Yes.'

'You see what that implies, don't you?'

'Yes. I'm not stupid.'

'We know that.'

'It implies that had the external circumstances been other than they were, he would have taken me with him and I would have gone.'

'And left your poor father to die alone.'

'Yes.' Tears are streaming down my cheeks now. 'But he didn't want to take me with him. That would have defeated the whole point of the exercise, which was to distance himself from me. To escape the closeness, the intimacy, he had allowed to develop between us. So all that about if the circumstances had been different applies only to me, not to him at all. I would have gone with him happily, gone anywhere, but he would not have taken me with him under any circumstances.'

'Shhh ...' She is gazing at me now with such tenderness in her eyes that I can hardly believe it. 'Listen. I was betrothed to Prince John of France, later King John, the one who was a prisoner in London. King John the Good. Good but ineffably boring. His father, King Phillip, became enamoured of me. Philip was not good – he was more than happy to seduce his son and heir's fiancée, and he was not boring – in fact he was very clever and very entertaining – so said fiancée was more than happy to be seduced by him. And who is to say that he did all the seducing? It is only too easy for a beautiful young woman – and I was named La Belle Sagesse and the most beautiful princess of my time – to seduce a man nearly forty years her senior ... So I married *him*, not his son. We're talking

about the King of France here, and the King of France's son! Can you imagine the scandal? And the jokes when, a year later, he died? The whole of France, the whole of Europe, quipped that he'd killed himself fulfilling his conjugal duties – or in plain terms, fucked himself to death. Marian, you are sitting with, talking to, one of the great sluts of history. Wipe those tears away. I decided that you were, like me, a slut at heart but good by nature – or should that be a slut by nature but good at heart?

She smiled, then laughed, 'And that is enough of that! ... So, where were we? Oh, yes. Well, there is no way to plan in advance what you and Lucia should do when he approaches. You will have to improvise. You've already done so successfully twice.'

'As it is *my* blood we're discussing here, you might have the goodness to tell me what exactly we are supposed to accomplish? Presumably not simply survive.'

'*Au contraire*. I'm afraid your personal survival is not high on our list of priorities. What matters is Merlin. *He* must not survive. If you do not survive either, that will really not matter to anyone. I would miss our delightful little conversations, but I don't want you to be under any misapprehension.'

She was right about that. Ferchard would probably heave a sigh of relief.

We were speaking French, and that "you" in "if you do not survive" was singular, not plural. She was speaking about me, not Lucy *and* me.

I could see I was going to have to have a plan for my "personal survival" in place. Not difficult for me to disappear in the sea at night; but I would need to disappear completely if Blanche decided to blame me for Merlin's survival and send her cohorts in pursuit.

'You will have to get him into the sea. For that, you will need to be prepared. A wraith *can* be bound, with chains of adamantine. Such chains will be provided, one for binding him, another that must be secured to a convenient rock in deep water, to attach him to when the moment comes. This doppelganger must become fish food. There is to be nothing left. If there is a skeleton, that must crumble and dissolve. If any kind of head or skull, that too must be securely fastened to the chain. It must not come loose, roll and float around the sea bed, find its way to a beach or a mudflat.'

'But how are we supposed to get him into the sea in the first place? He has a horror of getting his toes wet ...' It sounded jokey, but I was horrified by the whole thing.

'That is where Esmeralda comes in. As I say, she is already ensconced in Margate.'

'Where is this Margate – this Isle of Thanet?'

'In Kent. South of the Thames. It is directly across the sea from your part of the Essex coast. I mean that from Margate there will be nothing in between you and Esmeralda, nothing at all, making mental contact as easy as possible. She says if you open to her she'll be able to see with your eyes and hear with your ears without him knowing she is there. If necessary, she will take over your body, possess you. Do not fight this. Let it happen. Stand outside your body and watch it move, watch it speak. You should see her touch Merlin, make some form of contact with him. When that happens, she'll be ready to transfer to him. You will re-enter your body as she leaves it. Lucia will attack while he is distracted by having suddenly to struggle against Esmeralda possessing him. Then you will join Lucia in the attack. Your aim will be to chain him and get him into the sea, where, once below the surface, he will be helpless. Then, and only then, Esmeralda will withdraw, and return to her own body in Margate – though with Esmeralda you must be ready for anything. Just remember that not until there is nothing left of the doppelganger may you leave your post. Then, when it is all over, you will be brought clothes and conducted to me.'

'Forgive my cynicism, your highness, but after your comment about having enjoyed our little chats and how little you or anyone else will miss me, I don't believe I shall feel entirely safe being conducted to you when this mission is accomplished.'

'Your lowness, I can understand that. However, I pose no threat to you. I was speaking merely of the risks involved and that you must take those risks and may not survive them. If you do survive them, I shall be delighted. And to show my faith in you, I have your next two tasks lined up: that errand for Lady Alice Perrers, and then, while you're in Normandy, another important task which you'll perform for me. I can tell you no more at this stage, but immediately you finish here in Essex, I will, if possible, collect you myself and take you across to France. If I'm unable to be here, you

will return to London. In London, you'll report to Ma Lethbridge at the Green Unicorn then set out on Lady Alice's errand.'

'Do I have to?'

'Of course you have to.'

'I meant do I have to report to Ma Lethbridge.'

'Yes, you do. And as Alice owns the Green Unicorn, you can assume the harpy speaks for her mistress.'

Alice Perrers owns the Green Unicorn?

But Blanche is still talking. 'If Ma Lethbridge thinks you've been playing the whore and pocketing the money, then you'll be in even more trouble than you are already. I mean, really, standing up Sir Richard FitzAlan. You do ask for it.'

Standing him up? But ... 'Lionel said – I thought – I was free now. That I –'

'Martin of Chich has no further hold over you. And speaking of Martin, I must tell you that I instigated enquiries into the clandestine activities of your erstwhile master, and Martin is not what he appears to be, or not only. He is also, my agents now suspect – though nobody realised it at the time – an agent of Lancaster's.'

'Of *Lancaster's*? But Martin is deeply involved in this rebellion that is brewing here in Essex against the King and Lancaster – and in Kent too, they say.'

'In this case, I suspect Lancaster's left hand knows very well what his right hand is doing ... I just want you to be aware of the situation in case Martin ever tries to play a part in your life again.'

'But I no longer belong to him? In any sense?'

'No. You will be given copies of both documents. And the original in Paris will *disappear*. However, Ma Lethbridge seems to believe that Lady Marian has left you in her care. As it would be difficult – indeed impossible – for you to produce a Lady Marian who is not manifestly you dressed up and pretending, your only hope will be to persuade Sir Farquhar to intercede for you. Perhaps you can wheedle him into telling Ma Lethbridge that *he* needs your services during the day and you can only work for her part-time, in the evenings?'

'But what about Lady Alice? Should I go and see her?'

'If Ma Lethbridge doesn't have the details of this mission ready for you, you'll have to.'

'And she'll know why there's been this long delay?'

'Of course she won't. And you're not to tell her. No one – but no one – is ever to learn of your allegiance to me or of the work you've been involved in here on the Essex coast. You do understand that?'

'Oh, yes.'

'Good. And now perhaps we should find Sir Lionel before he spends all my money on Lady Lucia.'

* * * * *

For someone who delights in running around naked covered in soot and mud, Lucy seemed strangely happy to be pampered and spoilt and dressed up in satins and silks. But it wasn't our outings that afternoon and the following morning – me, walking through the streets of Colchester with Lucy Longlegs and the Queen of France! – that mattered. What mattered was organising somewhere in the vicinity of the marshes for us to stay; and it was eventually Lucy who came up with the answer. Her witch, the one who fabricated the ointment of invisibility (among other things!) lived in a hovel on the edge of the marshes. She would welcome us, and Lucy would return to her life of running around the marshes and swimming in the grey-green sea, at least until Alban Elued, when we expected Merlin Redivivus to show up. And I would swim in the grey-green sea with her, though I was less enthusiastic about wallowing in the slime that passed as mud on the salt-marshes.

The only hitch was my identity. Lucy had known Liza's daughter, Marian atte-Marsh, as a child on the marshes and in the sea, and she still couldn't make up her mind whether I was in fact *their* Marian.

'If you were, I'd never have recognised you. But some people do change as they grow up, don't they, while others remain much the same. It could have been you. You didn't seem to be playing the part of Marian atte-Marsh, with all that talk of your Spanish upbringing and your Scottish father. Marian's father was a Spanish sailor named Paco.'

Blanche explained that Martin had convinced himself, and then everyone else, that I was her, so she'd decided I should go along with it, use that identity – so much easier than building a whole new cover from scratch.

I could see that she was still only half-convinced, but we left it at that for the moment.

We bade Blanche farewell, and Lionel took us from Colchester along the road through Wivenhoe and Much Bentley. It all seemed like home to me now. As the sun went down, he left us at a spot chosen by Lucy from where we would be able to make our way unseen directly to Audrey's hovel. The spot chosen was midway between Chich and Great Clackton. On one side were fields and on the other a wood. It was not the wood where Martin had shown me the primroses; that one we had passed by earlier. This one ran alongside the marshes, and beyond them was the sea. Audrey lived on the edge of the marsh in the shelter of the trees.

Assuring Lucy that he would wait a while at that same spot on the road at midday every day, starting tomorrow with the weapons and chains we needed, Lionel gave her a kiss that was definitely more than a peck then rode away taking our horses with him.

We were on our own, each wearing only an old skirt and top and carrying a small bag.

'This way.'

I followed Lucy in among the trees.

After a moment, she stopped and turned to me. 'Audrey knew you – knew Marian – better than I did. Better than anyone did, apart from Liza. If you're not Marian, she'll know.'

'I can't say I'm not. It's the identity I'm supposed to be using.'

'You may have to, if you're really not her.'

'You know I'm really not her.'

'No, I don't. I don't at all. I'm curious what Audrey's reaction will be.'

I shrugged, worried now and wanting to go because I didn't know my way around. But when we emerged from the wood the other side, there before us was Audrey's hovel, and a woman who must be Audrey herself standing outside it peering at us.

'Audrey!'

Lucy had told me that Audrey was old, but now as she hurried towards us I saw that she was still strong and lively – no cane, no limping – and had long, thick white hair tied back in a pony-tail.

'Lucy?' They hugged and kissed. 'Oh, I'm so happy to see you again. I heard about you being freed at last. Is it true? You're free to come and go?'

'It *seems* so ... Marian was freed along with me, and – '

'*Marian?* Marian! Is it you? I thought you were dead!' And then I was in her arms, clutched to her breast, the child, though like Lucy I was twice her size. 'Oh, Marian, my darling, my dear! When I learnt what they'd done with you ...'

'I don't ...' Gently, I pulled back from her embrace. 'I know the story – they've told me about myself – but I don't remember.'

She peered at me and I realized she could see very little. She wouldn't be able to tell!

'You don't remember? What – *nothing*? But why? Because of an injury – or an illness? Or did they – did *someone* – do that to you? Wipe out your memories, replace them with another story? A sorcerer? Or the *priests*? Can *they* do that?'

'I – I don't know, Mistress Aud- '

'Just Audrey – like you always used to.' There were tears in her eyes.

'Audrey.'

But now she was holding me away from her, studying my face, my eyes, trying to see.

'Are you sure you *are* Marian?'

I glanced at Lucy. Help me!

Audrey, too, looked at Lucy. 'Are you sure this is Marian?'

'No. She – Oh, I don't know.'

'Are you Marian, girl? Or are you playing some kind of trick?'

'That's my name, but – oh, let me tell you my story. Please?'

'Is it a long story?'

Lucy laughed. 'I've only heard part of it and even that took years!'

'It took years to live. It doesn't take years to tell.' Was I so boring?

'Don't pay Lucy any attention, lovedy. Here – sit down on this bit of a bench and I'll fetch us some of my elderflower wine.'

She went inside and we sat down.

'Elderflower wine?' I raised my eyebrows.

'You'll see. Just don't expect anything like wine ... I'm keeping an open mind. Is that so wrong? Like Martin, I remember you from when you were a kid, and yes, that could have been you ... Martin's a bastard, but he's not stupid.'

'Compared with people like Lady Blanche, he is.'

'Did *she* know you when you were a kid?'

I shook my head, and Audrey appeared with three chipped pottery mugs and handed one to each of us.

Lucy took hers with a smile of pleasure and drank down half of it. 'Oh, Audrey, I've missed things like this!'

I peered into my mug, sniffed at the pale yellow liquid.

Audrey looked hurt. 'It used to be a favourite of Marian's.'

I sipped it. Mm, it *was* nice. I smiled and drank some more.

'You remember it now?'

'No, I don't, really I don't. But I like it.'

She drank some of her own, and after a moment said, 'If you're not our Marian, how is it you come now among us? Why should a stranger make her way to these marshes?'

Why indeed? 'It was all Martin's doing – Martin Wickman, of Chich. He mistook me in Paris for your Marian – or pretended to for his own good reasons – and ever since he's been insisting I am her. It was him brought me down here, at first to work as a skivvy at the White Hart, then, when his mother didn't take to me, he hired me out to Master Henry in Colchester. That's where I met Lucy.'

Again she peered at me. Her face was lined and wrinkled but it was a kind face, a face that smiled a lot. 'You look a little like her – but how can I tell? You don't sound like her. She was a child, though, with a child's voice ... and after so many years, and speaking another language, you would sound different.'

'Marian spoke Spanish,' said Lucy. 'Her father was Spanish, remember? Paco.'

'That's true. I'd forgotten that. Poor Paco. A few months after you left, poor Liza died – of a broken heart, mainly, I think, though she'd just had another terrible whipping – and Paco wandered off straight after we buried her. Just him at her graveside, and me.'

'No priest?'

'She was a whore, like you, so no priest, no. We saw to her ourselves. I'll show you where ... '

That "like you". It had been just me, not me and Lucy. Lucia. Everyone seemed to agree that she wasn't one, despite everything.

'What do other people say? Audrey asked. 'People who knew you?'

'Martin's told people I'm her, so that's what everyone believes. Not everyone's heard his story, though. I was with Balthild and Ned Smith the other day and he said Marian – your Marian – had a horrible scar ... just here.' I lifted my top and lowered the waist of my skirt to show her my side. 'I have no such scar. He said I wasn't her, couldn't be her.'

She ran her fingers over my flank where the scar should be. Her finger tips were soft and sensitive, utterly different from Marell's talons. 'It was a terrible scar when Ned last saw it, no doubt. But by the time I'd finished treating it the scar had grown faint ... I heard the captain of that ship paid good money for you, knowing full well he'd triple that among the Moors where he was headed. Would that have been true of a girl with a terrible burn-scar on her flank?'

Well no, it wouldn't. Of course it wouldn't. 'But I *know* I'm not Marian atte-Marsh. I'm Mariana de la Mar.'

Again she studied me, looking deep into my eyes. 'Then all right, let's hear your story, Mariana.'

'Including all the parts I haven't heard,' added Lucy.

'All right, but let's start with why I'm here – here on this marsh somewhere between Chich and Clackton. I'm here because a member of the French royal family who also has close connections with the English royal family ordered me here.'

'You mean Blanche?' asked Lucy. 'She didn't *order* us here. Not me, anyway.'

'She ordered *me* here. I told her I wanted you with me after you saved my life that night. That I'd feel safer with you beside me. She refused. I insisted.'

'But what's she want you here for?' demanded Audrey.

It was Lucy who answered. 'We're supposed to be catching the thing that's been killing girls like Marian.'

Lucy was overdoing the "I'm not a whore" in my opinion. Anyway, it wasn't just whores like me. 'Why do you imagine the

most important man in England – and we all know who *he* is – summoned Blanche from France when his own people proved quite incapable of catching the wraith – "the *thing*" as you put it?"

'I suppose because Blanche has some experience of wraiths and the undead.'

I glanced at Audrey. She seemed unfazed by the words "wraith" and "undead", so I went on with what I was saying. 'Yes, but why did he care? Why would the death of a few "village sluts with green eyes" even come to his attention, let alone cause him to lose any sleep? Blanche told me it was because it's not only whores like us who are being murdered –'

'Whores like you.'

'It's not only whores *like me*, it's ladies who behave like whores. And not just them but rich courtesans, the lemans of dukes and barons and lords and knights. Blanche mentioned Lord Latimer's leman, who had her throat torn out exactly the same as that girl from the Blue Maid and Edith from the Angel and all the other "green-eyed sluts". And Sir Richard Lyons' mistress –'

'Him!' snorted Lucy. 'He comes to the Shag when he's up this way – he's an Essex man – but he owns one of the biggest brothels in Southwark, so I don't suppose he'd miss one girl.'

'He does?' I was curious. 'Which one?'

'The *Ad Leonem*.'

I knew it. It was on Bankside, part of the row of brothels along the waterfront near my house.

'*Ad Leonem* actually means "Lyons' Place",' she went on, showing off her knowledge. 'Some man told me that, when we were chatting after Lord Latimer and Alice Perrers and Sir Richard Lyons were convicted by Parliament two, three years ago. Of course, they're all back in favour now.'

'Except Lady Alice. She's still –'

'She's not a Lady.'

'Her husband –'

'You'd have to address her as Lady Alice, but –'

'Anyway, she's not the point now. It was Sir Richard Lyons' leman, Matilda, who was attacked and killed by the wraith. Somewhere near Chelmsford.'

'I've heard of her, yes. Now she was a real whore.'

I was going off Lucy fast. But I knew I mustn't. We were in this together. And anyway, what was she doing but behaving like the lady she'd been brought up to be? Lady Lucia. I should be glad.

'Matilda must have been something special,' I said, 'because it came to the attention of Lancaster, and he passed it on to Blanche.'

'Ah ha. Now you mention Lancaster, I begin to see where you're heading.'

'You do?'

'Lancaster himself, John o' Gaunt, has a mistress he dotes on.'

'Even *I've* heard of *her*!' laughed Audrey. 'That Katherine Swynford. She was attacked by an undead, what, fifteen years ago or more – soon after she first slipped into Gaunt's bed. Happened here in Essex, down near Chelmsford. All the witches were talking of it.'

'Katherine Swynford, yes.' Geoffrey's sister-in-law, I thought, but didn't say. 'Now the same undead, this wraith, has attacked her again. Or at least attacked and killed someone very close to her. And *that* is why we're here.'

'Who?' demanded Lucy.

'Lady Mary Balliol. Of the Scottish royal family in exile. She was officially one of the Ladies-in-Waiting to La Infanta Constanza de Castilla – Gaunt's wife – but, well, she soon became the object of gossip, especially among the other, no doubt plainer, ladies-in-waiting, and Constanza, who is very pious, finally refused to allow "that *putana*" into her presence ever again. So with Gaunt's blessing, she joined Katherine's circle. Katherine is in no position to label anyone *putana*, whore, but she wouldn't have wanted to, they were already close friends. Then one day, while they were staying at Castle Hedingham, *again* here in Essex, Lady Mary was murdered, her throat bitten out.'

'So Gaunt believes his Katherine's under threat once more,' said Audrey.

'She is. She, too, was attacked.'

'Then he's quite right to be concerned. But what are *you* two supposed to do about it?'

I laughed. It was a good question.

But Lucy protested, 'We killed the other one between us.'

'Other one?'

'The undead that was killing priests and monks around Colchester.'

'Ah, yes, I heard about that. That was you two, was it? Well, that was certainly something. But this that kills girls like you is a different kettle of fish altogether. And didn't you say, Marian, that you'd had to persuade this great Lady to let Lucy join you? Was she going to send you out on your own against the thing? Are you sure you aren't just being used as live bait?'

Lucy laughed.

'It's all right for you. You can run like a hare. But what about poor Marian?'

'I can swim like a fish!'

'Then you make sure you stay close to the sea.'

'I don't think we'll be in any danger until Alban Elued. I have a rendez-vous then with the wraith, on the beach at Clackton.'

'A rendez-vous with a wraith?' She laughed. 'Now I've heard it all. But if you're going to be around for a few days, you can tell me how you managed that tomorrow. Right now, I want to hear the story you promised us. The story of Mariana de la Mar.'

'Mar is just a name I use. It means "sea". Mariana of the Sea. My grandfather was Don Joaquín de la Manga. He was *alcalde*, the mayor, of the fishing village in the south of Spain where I was born. My father was a Scottish knight in exile, Sir Andrew MacElpin, and my mother was Maria, the daughter of Don Joaquín. She died when I was very young and I hardly remember her. I was brought up by my grandmother, Sebah, Don Joaquín's wife. She was a Moor –'

'A Moor?' squealed Lucy. 'A Saracen?'

'Yes. So as well as being half-Scottish and half-Spanish I'm partly Moorish, and I'll have no silly comments, please. It was her who brought me up and taught me the things my father and my teacher – another man – 'I decided not mention that he was a Jew, a rabbi – 'couldn't teach me. She taught me how to be a woman. And she taught me how to dance. And then she died. Was killed by bandits up in the mountains when we were returning from a visit to relations of hers in Córdoba. I killed the man who killed her. I was eleven.'

'Oh, Marian ...' Lucy was awed! 'I was *seventeen* when I killed my first man.'

'You do what you have to, when you have to,' murmured Audrey.

'Oh, you do. And then when I was fourteen, my father died ...'

I told them the whole story, leaving out only my silver ingots, Malika-Alazais and Queen Blanche, along with all mention of my being involved in witchcraft in Spain and charged with witchcraft in Paris. I was about to start on my strange relationship with Martin of Chich when a flaxen-haired girl of about ten or eleven came dancing up the path, a dead rabbit dangling from one hand and swinging to and fro as she danced.

'That's Mary,' Audrey told us. 'We'll leave the rest of your story for another time. Marian, you're to be known as Liza's daughter?'

I nodded at Audrey as Mary came up to us and smiled. 'Hello.'

'Mary, this is Marian atte-Marsh, who has come back to us after being away far too long. And this is her friend, Lucy, who I also knew when she was a child. Mary helps me,' she told us. 'She's learning herb-lore and animal care. Only when you can heal sick animals are you ready to start learning how to heal sick people.'

'Were you practising on that rabbit?' laughed Lucy.

'Ignore her, Mary,' said Audrey. 'The child's also learning to hunt. Perhaps you can teach her a few tricks while you're here, Lucy.' She smiled at Mary. 'Lucy was the best hunter I ever knew.'

'Still is the best,' I said. 'You should have seen her with the – with that creature in Colchester.'

'Mary will need to hear the story, to know why you're here. Mary, it was these two killed the night-walker, the one murdering priests.'

She gazed at us wide-eyed. '*You?* But how *could* you?'

'Mary, take them for a walk, show them around. I'm sure Lucy still knows these marshes and woods like the back of her hand, but Marian seems to have forgotten her way around.'

I laughed. 'A couple of months ago I was all alone on the beach down there in the middle of the night and I had absolutely no idea which way to go.'

'You can tell her all about it as you walk. Now off you go, the three of you. Come back at sunset. I'll have your dinner cooked,

and some skirting ointment ready. You'll want it tonight unless I'm much mistaken.'

'Skirting ointment?' I asked, as we made our way along a sort of path that wound among the ponds and lakes of salt water that stretched out to the horizon on both sides of us.

'The ointment I told you about, the stuff I used to wear at night when I was hunting or being hunted. It makes you virtually invisible.'

Now *this* was why I loved Lucy.

I couldn't wait. But I knew I'd have to see it all first and get my bearings in daylight if I was ever to be able to keep up with Lucy in the dark, at night.

* * * * *

We can't wait for full darkness – the long northern summer evenings seem even longer here – and it is still quite light when we set out, clad only in the skirting ointment.

We run across the marshes, then Lucy has me stand beside the open road until a man rides by to prove how invisible the skirting ointment makes us; then wait, as still as trees, while two more men walk slowly past so close they could touch us. After that, we swim for an hour, and here, at last, I am in *my* element and able to take the lead.

Then we sit among the dunes that separate a small pebble beach from the marshes and each dream our separate dreams.

I am busy reliving the evening I followed the revenant across the hallowed grounds of the Franciscan Priory and fell flat on my face, when Lucy breaks in on my reverie. 'Was that creature in Colchester the second man you killed? Or had there been others?'

Why is it that absolutely everyone seems able to read my mind?

'I didn't kill him. You did the slaughtering, I did the butchering. But yes, I've killed others. I killed my second, still in Spain, when I was fourteen. And a Moor, a slave, on a ship soon after that. Then one – no, two – in Avignon and one in Paris. Also in Paris, I

assisted in the execution of a group of evil men. And of one I pitied.'

'What do you mean, assisted?'

'I assisted a wonderful woman called Niniane in organising it. No, we didn't organise it, we ... I can't tell you, it's her secret. But the actual executions were carried out by a man called the Albanian, the King of the Paris Underworld.'

'Why?'

'You're not going to believe this, but it was because they'd tortured *me*.'

'Those whip marks across your breasts?'

I touch them and nod.

'Well, well, well ... So this Albanian knight in shining armour rescued you from your tormentors. The damsel in distress.'

'I'm no damsel in distress. I saved myself. The man I killed in Paris was one of them. The Albanian killed the rest. Afterwards. Don't ask me why.'

Lucy laughs. 'All right.'

We gaze at the sea for a while, each occupied with her own thoughts.

'What about you?' I ask. 'Was the undead the first since that time when you were seventeen?'

'No. There've been others ... You could say I'm a trained killer.'

'Seriously?'

'Seriously. I was trained to hunt and kill animals.'

'Not people.'

'Wait. I told you I hunted alongside my father. I didn't tell you what happened later, how it all went wrong.'

This is going to be interesting. But a sudden coldness in the air reminds me that the wraith might materialise before – or behind! – us at any moment. There is nothing I can do about that, it is why we are here, but we shouldn't be sitting so far from the water. I just pray Blanche and I are right in supposing Merlin won't appear again until Alban Elued.

On my left, Lucy is talking, softly.

'My father was a man who went out drinking and whoring – I told you that, as well. Nights spent with me in the forest were one or two a week. The other nights he was out with his companions.

Eventually, bored at home – all right, I played the lady at home, but how could doing embroidery compare with hunting? – I took to going out at night alone.'

'Was that when you started going naked?'

'Yes. I'd never have done that in front of him. With him I wore a forester's green tunic and tights and boots, the same as he wore. Audrey saw me one night – they flit around like phantoms! – and offered me the skirling ointment. And the first time she put it on me, she told me what she told you today.'

'That at night it would make me invisible – well, that's true – and in daylight people would only see me if they looked out of the side of their eyes. Is that true, too?'

'I don't know. I never tested it. The few times I was caught outside in daylight I hid till nightfall.'

'Like a vampire.'

'Shh.'

She peers around. There is nothing, just the breeze blowing the sand and the occasional nightbird in the distance.

'Anyway, me going out hunting at night, all alone, went on a for a couple of years – when I was fourteen, fifteen. Happy times. I changed though. As I grew more and more at home in the dark forest, I changed from being a hunter to being a watcher. I knew – I saw – everything that happened in the forest at night. I'll take you into the forest one night ... I lived for those times.'

'So what went wrong? Just that you grew up? Your father died? Lady Helen took you to the Shag?'

'No, that was later. My father died when I was seventeen. That was when Lady Helen and Sir George –'

'Your brother?'

'Yes, but I mustn't call him that – though Lionel says it doesn't matter now. Once, a year or two ago, when she'd come to get her money and to check up on me, I forgot and asked after Sir George, only I said "my brother". Sometimes Sir George came with her and peered in at me, and then I just wanted to die, but that day he wasn't there, it was only her and me, and I said "my brother", then I burst into tears and cried "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! Please, Lady Helen!" because the last time I'd done that, years before, she'd had Master Henry keep me gagged for a week – that's when my mouth first got

so big – it's like a whore's – like yours – I hate it! – but she just stood up and said "Whores don't belong to families, not proper families; and respectable families don't have whores in them. Tell Dan that Lady Helen says you're to be kept gagged again, this time for two weeks. Don't forget." And she went, just like that. I never called Sir George *that* again.'

'Wait. We were talking about your father, and you said everything went wrong. *What* did?'

'Well ... my father didn't only drink and whore. He gambled.'

'Sounds like my – my *master* – in London.'

'The knight? They're all the same, aren't they. Is he really your master? Or is Martin?'

'He's my uncle.' Much more my uncle (and substitute father) than Uncle Yacoub ever was, so why not allow him the title? 'But a rumour started in Paris – no, before that, in Avignon – that I belonged to him ... It's hard to fight such rumours. Soon, everyone in Paris believed it.'

'And Martin? How on earth did he come to be your master? He *is* your master?'

'Oh, yes. Legally. But ... wait! You're changing the subject! Your father – gambling – remember?'

'Right. Yes. He lost a lot of money, owed hundreds of pounds to various friends and had to pay them, so he borrowed money from the richest of them, a great landowner over Thorrington way, to pay off the others. So now he was at the mercy of that one. And that one knew about me. How? In his cups, my father'd been boasting what a great hunter I was, how I knew the forest at night better than any man alive, how now I'd changed, stopped hunting and killing, begun sharing the lives of the animals. Become, as Sir Robert put it, prey, not predator. Which, quite naturally, excited him. Especially as my father had left no doubt in their minds that when Lady Lucia hunted alone she hunted naked. He felt the thrill of the chase. So he offered my father a choice. Either, "our manor" – you see how naïve I was? It was never going to be *our* manor, it was going to be Sir George's manor – either our manor, or *me*, as prey in an on-going series of hunts. Only I would have to survive the first hunt. If I didn't, if I was killed, the deal was off; I was not as good as he'd boasted. On the other hand, should I survive, then

thereafter at the end of any future hunts, if I was caught, I would be raped, not slaughtered. Raped by all and sundry. And believe me, it was all and sundry!

'And your father agreed to that? He was worse than mine!'

'He had no choice. No, that's not true. He had to choose between his son and me. If he saved me from this, then the manor would be forfeit and Sir George would have to make a life for himself as a soldier or whatever. But there was never any question of that happening. All my father could do for *me* was try to improve the terms of the wager with Sir Robert. Which he did. Like a hunted wolf or bull or wulboar, I'd be at liberty to defend myself. If any man was wounded, or killed, in the chase, he had only himself to blame. It won me honour. No bow and arrow, stipulated Sir Robert, or even a spear – it would give me too much of an advantage. My father agreed, but insisted on a dagger. And he trained me to use it, and my hands and feet, against *men* ... The first hunt – the one I had to survive to save the manor and Sir George's inheritance – and my own life, though they made it clear that wasn't the point – took place after a month. Wearing only a belt with my favourite knife, I was released mid-morning in a secluded glade in the forest near Thorrington, and given a half-hour start. This was much too early for my liking, but it was a cold, misty autumn day, and it would be dusk by mid-afternoon, which was something.

'I already had a plan, which I hadn't shared with anyone. I headed due west towards the River Colne – the one that flows round Colchester –'

'I know! I swam in it down to the Hythe when I was escaping from the *posse*.'

' – avoiding the tidal creek and keeping to the trees, but by the time I got there the dogs were hot on my heels. Once I was in the water, though, I was safe – or at least safer. I headed towards Brightlingsea and into the estuary, knowing they'd think I was crossing to Mersea Island and get boats to follow me over. That's what they did, but while they were getting that organised I'd swum round and come out of the sea up there where they'd least expect me to be – ' She pointed to our right, towards Point Clear – 'and without anyone spotting me. I hid there, clutching a club I'd picked up on the beach, till it was dark then walked across the marshes. I

felt a strange tingling in my spine, a need to glance this way and that, to listen to every slight rustle, to sniff the breeze. I had eluded them, but I knew it was only for the moment. Like any rabbit or roebuck, I was prey still, and totally on my guard. A good thing, too. I was approaching Chich when two enterprising youths who'd guessed I might turn that way and head home, set up an ambush. They'd forgotten how familiar I was with the area by night, just as Sir Robert had forgotten I was a swimmer. It was perfectly obvious, to me as prey at least, that something large, or *someone*, was behind those bushes. The hunter-turned-quarry turned hunter again in an instant. I circled wide and came up behind them. They were talking and drinking, clearly not expecting me yet if at all. My throwing knife took one through the neck and while he was still clutching at it and the other one didn't know what was happening I slammed him with the driftwood club then cut his throat. Then I walked home and went to bed. In the morning, I told my father the manor was his.'

I was speechless. And I'd thought I was good!

But what a pity Martin hadn't been one of those two "enterprising youths" who found it entertaining to hunt and rape and kill a helpless girl. Well, not helpless, but they'd thought she was – their last bit of arrogant stupidity.

'Was Martin on that hunt?' I asked her.

'Your master? Yes, probably. He often was. He's a year or two older than me, and he's always been one of the local lads. Why?'

'Oh, nothing. Just curious.' If she'd killed him on that hunt or on one of the subsequent ones, all this would never have happened to me. Yes, it would. Blanche would have found some other way of getting me onto this beach to act as bait.

Or, in his absence, would I have been burnt as a witch in Paris? No, P'tit Jean and my two priests would have found some other way to save me. Or if they hadn't, the Albanian would have. And if *he* hadn't ...

Shocked, I realised I believed at least part of Martin's story. And that I did indeed owe him my life. And more. Much, much more. Being tortured for days or weeks by the Inquisition then burnt, still alive, at the stake, is not at all the same as dying by a sword thrust or dying in one's bed of a fever ...

We got up and walked on a little and found a sand-dune that sheltered us from the wind and there we slept a few hours.

At dawn, Lucy went her way. I preferred to stay on the beach in the blessed silence. A silence, and a peace, I hadn't known since that other beach beside the Mar Menor so long ago.

We miss so much in the hustle and bustle of the world. We need silence to become aware of all that is not flashing and waving in our eyes and banging and crashing in our ears.

I could see myself becoming a hermit when I was old.

I remember laughing at the thought that they might let me live to grow old. But they did, and I am, and I do live a solitary life now on this other beach so far away from either the Mar Menor or the Chich Marshes ...

In the silence of that long-ago dawn, I became aware that all alone as I was on that deserted beach in the watery northern sunlight, *I was not alone*.

Papa? Papa! '*Papa? You, too?* A shade, like Lucy's papa, unable to move on?'

'Lucy ...? Ah, I see. No, I'm not a shade, lass – '

'You *see*?'

'In your mind. You think of him, I see him.'

'Then you do not come to beg forgiveness?'

'Forgiveness? I did what I could – perhaps not the best I could, but what little I could in very adverse circumstances. I have forgiven myself.'

'Can one forgive oneself? I thought only the Church – '

'You thought no such thing.'

I laughed. In my trance, my dream, whatever it was, I laughed.

'No one else can forgive a man, only himself. If your friend Lucy's father needed her to forgive him, it was simply because he could not forgive himself while he believed she still felt bitterness towards him.'

'I see.' I did. It made sense, and I believed it. 'Then why do I feel shame here before you?'

'You feel no such thing.'

Again? And again I laughed.

'Aye, some part of you believes you ought to be respectably married and producing children. From where I stand, lass, outside and looking in, that seems, well, the least of a woman's – or man's – duties. Animals mate, have babies. Should we admire them for that?'

'It's not the same. A marriage – a true marriage – is for life, not just for a quick coupling.'

'Do you know how long some birds live – crows, for instance, like the raven and the hoodie and the jackdaw?'

'How would I know that?' I didn't grow up in the highlands ...

But, of course, he was reading my mind. He was *in* my mind. 'No you didn't – my fault – but you know things no Highland lass knows. And you are something, with your Spanish and Moorish and Jewish blood, no Highland lass can ever be.'

A mongrel.

'I thought I told you never to utter that word again!'

'That was far away and long ago. And anyway, I didn't utter it. But you were giving me a belated lesson in ornithology.'

'I'll wager that tongue of yours still gets you into trouble.'

'You don't know the half of it.'

'I do now.'

Reading my mind again.

'Ah, they shouldn't do that to you, lass. Not that one with the spike on it.'

'You're as bad as Ferchard.'

'Bad? Ferchard's a good man. You're fortunate to have him.'

'The ornithology?'

'Ah. Yes. At two years old a jackdaw is mature and mates for life. And jackdaws live seventy years, barring accidents.'

I had no idea.

'What *you* do, no magpie could do, no animal could do, and very, very few people could do.'

'What I do? You *know* what I do?'

'I know what you are doing here on this beach.'

Right. 'Can you help at all? You said you are on the outside, looking in. The outside of what exactly?'

'Think of me as outside Time. The poor shades you mentioned, and the wraith you so fear, are still trapped *in* Time.'

'So you watch Time flow past?'

'Flow? Time is not a river, it's a lake.'

'Unmoving? So we move through time.'

'Yes, but – no, not a lake, a great sea, an ocean, all eddies and
and currents and tides - '

'That we get caught up in.'

'Exactly.'

'And that is where you are now, Papa? Caught up in an eddy that
has brought you – '

'I am not your papa.'

Sudden horror overwhelmed me.

'Oh, I was, in that life. Still am, in a sense, so long as you go on
living the life we once shared. Am to you, and to Ferchard, and – '

'Papa, where and what are you now?'

'Now, Marian? I have been born again somewhere. A life that
does not concern you. The "me" you see before you "now" is
outside time.'

'Outside time?'

'Time is not infinite. The ocean has its boundaries, its shores and
beaches. Imagine that you are encountering me on one such beach
now.'

'Like the beach at home.'

'At home ... A man in his time has many homes – in his times, I
should say – and one day, no doubt, we shall share another life in
another home.'

He was fading! 'Papa! Wait!'

'Tell him to forget this life, let it go. Another life, another
chance, awaits him ...'

And he was gone.

Tell who? Merlin? *Ah, Merlin. Fancy meeting you here on this
lonely beach in the middle of the night. And what a pleasant
surprise. You know, you really should forget this life, the life you
led as a wizard, consorting with people like King Arthur. Just
forget it. Let it go. Another life, another chance awaits you. No,
please, take your claws from my throat, I'm speaking.*

Papa, you are still seriously out of touch with reality.

Time for a swim.

6

A LIFE ON THE ESSEX MARSHES

Hours later, I come up out of the sea. In the dark, Lucy and I wore nothing but Audrey's skimming ointment, so now I have to make my way back to the hut in broad daylight hoping the olive-grey-green cream really does work during the day.

Sheep follow me with their eyes, their heads turning as I walk by. Can they see me, or is it that they smell me despite all that time in the sea? How do they survive here in these conditions anyway – and survive so well that they produce the milk that produces the famous cheese? But I see no people, even though, as I approach the hovel, I come close to the edge of the wood. There could be hundreds of men among those trees watching me, and even now drawing their bows. Refusing to panic, I walk slowly and, as it were, edge-on, remembering something they said about that reducing the chance of being spotted.

Then Audrey appears in her doorway and waves. How did she know I was coming? Silly question.

'What happened to Lucy?' she asks.

'I don't know. She went off by herself at dawn. I spent the morning swimming.'

'She does that. Always did. Disappears without a word. You, too. You did just what Marian would do.'

Weird.

'Come in. I've got some bread here, and some cheese. Father Peter brought them. We ate together, and saved some for you two.'

'Father Peter?' I tense, ready to run back into the sea.

'Rector of the Church of St James at Little Clackton. He's around still, somewhere. He wants to talk to you. Don't worry, he's

harmless. An old man who tolerates witches and smiles on mermaids.'

'All right, I won't run, but I'd rather he smiled on me when I'm wearing some clothes.'

'He's probably already seen you.'

'No. There was no one –'

'He watches birds. *They* don't notice him.'

'Ah. I wager the sheep do.'

She laughs out loud, a great joyous laugh that I love. A laugh like mine. No lady, Audrey.

'The skirring ointment that will fool a sheep has not yet been invented! But you're right – it might have fooled old Father Peter. We'll see when he comes.'

And a voice behind us says, 'If it doesn't fool the sheep, you can be sure it won't fool the shepherd.'

Father Peter is an old man who walks tall though he is surely no longer as tall as he was in his youth. His beard is snowy white, his face pink, his eyes blue and his cloak black. How could I possibly have missed him on the marshes?

'The birds don't see me because they don't see my cloak.'

'That *black* cloak?'

He takes it off, turns it inside out. The lining is a dull grey-green. He puts it on again and almost disappears!

'Like Merlin's cloak of invisibility,' I laugh.

'Just so. As good as any skirring ointment and much warmer.'

'I must get a cloak like that.'

'Ah, but you're a sea maiden – I watched you come up out of the sea. You can't swim in a cloak.'

'But I was so careful!'

'It was then that I knew you for our Marian.'

What can I say? What should I say?

Audrey saves me. 'Marian, you haven't eaten. But come and put some clothes on first. Father Peter watching the birds and spotting a mermaid emerging from the sea is one thing. Father Peter sitting chatting with a naked whore is quite another.'

His response took me by surprise. 'In the eyes of the world there may be a difference. I doubt if there is in the eyes of God. *The Lord seeth not as man seeth.*'

'Man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.' I finish the quotation automatically, as I would have done with Rabbi Yacoub or with the other students in Paris, then realise I have given myself away.

Was it intentional? I didn't like deceiving this good old man.

But I avoid his eyes and let Audrey hustle me in through the doorway.

When I reappear in a skirt and blouse, carrying my bread and cheese, he makes no reference to the quotation from the Bible. He eyes me uncertainly, though. And leaves it to me to start the conversation. Would he, if I were a simple girl from the marshes? A simple, local girl who works as a whore in the nearest market-town?

I doubt it.

'Nice cheese,' I say, with a smile.

'From our observant marsh sheep. Is it the first time you've tried it?'

And there we have it ... 'No, of course not.' And it's true! We often eat cheese like this at the Shag.

Again he waits, a slight smile on his face. I have the feeling he might be playing me like a fish – a "sea maiden". Or is he simply watching, oh so patiently, as he would an exotic bird – a bird of the south blown off course and ending up here, a stranger in a strange land.

Time to pursue *my* line of questioning. 'You must have known Lady Lucia much better than you knew – ah – me, when we were children.'

The smile is growing more overt. 'I hardly knew either of you. I taught Lucia her catechism, of course – though briefly. I assume you learnt the catechism with Father Barnabas.'

And I assume that is a trick question. The safest answer is 'No,' and on fast before he has a chance to say something like *But you did know Father Barnabas?* 'No, I was sold into slavery before we ever got round to that.' Which was also true. 'But if not you, Father, who taught Lucia to read and write?'

'No one. Her father dismissed such skills as unbecoming to a gentleman or lady. Though Lady Eloise would have liked the child

to learn to read at least, just as she would have liked her to be able to speak French.'

'She doesn't speak French?' I make myself sound surprised.

'Why? Do you?'

'I do, actually, yes. I suppose I just assumed that Lucia, as a lady, would, too.'

He studies me for a moment. Is it that he is too polite to question me, or that he doesn't know – *yet* – exactly what questions to ask? Finally, he sighs and says, 'Lady Eloise used to speak French all the time with Lucia when she was small. You could say it was Lucia's mother-tongue. But the poor woman was ailing and, from the time Lucia was five or six, completely bed-ridden. After Sir Arthur returned, she saw very little of her daughter and had no say in her upbringing. Lucia became a little daddy's-girl, following him about wherever he went.'

'But she'd remember, surely?'

'I don't think so. Lady Eloise told me that from the age of five Lucia refused to utter a word of French. She supposed it was because her husband had made it clear to the child that he didn't like her chattering away in a language he barely understood. Or had made some disparaging remark about the language. Apparently I spoke Welsh when I was a child. I remember nothing at all of it now, save one or two phrases like "*nos da*" – good night – so given how and where and with whom Lucia has spent the last twenty years, I very much doubt if she remembers anything much more than *bon jour* and *bon nuit* and one or two bordel vulgarities – you would know more about them than me.'

'That depends where and how you spent your youth, Father.'

'I misspent much of it in Cambridge,' he laughs. 'Don't tell me you've worked there.'

'No, but I've worked in Avignon and Paris.'

'Ah, how I would have loved to study in Paris! So. I bow to your superior knowledge ... And now would you like to tell me exactly what you and Lucia are doing here? Audrey hinted at some splendid purpose, but I find that hard to credit. At least, I did until I met you.'

'Go on, say it, Father,' I laughed. '*If it is indeed you.*'

He grinned. 'Oh, you are indeed *you*, my daughter. But are you Marian?'

'I was christened Marian – or rather Mariana – and that will have to do you, Father. And as for our splendid purpose ... Oh, let's just say that who I am is a secret and what we are doing is an even greater secret.'

'That's not good enough.'

'Then let me add that we are here on behalf of the highest in the land. If you doubt me, be on the road the other side of those trees at midday any day and you will witness his representative come to see how things are progressing. However, I'd advise you to wear your cloak of invisibility, and I warn you that if you ever mention our presence here and his highness's involvement in it to anyone at all you will incur his wrath. Our mission is *his* secret and it *must* remain a secret.'

'I need –'

'No, Father. I have already said far more than I ought.' I shrug. Just the hint of a shrug, very English, not the Gallic shrug I normally indulge in, which is a dance in itself. 'From moment to moment on a mission like this, one must make such decisions and pray that one will not live to regret them. I have trusted you. Now you must trust me.'

'The sun is high, it must be almost midday now. But tell me one thing before I accompany you to the road clad in my cloak of invisibility. Are you fighting on the side of Good, my daughter?'

'I am, Father. And believe me, the thing we are fighting is very, very evil, and very, very dangerous ... Now, you may follow me through the wood, but keep your distance and stay out of sight.'

Lionel is standing by his horse, waiting. He has two men with him, one a two-hundred-and-fifty-pound bruiser of maybe thirty years, the other a skinny youth who can't weigh half that. Both are wearing the conspicuous Lancaster livery, though the coat of arms does not display the castles and lions of the King of Castilla and León, I notice, as it did at the Savoy Palace. Still, this should be more than enough to impress Father Peter.

'Mariana. The chains are over there. I'll bring the weapons Lady Lucia requested tomorrow. So. Do you enjoy life out on the marshes, away from all the comforts of urban life?'

'Sir Lionel. Actually, I do.'

'But then the life of an urban whore provides few comforts.'

'Indeed. Though I must confess I prefer the sea to the mud.'

'Me, I'd be happy never to see marshes, mud or sea-water ever again.' He ran his eye over me in a way with which I was all too familiar. Hoping perhaps that I needed a little "comfort"? 'I'll come with you, shall I? And one of my men can carry the chains.'

'No, I'd prefer you not to be seen with us there – especially accompanied by men in livery. I would also prefer you not to address me – or to refer to me – as Mariana. Here, I am simply a local wench y-clept Marian atte-Marsh.'

'A comely wench, if I may say so.'

'You may, but say no more. Indeed, say no more of anything. The trees have ears.' Elderly ones in this case, but still sharp if they were anything like the eyes. 'Leave the chains there, under that bush. Lady Lucia and I will come together later to collect them.'

'Do it yourself. Don't go troubling Lady Lucia.'

And with that Lionel rode off accompanied by his attendants while I turned to walk back through the wood.

'Marian!'

It was Father Peter.

'No, Father. I have nothing to add to what I previously said – and what you no doubt heard here. You must not mention any of this to a living soul.'

He gave me a strange look. Was it what I had said? 'I suppose a dead soul wouldn't matter,' I added with a smirk, 'so long as it was not still walking this earth.'

'We'll discuss "the soul" another time, along with what possible meaning the phrase "a dead soul" might have. For now, I simply wished to assure you that my lips are sealed regarding what I heard and saw here today.'

'Thank you, Father.'

'*Benedicite*, my daughter.'

He would keep faith with me, at least for the moment, of that I was sure. He would also be back for more, of that too I was sure!

Lucy had been to Hart Lea, which was evidently the wood I still thought of as my Primrose Wood. She came home with two rabbits and tales of how she could have got us a brocket (a young deer) or a mocksin (a young wulboar). I believed her.

Hart Lea, which was on this side of Little Clackton, formed part of her family's estate. She knew every tree and bush and nest and den intimately. It was where she had learned to hunt with her father, where she had later hunted on her own before she started roaming further afield under cover of darkness and Audrey's skirmishing ointment. But finding herself there once more had brought back other memories than hunting. Memories of the home she had not seen for ten years.

I wanted to go hunting with her next time but she preferred to be alone. I was a fish out of water in the forest, she said, and I had to admit she was right. Audrey, too, said she'd rather I stayed back with her, she had things to show me, things she wished to talk to me about.

Then, as we sat on into the evening, the fire still burning brightly and Audrey's sea-kale soup along with some bread Lionel had brought warm inside us, Audrey said what I'd been thinking. 'Lucy, you went to the house, didn't you.'

'Yes. Well, why shouldn't I? It was my home. Should *still* be.'

'Who did you see?' asked Audrey, gently. 'Your brother? Your nephew? Your little niece?'

A boy and a girl. 'How old are they?' I asked Audrey.

'Hugh must be eight now, or nine. And little Anne, four or five.'

'So who did you see?' I asked Lucy. 'Them? Or their parents?'

'The girl.'

'Did you already know about them?'

'Oh, yes.'

'Had Lady Helen told you?'

'No, of course not! Once, soon after Hugh was born – Master Henry had told me about it – I asked Lady Helen if I could have a day out, go home for a visit, and see my – my new little nephew ... She was shocked. "Are you mad?" she hissed. "This is your home, and these whores are your family. Your only family."

'So you never asked her again.'

She looked at me and rolled her eyes.

We sat in silence for a while, watching the flames dancing above the glowing embers in the dying fire. Then she said, 'Master Henry gave me the news sometimes, after Lady Helen had been and gone, so I *knew* ... I'm going back tomorrow. I want to see the boy.'

That night, we stayed home in Audrey's little house. When I awoke next morning, Lucy had gone.

I asked Audrey whether she'd gone in skirling ointment or if she'd worn clothes like yesterday.

'Oh, clothes. Skirling ointment in daylight? No, I never used to let her do that. She's too impulsive, too careless. It would never have done for her to be caught out there naked wearing nothing but witch's ointment.'

And it would certainly not do now, I thought. Then: *Witch's ointment?* Was that what this skirling ointment was?

'Hurry up and finish your breakfast. I'm going to show you where some plants of power grow, and teach you a little herb-lore. There are a couple I need and must gather today before the tide comes in.'

* * * * *

This part of Essex is flat, flat, flat. All its beauty – and I am coming to appreciate its beauty – lies in the changing colours and contours of that flatness as twice a day the great tide slowly covers the beaches and flows up the creeks and turns the marshland into a lake. It is quite overawing to one accustomed to the tiny tides of the Mediterranean. It leaves the sheep stranded on small islands of mud and marsh grass, and strung out along the dykes, but they are used to that, and simply wait and watch as the frothy grey water flows back out between the banks of the creeks and fleets.

The people, too, from the lowliest marsh-dwellers like poor Liza and Audrey to the shepherds who milk the sheep and make the famous butters and cheeses. And they know (do the sheep?) when the tide will be in and when it will be out, for it is never the same

two weeks or even two days running, but always earlier and earlier and earlier as if determined to catch you napping.

Sometimes even a woman as wise as Audrey gets caught out.

'Three years ago,' she told me, 'one night, in the pitch dark,' – we were walking along the top of a dyke in the summer sunshine as she recounted the story – 'the tide came in faster and farther than even the eldest among us had ever seen. Thousands of sheep drowned here and down the coast, cattle too, for it swept over grassy meadows that had never known the sea before, and people were rescued from the roof of their houses by those with boats.'

'And you? You have a boat?' I asked, thinking surely she must, living here, though I hadn't seen one. Perhaps a coracle like the one my eel-catcher friend used on the great River Rhone in Avignon.

'Only men have boats.'

Of course. Silly me.

'Some people didn't know till the water came swirling into their homes and around their beds. But I knew. My tree's the alder, and there's an alder in the wood close by that protects me when I've no wish to be seen or caught. I climbed up there and waited in the wind and cold till the flood receded. Afterwards, some said I'd survived by magic. Some even hinted I might have been responsible – not that I'd intended such a catastrophe, they never suggested that, but that while calling up a wind or a storm or some such I'd let things get out of hand.'

'And do you, can you, call up a wind, a storm?'

She didn't answer that, not at once.

We were gathering thyme on a south-facing bank and the sun was so warm and the smell of the thyme so strong that it was almost like being back home in Spain. I love sunshine, loved feeling it on my face and my bare legs, and hopefully on the rest of my body later in the day as Audrey had promised me skirling ointment as soon as Lionel had been and gone. I wouldn't need it for swimming – the tide would be coming in and I planned to spend the afternoon in the sea – but when night fell I wanted to explore the woods a little on my own under cover of darkness.

'These here are kingcups,' she announced, breaking the silence.'

Glossy yellow flowers. There were still a few to be seen but most of the plants had fruits – pods – now, in August.

'The kingcup's a plant of power and those pods are used in making the ointment you're so curious about ... No, we won't pick them today, they need to be left for another month ... I know, now, that you're not our Marian, poor Liza's daughter. So does Lucy, unwilling though she be to admit it.'

I glanced at Audrey, wondering *how* they now knew. Instead, I got why Lucy would have preferred me to be *their* Marian.

'Poor thing's jealous. She sees you hobnobbing with the highest in the land and she knows deep down you're likely far superior by birth and *true* current status to either her or Lady Helen.'

I shrugged. 'For the moment, I'm Marian atte-Marsh. And when I'm not playing that part, I'm Mariana de la Mar, a Spanish whore. Anything else I may be is by birth alone, and is buried deep in the past.'

'Buried deep, perhaps, but not in the past. The real you will re-emerge.'

I gazed at her, then smiled and said, 'Now tell me what makes you and Lucy so sure I'm not *your* Marian.'

'In Lucy's case, the fact that you're impervious to spicknel.'

'Spicknel?'

'Another component of witch's ointment. No, it doesn't grow around here. I get mine from a Scots chapman comes by every summer. Cats are attracted to it, excited by it, and *our* Marian had much of the wulcat in her. She couldn't abide having it daubed on her skin. It drove her into a frenzy.'

'It's not something you could grow out of?'

'That was Lucy's first thought. But no, it's not.'

We were approaching the trees now. No doubt there were many herbs that grew only in among the trees, not out on the dykes. But I was more interested in this conversation about Lucy and me and Marian.

'You said "In Lucy's case" it was the spicknel. In your case?'

'Oh, I think there's a lot of the witch in you. That you could quite possibly control your reaction to the spicknel – and to anything else I might test you with. And we're not talking about something you might have picked up over the years and on your travels. This is in your blood. Your mother? One of your grandmothers?'

Not my mother. And not my Spanish grandmother. But I remembered my father's tales of his mother. 'I have – had – a grandmother in Scotland. I never met her. I believed she was dead. No, I didn't believe that, but my father did. When I was a child, I believed she was still alive and I would know her and love her when we went "home" to Scotland. His home. It never happened. But Balthild told me she thought I would meet her one day. Lady Marian.'

'The same name as you. And she's a witch.'

'I know nothing about her, really. But my father implied that she was. And so does his old friend Sir Farquhar, who once knew her well.'

'Sir Farquhar? Your master?'

'My master when I'm Mariana de la Mar. My guardian and adoptive uncle when I'm Lady Marian MacElpin. Do not repeat that to anyone.'

'Oh, my lips are sealed, child. As are the lips of all true witches. Balthild's not a witch, but she is something of a seer. If I was you, I'd take it as gospel that you'll one day meet this Scots grandmother of yours ... The reason I suddenly feel I need to know all about you – and your task here – and how much of a witch you may be – is that I saw you and the wraith in the flames this morning while you were still asleep. But before we go into that, I must tell you one more very good reason for believing – for *knowing* – that you're not our Marian. Have you noticed the birds?'

The *birds*? There'd been a cormorant taking an interest in what we were doing. And a second one now. They seemed to be following us. 'The cormorants?' I asked. 'Martin told me that's what "shag" means. A shag is a cormorant, it's the English name.'

'And you working at the Shag in Colchester. That's quite a coincidence. Or perhaps not a coincidence at all, for the shag, the cormorant, seems to be your spirit animal. I've never seen them following anyone around like this, even down by the open sea, let alone up here on the marshes. And when the tide's out! Look at them now.'

They were both standing on tree stumps, wings spread out to dry. And they both seemed to be gazing at me. I walked a little apart from Audrey. Their heads, their eyes, followed me.

'You'll only ever see them standing like that on a rock or post surrounded by open sea. But this? Have *you* seen them acting like this before?'

I nodded. 'Sometimes at home by the Mar Menor they seemed to take an interest in me. I supposed it was normal.' Though now I thought of it, I remembered Pedro the fisherman remarking on the odd behaviour of *los cormoranes* when I was around.

'Our Marian's spirit animal was also a bird – you see how close you are in spirit, you two? – but hers was the magpie.'

'The magpie?'

'Those black and white crows with the long straight tails.'

'Oh, I know, yes. I've seen them in Colchester – and at home in Spain.'

'You see them – and hear them! – in these woods, but they used to follow Marian across the open marshes. That, you don't often see. Jackdaws, yes, hoodies, even ravens at dawn if there's a sheep died during the night. But not magpies. They were there because she was there, Same as those shags are here because you're here.'

I agreed. That was a pretty conclusive reason for thinking their Marian and I were not one and the same.

'There's one other thing I ought to tell you, lovedy. I've seen Marian's ghost, not once but many times over the years.'

'Her ghost? So that's why you told me "I thought you were dead" when we first met!'

'I thought I must have been mistaken about the ghost, but I saw her again last night, peering out at me from among the waves.'

'In the sea? You saw her in the sea?'

'Always. She never comes out onto dry land.'

You could hardly call these marshes dry land, but I let that pass. 'You mean she's like a kind of mermaid? You're sure it isn't a mermaid?'

'Well, I've never seen her legs, only her face and hair and arms, but ... I've never heard tell of any mermaids around here. No, it's our Marian.'

'And how do you know she's a ghost? Could she not be a the real Marian, alive and living in the sea now?'

'Living in the sea? Could *you* live in the sea?'

I thought about it. 'No. Not now. But I think I could – that I might be able to adapt to it over time – if I had to.'

'Hmm. Thing about ghosts is that you can see straight through them.'

I remembered my conversation with Blanche about astral travel, fetches and doppelgangers. Was it possible Marian was alive somewhere – perhaps suffering dreadfully and in her desperation sending her soul back here to the sea she so loved?

'Ghosts are more or less mindless, aren't they? At least until they've fed on blood? Or are the Undeparted Dead different from ghosts?'

She shrugged. 'I don't know. Anyway, she's never shown any sign of recognising me. I don't think she could even see me.'

I determined to keep an eye open for this ghost and if it did appear, to try to induce it to show some sign of being *aware*.

But now we were heading back towards her home and it was midday and I had to meet Lionel. I agreed to tell her more about my mission, but not now, later, while she was daubing the skirling ointment over me.

Lionel had brought the weapons – spears, a short sword and a variety of lethal-looking knives – but had no news for me save that another killing had occurred in Colchester – a girl of higher status this time, a merchant's daughter, but beautiful and spoilt and with a reputation that meant respectable people on hearing of her death merely shrugged their shoulders. No reason to think that would happen to *their* daughters.

'At least Lady Lucia is not the type this creature preys on.'

Not the type? I thought sarcastically. *Lucy Longlegs?*

But 'I'm sorry Lady Lucia isn't here to see you,' I said brightly. 'I don't know where she went this morning.'

'The fact that Lady Lucia is not here – and where Lady Lucia goes and what she does – is nothing to do with you.'

Which ended that conversation.

Later – coincidentally? – I had got halfway through giving Audrey an abridged version of Blanche's plan for Alban Elued when she

suddenly said: 'You do realise this plan is not what will actually happen, don't you? That it's not what's intended to happen at all.'

Huh? But that was ridiculous! She obviously didn't understand!

I was standing in front of her and she was smoothing the ointment over my back, so I couldn't see her face to guess what she meant.

However, a sudden sinking feeling in my stomach told me she might well be right, might see something I hadn't seen, not consciously.

I waited for her to explain, but she just carried on smoothing in the ointment. The only sounds were her breathing and the sea rushing in up the fleet that that ran by her hovel and flowing across the open marshes to the east.

I lack patience. Always have.

'What makes you say that?'

'This wraith can read your mind.'

She didn't need to go on. It was obvious. I mean, *everyone* can read my mind, so what possible reason did I have for imagining Merlin Redivivus might be an exception? Blanche was not *estúpida*. Nor was Audrey.

'Right, you're done.' She slapped my bottom. 'Run along now – and I don't want to see you till the morning. You have to be completely at home on these marshes and in this sea. And I have to think about what you've told me. And what might *really* be happening. You might start thinking about it too,' she added sarcastically.

I blushed, and I'm sure she knew, though a blush could never have shown in that poor light through the skirling cream that covered my face. 'I'm not usually that stupid.'

'Perhaps not, but it certainly wasn't your intelligence this Lady Blanche chose you for.'

And now I looked back on it, it was true that *intelligence* had not been among the many "assets" and "qualities" Blanche had mentioned when she recruited me. Like my experience working in a brothel. And the fact that I killed men without a qualm when the occasion warranted it.

'No, you're probably right,' I said.

'And it wasn't as extra live bait that she allowed Lucy to accompany you. Those weapons are for Lucy, for her alone, you say? Then take it from me, *she* is in on the plan.'

She was right about that, too. Oh God, what had I got myself into? But I simply nodded, ran splashing across the mud and grass to the nearest deep water, and dived in.

I swam out, far, far out, till the land was lost in the mist and the mist was lost in the night. Then I lay on my back, floating up and over the waves, up and over, up and over. The Harvest Moon had not yet risen. The night was black. There'd been no sign of the ghost, and now I wouldn't see her even if she was right in from of me. Not unless she touched me. I shivered. Time to follow the waves back to the coast. Hopefully, I would not have drifted too far to the west.

I had. Or maybe I hadn't. But I was lost. And when I came out onto the beach I knew I had no hope of finding my way back across the dark marshes. The only thing to do was walk along the coast as I had that other night, then follow the track to Great Clackton from the point where the marshes ended and the land rose and formed a cliff. Then follow the lane from Great Clackton that led across-country to Chich. That part would be easy because it was on that lane I always met Lionel, at the point where another lane led north from it past Primrose Wood to Little Clackton. It was a long walk and would take me the rest of the night, but at least in my skirting ointment and with it being so dark I ran little risk of being seen.

As I walked along the beach, I kept imagining the wraith coming up behind me.

Silently.

I, too, was silent on wet sand, but in the dark and with the coastline totally devoid of landmarks, I had gone far out of my way. Here to the west, muddy gullies came right down to the sea even at low tide, and with each step my foot made a sucking, slurping sound as I pulled it free of the slimy mud. The tide was turning now, coming in again, as I left the muddy fleets behind and finally, too, the wet sand and mudflats, and came to the shingle beaches I had last walked along the night I met Balthild.

Here, it was impossible to walk without making a noise. Impossible for the living. Impossible, too, I imagined, for revenants

and the Undead. But not for a wraith. At least a dozen times, fear of what walked behind me stretching out its hand suddenly overwhelmed me and I plunged into the sea. And swam for a while. Then came out because walking was quicker and I was being foolish. Or so I told myself. But I didn't believe myself. He was there. And the only thing keeping me alive was our rendez-vous on Alban Elued. That and my uncanny ability to know exactly when he was reaching out for me and to move faster than his arm as I leapt again and again into the sea.

By the time I reached the point where the land began to rise I was trembling uncontrollably and afraid to leave the safety of the sea at my feet.

Then I saw Balthild. With a cry of joy, I ran into her arms and burst into tears.

She said nothing, just wrapped a warm cloak around me, gave me a drink of water and a crust of bread, then put me on Darwin – much to his disgust. I've received many an evil look over the years, but the look in his eye as he turned his head and peered up at me ... Either that donkey was a devil incarnate or –

'Perhaps he's a bit of a puritan,' I whispered.

She laughed. 'I don't think so. He doesn't object to *me*.'

I remembered that Balthild had been a whore when she was younger. And was a seer, and something of a witch. Perhaps I could talk to her.

I was still wondering tiredly how best to begin when she said, 'There's a hut up the way a bit where we can stop and talk. A bothie I suppose you'd call it – yes, I remember your Scots background. There was a Scots lass at the Shag when I was there. She told us they used to keep her in a bothie outside the village for the men and boys to use till a trader came along and bought her and brought her south and sold her to Master William.'

That reminded me of Niniane in her bothie outside the village in Serbia. It would be Niniane I'd like to have with me on the beach that night. How did Blanche think this Esmeralda was going to be able to help from far away across the sea? Then I remembered Audrey's doubts about the plan and realised that perhaps she didn't think any such thing.

'I have something to tell you,' Balthild continued, 'and you have much to tell me. So, here's the hut – the bothie. Let's go in here and sit down and talk.'

It was, as she said, just a little bothie: a bench where someone – a shepherd? – could sleep; a couple of sheepskins and a rug; a hearth on the bare floor, a cooking pot ... But shelter, a place to rest. For the moment, I would listen and she would talk.

We sat together on the bench, then she said 'No, you lie down. Here, put your head on my lap.'

I was shy, but she insisted.

She stroked my forehead, ran her fingers through my hair.

I wanted to say something like *You are very kind*, but it felt wrong, then –

'I hear you spent the last couple of months working at the Shag, so you must know Lucy. No, wait, let me finish.'

I closed my mouth, relaxed. Her fingers were magical.

'Rumour has it that Lucy from the Shag is none other than Lady Lucia Hartley, who, years ago, used to haunt the woods and marshes wearing little or nothing. Not quite before my time here. I do remember her. I saw her once come out from among the trees at dawn dressed much the same as you are now – minus the cloak, of course – and unaware that anyone was watching her. She had the stillness, the grace, of a wild animal. A blackbird gave the alarm, she glanced round, saw me, and was gone in the blink of an eye. No, I said wait ... The story goes that after old Sir Arthur died, she – Lady Lucia – was packed off to the Shag and forgotten.

'Now, years later and by means of some string-pulling, she has been released from her indenture at the Shag and is back on the marshes. And another young woman from the Shag is roaming the woods and marshes with her. I knew as soon as I heard that the other was you ... I haven't finished yet, but you can speak now if you want to, before I go on and tell you something you don't already know.'

'What you say is true. About Lucy and me being from the Shag. And it's true she's really Lady Lucia, Sir George's sister, but she's scared to say so.'

'Better. That way she won't go causing trouble ... Lady Helen's in London. Did you know that?'

'I knew she'd gone to London. I didn't know she was still there.' She'd said she'd be talking to Ferchard about me. Oh, God!

'Lady Helen's hard – some might call her cruel – but she's not stupid. So it's a pity she's not here. Sir George is stupid, he does stupid things, and he has a very stupid thing planned for Saturday.'

'Saturday?'

'The day after tomorrow.'

She carried on caressing and massaging me in silence, knowing that I was trying to guess what that very stupid thing might be. The only thing I could think of was: 'Not a hunt? Don't tell me he's planning a hunt like when they hunted her before?'

'You know about that? *She* told you? Ned told me. I think he actually took part in one. He's never admitted it, but he's never denied it, either.'

'Martin did, too, I know. Master Martin.'

'They all did. Anyway, this time they plan to hunt the two of you, and finish you both off. You're technically a fugitive, and –'

'I'm not!' I was a fugitive still in Spain and France, that was sure, but not in England.

'He says you are, Sir George, and he's the law around here. Unless someone higher up than him steps in, and who's going to?'

'The bailiff in Colchester knows I was freed –'

'By the time he gets wind of it, what's left of you will long have been crab food.'

'What's *left*?'

'After the hounds are done with you. And the men, if the men get to you first.'

'She told me they didn't use hounds when they hunted her. It wouldn't be fair.'

'It was sport, then. A game, organised by Sir Robert over at Thorrington. This isn't a game. What Sir George is organising now's a traditional Great Hunt. He means you both to die.'

'Lucy's not a fugitive, either. Her contract with Master Henry was for ten years and it's elapsed.'

'That's got nothing to do with it. He's a magistrate, I told you, and that means he's the law around here. If he's declared her an outlaw, an outlaw she is.'

'Does she know? I haven't seen her since yesterday.'

'Oh, she knows all right. You haven't seen her because she's being held captive over at the manor house in Little Clackton. Saturday morning, they'll release her and give her a head start, then go after her. And when she's dead they'll search around for your scent and go after you.'

'My scent?'

'They've something of yours from Chich, something you wore.'

That bastard Martin.

This had all got completely out of hand. Even if we survived the Great Hunt, as I was confident we could, everyone would know we were on the marsh and that she'd been declared a *caput lupinum*, a wolfshead. From then on, men and boys would keep coming in search of us day and night. It would make my mission impossible.

I sat up. Gave Balthild back her cloak.

'Where are you going? What are you doing?'

'First I'm going to rescue Lucy.'

'You can't!'

'And then – you mentioned pulling strings. I will pull strings. You have no idea the strings I can pull. That hunt will never take place.'

'You?' she scoffed. 'Them as imprisoned her are gentlemen. And she's a lady – sort of. What can a trollop like you do?'

'There's a little song I heard the other day:

*When Adam delved and Eve span
Who was then the gentleman?*

Do you know it?'

'Of course I know it. The men and boys around here mutter it all the time. The day will come when those clodpoles will roar it out loud. I dread that day!'

'You've *seen* something?'

'I've seen men strung up, dangling from trees, all along the road from here to London, hundreds and hundreds of them, men and boys ...'

There was a moment of silence while I absorbed this. Was it possible? Yes, of course it was possible. Nobles such as Gaunt and his brothers were ruthless if they felt threatened. And their women,

like the Countess of Essex (and everywhere else) and the unfortunately late Princess Isabella (sister to those brothers) were even worse. Not to mention local tyrants like Lady Helen.

Suddenly a peasants' revolt here in Essex and its inevitable tragic outcome loomed horribly vivid and real in my mind. It would come soon and I would be caught up in it.

Still, that was not the immediate problem.

'Balthild, I must go.'

She gazed at me a moment, then sighed and stood up. She would help me.

'What's the quickest way to Little Clackton? Along the Chich road then right near Audrey's bothie and up past Hart Lea?'

'No, that's a long way round. You can go straight from Great Clackton. I'll show you.'

'Oh, thank you so much. And do you think you could possibly lend me some clothes? A skirt, and a blouse of some sort. I may have to show myself, pass as a local girl – even as Marian atte-Marsh –'

'The local whore, yes. Tell them you're setting up in business, taking over where you mum left off, that'll put a sparkle in their eyes. But you're right. You'll charm your way past any that's guarding her much more easily than you'll fight your way past.'

At the smithy in Great Clackton, I wasn't invited in – 'Master Ned's got an ear-cropping in the morning, best not to disturb him.' – so I waited outside with Darwin, who kept rolling his eyes and baring his great yellow teeth at me and making it quite clear he blamed me for his being woken and dragged out of his warm stable once again in the middle of the night. And he was quite right. I stretched out my arm to scratch between his ears – and nearly lost my hand!

'Good thing you're quick!' laughed Balthild, returning. 'Best not to touch him if he doesn't take to you.'

'Who does he take to?'

'Well – me. That's it, really.'

'Linette?'

'No, Darwin can't stand her. She teases him.'

I liked Linette.

'Had *you* been teasing him?'

'No!'

'Here.' She handed me the garments. 'They're just old rags. Don't worry if you can't return them.'

She sat me on Darwin (who aired his feelings by means of a series of loud farts), and took me far enough to be sure that even I could not get lost.

'You'd best take cover among the trees from here on. Follow the lane but stay out of sight. Soon you'll come to a clearing. One great house stands there, the one Sir Arthur and Lady Helen live in. It is walled and has a moat. Opposite it, and a little further on, stands another great house. That one has a wall but only for show and no moat or any other defences.'

'Why two houses?'

'Because there used to be two landed families. Sir Arthur was from this side – Engaynes. His wife, Sir George's mother, was from the other side, a descendant of the original Bovills and the only child. They married and the two families became one. So now Sir George owns the lot.'

I didn't care. All I needed to know was where they might be holding Lucy. 'What do they use the second house for? Is it empty?'

'Apart from the ghost.'

'*Ghost?*' Not another one!

'Lady Mathilda, Sir George's grandmother. You might do well to start your search there.' She giggled. 'You could pretend to *be* the ghost. Any guard who thinks he sees her will faint on the spot or flee into the night and never return!'

It was obvious Balthild didn't have my experience of the Undead or she would never suggest such a thing. Still, the thought intrigued me. 'Do you know anything else about her?'

'Only that she was a great beauty, and now she haunts the place with a silver mirror in her hand. Rumour has it she committed suicide and is entombed right there in the house somewhere. You know, they couldn't bury her in the churchyard on holy ground because –'

'Yes, I know.'

* * * *

So I did as she suggested and started with the empty house on the near side of the lane. But I took it slowly. First, I climbed up onto the thick brick wall and lay there, flat on my tummy, glad now I was wearing clothes: cold crumbling bricks are not nice on the bare skin. And as I waited and watched, and wished Balthild had come all the way with me, it hit me how lonely I was.

Yes, I'd grown up lonely, but I'd had adults who loved me right there in the background until I was fourteen, people I could trust. Since then, though, there'd been no one except for a brief period in Paris when I was loved by Raoul and grew to love him in return.

Where was Raoul now? Still in Paris? Perhaps, after I'd run that errand for Lady Alice I'd get the opportunity to see him, perhaps link up with him again, live with him somewhere, somehow ... Of course, Ferchard wouldn't approve. Raoul was not a knight, hardly even a gentleman. Ferchard, who spoke of me and treated me as a whore one minute and insisted I was a lady and an aristocrat the next. Let not your right hand know what your left hand doeth.

If somebody didn't make a move soon, I would have to. Give it a few more minutes.

There'd been ibn Khaldoun, too, in Granada, long before Paris and Raoul. Ibn Khaldoun had loved me, and I had loved him in return, loved him as my first true lover, the first man who had loved me as he made love to me rather than simply used me, used my body. But now looking back on it I saw that we'd passed in the night like travellers: two travellers on the road of life who will never meet again, never spend another night in each other's company, delightful though it had been.

And it occurred to me now for the first time that Raoul and I had been friends as well as lovers. Ibn Khaldoun had been rich and cultured and more than twice my age, and he had owned me. He had loved me as a precious object, not as someone who could ever be his equal and his friend.

Nothing was happening. I would scout around here quickly and if I found no sign of life would head over to the other house.

I dropped down inside the wall into what seemed to be an overgrown vegetable plot and made my way towards the house itself. It didn't appear abandoned, only closed up and silent. There were outbuildings attached to the main building, and others

standing clear of it. These, though rather dilapidated, all seemed to be in use.

I crept around, inspecting them all, wondering idly whether the skirting ointment would work in a face to face confrontation with a man holding a lantern. I doubted it. But I was wearing clothes, and I wanted a face to face confrontation.

Nothing. All the doors on this side were closed, but none was guarded. I tried the nearest. It was bolted from inside. I tried two more. Then a fourth, just round the corner. It creaked open when I pushed.

Inside, it was silent and dark. I crept forward. It didn't seem to be closed off from the rest of the building. A doorway opposite the door I'd come in through gave onto a passage which led into the house.

I found myself in the great hall. At the far end I could make out the stairs to the solar, where the private family rooms would be.

Should I go up? She could just as easily be up there as in some outhouse. But a guard might hear me coming. The stairs were of wood, not stone: they would creak.

I had to go up.

I needed some kind of weapon. Perhaps I'd find something up there.

The door on the first landing was bolted on the outside. Had I found her? I opened it and peered in. 'Lucy...? Sorry, Lady Lucia?'

No response. A narrow window with actual glass in it provided sufficient starlight for me to see the room was empty of people. But not of furnishings – a bed, two chests, a table with a basin and jug, a brush, a comb, and a silver mirror. The mirror! So this was the old lady's chamber!

I peered round nervously. Wherever she was, and I had little doubt that some part of her was around here somewhere, she was not in her chamber.

I hefted the mirror. It was solid and heavy. The silver surface was tarnished and it was no use as a looking-glass but I had my weapon.

I laid it back down and opened the chests. One was full of her clothes. I really could do what Balthild had suggested. All right,

she'd been joking, but she hadn't known I would find Lady Mathilda's own clothes!

And if I bumped into Lady Mathilda, got caught impersonating her? Ghosts didn't attack, did they? Like the wraiths and revenants I came up against on an almost daily basis? But nor were they as docile as the simply undeparted. She'd be furious, that was for sure, and she'd certainly go on a rampage.

Well, all right. But I wasn't going to dress up and go into haunting mode until I *knew* there was something to dress up and risk her wrath *for*.

I hurried back downstairs and rapidly searched the rest of the interior of the building. All was bare and dusty and silent. They must have left her stuff up there because they were scared to move it, same as they were scared to have her poor body in the vicinity of the church. Like they were scared to have my poor (still living) body on the holy ground of that monastery in Colchester. And the way they buried the bodies of the poor dead whores of Southwark, the so-called Winchester Geese, in unhallowed ground at the Cross-Bones graveyard.

No time for such thoughts now. Or ever, if I wanted to keep the skin on my back.

Back outside, I did a complete circuit of the building and outbuildings. And was almost back where I started when a rat or something scampered across in front of me. I stopped dead, and a barn owl swooped down and seized it in its talons. There was a tiny squeak, then the owl flapped over to the trees, noisy now, and out of sight.

In the total silence that followed, I heard a cough.

A man's cough.

The guard. It must be.

Attack him? Seduce him? Or dress up as Lady Mathilda and scare him to death?

Under normal circumstances, I would have approached him then chosen between attack and seduction depending upon his reaction. But having found that chamber, those clothes – surely that was a sign?

I raced back up to the chamber, stripped off what I was wearing and dressed in an old-fashioned red kirtle which turned out not to

be all that old-fashioned as she must have been thinner than me and it clung to me quite as tightly as the latest cote-hardie. To that I added a white head-dress held in place by a silver circlet. But decided against a cloak – or shoes or boots. I would continue barefoot.

Balthild's things that I had been wearing I stuffed out of sight in the bottom of the chest.

Clutching the heavy silver mirror, I hurried back to the point where I'd heard the cough. And there he was, sitting out in the open now. But he was not alone. A man in what looked like a friar's habit was sitting with him, his back to me. Behind the guard was a closed door and, I had no doubt, Lucy.

Holding the mirror up before me, and appearing to be intent on it rather than them, I approached at a measured pace.

The guard leapt up with a shriek of terror.

The friar jumped to his feet and peered round at me, eyes wide.

I moved on forward, slowly, showing no reaction whatever.

He fumbled for his wooden pectoral cross and thrust it towards me. '*In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti*, get thee gone from here, foul creature!'

Hard to argue with that, but I had no intention of leaving. I kept moving steadily forward.

The guard fled.

It occurred to me that I should respond in kind. After all, who was he to talk to me like that? Worse than those monks in Colchester. At least they hadn't tried to exorcise me.

'*Gloria Patri, et Filio, et Spiritu Sancto*, indeed,' I replied, then for good measure added: '*Sicut erat in principio, et nunc, et semper, et in saecula saeculorum. Amen ...*' I stopped still and locked eyes with him. 'How dare *you* call *me* "foul creature" – *me!* – an innocent wife and mother, when you have committed every foul sin there is? You would deny it? Then I'll open the *accusatio* with the *Septem Peccata Mortalia*, the Seven Deadly Sins. The first is *avaritia*, greed. Coveting your neighbour's goods. *I* never did. And you ...? The second, *acedia*, sloth: apathy, not caring. *I* cared for my family. What do you care about except securing your next round of creature comforts ...? The third is *ira*, wrath. You are full

of wrath right now. *I* am not ... The fourth *invidia*, envy, the jealousy you feel when –'

But at that point he turned to see whether the guard was still there, witnessing all this – he was not, he was long gone – and I seized the opportunity to hit him hard on the back of his tonsured head with the silver mirror. He dropped to the floor unconscious.

I unbolted the door, half-expecting Lucy to jump up and scream when she saw the ghost of her dead grandmother. But she must have heard and recognised my voice from in here. She remained sitting calmly on the bench, and asked: 'Why are you dressed up like that?'

A little thanks would have been welcome. 'I'm here to rescue you! Which, I might add, entailed hours of hardship and danger on my part –'

Now she jumped up. 'To rescue me? Oh, I thought they'd caught you as well. What about the guard outside?'

'He's gone. Fled. From the ghost of your grandmother. And the friar who was keeping him company is indisposed. Temporarily. We must hurry.'

'Lady Mathilda. Right. I thought you reminded me of someone.'

I opened the door and peeped out.

'What happened to him?' she asked, pushed past.

'He tried to exorcise me. Or should that be *expel* me?'

'Whichever, it seems he bit off more than he could chew.' She looked at me with new respect. 'Well, shall we go?'

She led me to the gate, opened it, and when we were through, closed it again. Why did I always do things the hard way? Then she strolled off down the lane.

I followed her. 'Don't you think we should keep to the trees?'

'Who's going to see us at this time? And if anyone did, it'd be you they recognised, not me.'

'Me?'

'Lady Mathilda. They'd shriek and run.'

Right.

'There'll be a hunt on Saturday,' she went on

'It won't happen.'

'It will. I heard Sir George. And guess who they'll be hunting.'

'You don't seem very worried.'

'Why should I be?'

'Because they don't plan on raping us when they catch us, they plan on killing us.'

'They'll never catch us. Not me, anyway.'

This was the Lucy I loved.

'I told you. It won't happen,' I repeated. 'I'll have it cancelled.'

'What do you mean, *you*'ll ... *Oh, I see.*'

'Tomorrow I'll tell Sir Lionel to forbid it, in Lancaster's name.'

'And you think he will? For *you*?'

'You know what we're here to do. Even if we weren't caught and killed, it would draw unwanted attention to our presence on the marshes.'

By the time we emerged from the trees at the edge of the marshes, dawn was breaking. I went straight into Audrey's bothie and fell into a deep sleep.

I awoke to the sound of Audrey's voice. My ears pricked up. Who was out there with her? Lucy? Or someone else?

'I've warned her, but she won't listen.' Audrey.

'She's not the kind of girl who listens.' Father Peter!

But were they talking about me or Lucy? And what had Audrey been telling him?

'What I can't understand,' the old priest went on, 'is how Lancaster's people think they can capture or kill a wraith, even using those two poor girls as live bait.'

She'd told him!

I went storming out to confront them – and was met with Audrey's laughter and Father Peter's stare of astonishment.

What? Oh! I was still wearing my Lady Mathilda costume!

'You *promised* you wouldn't tell anyone!'

'Father Peter is not just anyone. He knows a wraith haunts the area. He knew before I did. And don't you think the fact that it's killing local girls –'

'Not just local girls. There've been great ladies murdered, too, I told you. All over Essex.'

'Sit down, child, and stop getting excited. I'll fetch you something to eat and drink.'

'Where's Lucy?'

The old witch shrugged. 'She ate some breakfast when you got back here at dawn, then went off again by herself.'

'Where to?'

'I didn't ask. Nor did I ask when she'd be back.'

So all right, Lucy was free to come and go as she wished.

I glanced round, realised I was being studied intently by the old priest.

'I'm not one of your birds.'

He laughed. 'Oh, it's not only the birds I'm interested in. It's all the wild creatures of the woods and marshes.'

'Sea creatures are free to go about their lives unstudied, then?'

'I'm afraid amphibious creatures that come up out of the sea and wander the marshes and woods do come within my purview. I hear the ghost of Lady Mathilda was seen again last night – not that she was in any sense a wild creature – at least not in life, though in death it seems things change. She is reported to have hit some mendicant friar over the head with a silver mirror. Knocked him out cold.'

'What was he doing? Trying to exorcise her?'

'You tell me.'

'How would I know? But if he was, then it served him right.' Time for a more abstract discussion. 'But as you say, in death things change. Obviously. This wraith may have been quite other in life –'

'From what I know of wraiths – and I read everything I can lay my hands on – they are the expression of one single aspect of the original multifaceted character.'

'One evil aspect, now taken to the ultimate extreme. Yes, I agree with you.'

His eyes twinkled. 'Thank you, daughter.'

'I speak as I find, Father. Did I mention that when I was in Paris I was a student at the School of Theology? No, perhaps not, for I seem to remember you supposing I'd been *une fille de joie*.'

'I too speak as I find, my daughter.'

Touché.

'And surely Paris doesn't accept female students?' he went on. 'Don't tell me you dressed as a boy.'

'All right, I won't. What would you like me to tell you?'

'Tell me what they taught you about the Undead?'

Lucy chose that moment to appear from behind the bothie. On seeing Father Peter she hesitated, then decided to join us and sat down cross-legged on the grass next to me.

The priest gazed at us from his perch on the rickety bench and we gazed back up at him.

I determined to let Lucy make what she might of the conversation, and to focus my attention on him. 'They didn't,' I told him. 'They lectured only on Heaven and Hell, and Purgatory – all very orthodox. There was some discussion of the resurrection of the body as opposed to the immortality of the soul, but too much emphasis on the latter was frowned upon. Outside the lecture halls, though, we discussed everything – while keeping an eye out for the sinister Dominican friars who haunted the university.'

'Like the one last night,' he interrupted with a smile.

'Oh? Was he a Dominican?' As if I didn't know. 'For instance, *shades* – the undeparted dead. Many students believed in something like the Greek Hades or Hebrew Sheol. "The land of darkness and the shades of the dead," in the Book of Job, "the valley of the shades of the dead," in Psalm 23.'

'That's not exactly what the Latin "*in valle mortis*" means.'

'No, but my teacher in Spain, a rabbi, told me it was a perfectly acceptable interpretation of the Hebrew. And he said all the great mystics teach that Sheol, the underworld, is not so much *under* as *other*. And that reminds me of this little verse:

*Wherever blood is shed
they gather round,
the undeparted dead.*

It seems to be well known, locally. But what do you as a priest make of it? Do you think it's really true? That the undeparted dead crave blood, feed on it, gain vitality of some sort from it?

I glanced at Lucy, realised she was staring at me in astonishment – and so was Audrey, who was standing behind her with my breakfast in her hands. But she didn't say anything as she handed me a bowl of porridge. Lucy, too, kept her mouth closed, though I knew she had a personal interest in the subject.

I waited.

Finally, he said: 'I don't believe it is true that *wherever* blood is shed they gather round. That happens when the blood is poured out upon the ground deliberately in offering to them. And also in certain cases where evil is inherent in the shedding of the blood – for instance, cold-blooded murder is inherently evil in a way that kill-or-be-killed as a soldier on the battlefield is not.'

'You mean the blood of a victim is special in a way that blood spilt in the normal course of events is not.'

'Exactly. The Devil or one of his minions is there in person when such a deed is committed. And the Devil is Lord of the the Undead and of the Shadowlands.'

'The Shadowlands. Is that the English word for Hades, Sheol? The Land of the Shades. I like it.'

'You wouldn't like it if you had more experience of it, young lady,' Audrey cut in.

'I just meant I like the word –'

But the priest interrupted me. 'What Audrey is anxious about, and rightly so, is that the Shadowland is a source of power, of magic. And therefore a temptation to all who would make use of this power, this magic. But it is black magic. When you feed the undeparted dead on the blood of the slain, it is the power of the Devil you invoke.'

'Now just a moment. I'm not feeding anyone or invoking anyone. As far as I'm concerned this is a purely abstract discussion. Or it would be if Lady Lucia and I had not quite recently shared an experience of the undeparted dead in circumstances different from what you describe. Will you tell them, my lady?'

'No, you go ahead. You're good at this.'

So I told them about our encounter with the revenant in Colchester, and how Lucy had shed the creature's blood and I had heard her say "Papa" and what she had told me when later I asked her about this "Papa".

'You didn't witness this manifestation, Marian?' asked the priest.

'No, she hared after the creature and chopped off its head,' Lucy told him.

'Hares don't do that kind of thing. "Wolfed" would be more apposite. Audrey, it seems we cannot dismiss these two as simply live bait.'

'There's a world of difference between a putrifying corpse shambling around the city and the wraith of a powerful wizard out on the open marshes. And Marian, it must be midday, so if you want to speak to Sir Lionel ...'

'Oh, yes! I must, it's very important.'

Sir Lionel was standing under a tree out of sight of the road, waiting for me. I could see he'd been there some time.

If he'd been waiting for Lucy, he was doomed to disappointment. But he said nothing, only raised his eyebrows.

'Sir Lionel. I'm so pleased you're still here. We have a problem.' I told him about the "Great Hunt" Sir George was organising.

His response was not what I had been expecting. 'I know. And if you hadn't kept me waiting, I would have gone over there and cancelled it by now. If it hasn't already been cancelled. Lady Helen is home.'

'When?'

'Yesterday. She'll already have cancelled the hunt, I imagine. Though she didn't know Sir George had Lady Lucia ensconced at Engaynes.'

'Did you?'

'No, of course not. If I had, I would have gone to her immediately. Anyway, I met her this morning as planned, so he obviously hadn't locked her in, made her a prisoner or anything.'

'Ah. Well, that's all right then. Shall I see you tomorrow?'

'All being well.'

Father Peter is still there on the bench with Lucy sitting cross-legged on the ground in front of him. Of Audrey there is no sign.

They both look up.

'Lady Lucia's been telling me something of her life – her life with her father, before he died. Not quite a confession, though Audrey kindly left us alone. Perhaps if you, too, could give us a few minutes ...'

'Of course.' I turn to go.

'No, wait, Marian. That was my story, Father, a little of it. It was not a confession. I have nothing to confess. I am a murderer, but men were hunting me. I was a whore. Men placed me there.'

'I understand, my child. Still, perhaps you are concealing a little something? Envy, perhaps?'

She gazes at him for a moment, then without another word gets up and walks away.

We watch her go.

'She is not Lady Lucia,' he says at last.

I stare at him.

'Oh, she *was*, once upon a time. Just as she once passed as the boy Otter. But years have gone by since then, and she is no longer that person – those persons. I was on the point of explaining this to her when you arrived.'

'What do you mean when you say "no longer that person", Father?' Though I know exactly what he means.

'There is a man will be hanged on the gallows on the Ipswich Road outside Colchester tomorrow morning. Once, this man, John Wade, was a captain in the army of Sir Robert Knolles. He was stripped of his commission and flogged half to death for cowardice in the face of the enemy at the Battle of Pontvallain. Back in England, he turned to crime, was caught, and had his ears lopped off ... Captain Jack Wade was now Crop-eared Jack.

'And Crop-eared Jack, although a coward at heart, is a big man and a bully-boy. He got a place as a minder and enforcer at a brothel in Colchester – not your one. As you can no doubt imagine, he was good at his job and could have had the place for life, but he fell in with a gang of burglars, was caught, escaped from the Keep, and was declared outlaw.'

He pauses.

I wait. I think I know what he is going to say, but he takes me by surprise.

'It is an interesting coincidence that ten years ago Captain Jack Wade was a friend and admirer of Lady Helen's. I would even go so far as to say that if Captain Jack had been a landed knight like his rival, Sir George, she might never have married Sir George.'

'But the fact that Crop-eared Jack, coward, bully-boy and burglar, is being hanged tomorrow morning is not of the slightest interest to her,' I finished for him. 'I doubt if she even knows who he is.'

'Oh, she does. He sent a message asking her to intervene on his behalf, perhaps through her husband, and get the sentence commuted.'

'She ignored it.'

'No, she sent a message back saying there must be some mistake, the Jack she knew and remembered with affection was no crop-eared coward.'

Bitch.

'And now, Father, you're going to tell me that the Lady Lucia you knew was no big-mouthed whore.'

'Actually, it's not quite that simple. By the time she was fifteen, sixteen, our "Lady Lucia" had already gained a reputation. And Captain Jack Wade was never the gallant gentleman he liked to be taken for. He was a liar and a cheat, and – perhaps you should ask your friend Lucy about Captain Jack Wade alias Crop-eared Jack, see what *her* memories of him are.'

I nod. Yes, that would be interesting. But I don't want this conversation coming round to me, so I say, 'Does Lady Helen have any plans for Lady Lucia, do you know? Assuming the Great Hunt never takes place and she is still alive when we finish our task here?' Me, I intend that we should both escape, get right away, but it would be nice to know what she is escaping from.

'I imagine she would like to get her back into that brothel, hidden away and out of sight, as quickly as possible. But we will see. I don't think the poor creature will be quite so easily manipulated this time. You, on the other hand, have no choice but to do whatever your master and Lady Helen decide. She hopes he will agree to sell or hire you out to the brothel. I hope that if he does you will return there willingly, rather than having to be dragged there screaming then thrashed into submission. Lady Helen is not a merciful woman ...'

After a moment, he gets up, pats me on the head, murmurs '*Benedicite*, my daughter,' and goes.

And I head down to the sea and swim out, out, out until, when I stop and turn, the Essex coast is only a dark line on the horizon.

It was the middle of the night when I got back to Audrey's bothie, but at least I managed to find my way there without needing

Balthild to come to my rescue. Soon I would be just as at home here as the real Marian atte-Marsh had been. Poor girl. If she was still alive, and if I ever went back to Spain, I would track her down, and bring her back here to her home.

Audrey was awake but not in the mood for talk, and Lucy was fast asleep on the other bench. I lay down in my usual place on the floor.

But would coming back here be what she wanted? Perhaps she had made a good life for herself in Spain – become the mistress of, or even married, some rich *hidalgo*. Or perhaps she'd been shipped across the strait and sold at auction in the Maghreb (as I had so nearly been) and no one would ever see her again ...

But what about this ghost, or fetch, or whatever it was?

I slept.

THE MARYAM ANKLET

One thing about living in the north, as opposed to the south of Spain where I grew up, is that a sunny day comes as a blessing and puts everyone in a good mood. Audrey had gone off to Great Clackton on some errand or other and Lucy and I were sitting outside in the sunshine with Mary and Henrietta, Audrey's pet hen, which wouldn't come near Lucy and me unless Mary was with us. Wise hen.

Then something attracted my attention to the trees and I was watching and waiting when three riders emerged from the wood to the east of the bothie. They stopped and looked around, then turned the horses' heads towards us.

It was Lady Helen, with two men riding behind her.

'Your brother?'

Lucy didn't respond. I turned to her. She was ashen-faced.

'No,' I answered myself. He would not be riding behind.

We watched as Lady Helen dismounted and walked towards us, me curious and, I have to admit, admiring; Lucy pale and trembling.

Lucy and Mary stood up.

I remained seated and glanced up at the sky, half-expecting the sun to go in, but there wasn't a cloud to be seen. *Tam infra quam supra* – As above, so below – didn't seem to apply in Lady Helen's case. Or perhaps it was that the blue daytime sky, like Lady Helen's beauty, was ephemeral and deceptive. The reality was darkness and starlight. And evil?

Lucy had her eyes down. She was ashamed still, as she had been when Lady Helen visited the brothel.

Mary was gazing at Lady Helen in awe – or was it horror?

Lady Helen snapped her fingers at the child. 'Go!'

Mary fled, Henrietta running and squawking behind her.

'You, on your feet in my presence.'

I remained where I was.

'You wish me to call my men to you?'

'They touch me, one or both of them will die.'

For a second she looked surprised. Then she glanced at Lucy.

Lucy nodded. 'Believe her, my lady.'

'A whore who attacks a man is whipped half to death then hanged,' Lady Helen announced. But she didn't pursue it. She glanced again at Lucy, who was still standing, head bowed. No problem there, obviously. *I* was the problem.

But she was – still is, no doubt – a very subtle woman. She started by telling me about Lucy. 'When, many years ago, Sir George very kindly entrusted this woman to the care of Henry Bawd, it was done in the belief that she was his sister, at least by birth and name, if not by nature. For by nature she was, as she had amply demonstrated to the whole county, a whore. However, it transpired that Sir George was mistaken.'

She waited.

When it became obvious that Lucy didn't dare speak, I said, brightly, 'Mistaken? You mean he has finally realised she was not a whore? It's a little late for that.'

She laughed that lady-like laugh I could never hope to emulate. I had to admit that while I might still have lady-like pretensions, I did laugh like a whore.

'It would indeed be too late for that. But as you are very well aware, Sir George's mistake was quite other.'

'Sir George is to me little more than a name, a man I once glimpsed in a whorehouse in Colchester. I know nothing of the mistakes he may have made in his life, although if I were he my marriage would be the mistake I most regretted. But do elucidate.'

She raised her riding whip, then thought better of it and simply glared at me. 'It turned out that his sister was not his sister at all but the sister of ... well, if Master Martin's claims turn out to be correct, *your* sister.'

I am not often rendered utterly speechless, but that did it. I gaped at her, remembered it had been her who coined the name

Fish-lips for me, closed my mouth with a snap and sucked in my lips.

She watched this performance with a smirk, then said, 'Either way, it is with Lady Marian that I am negotiating, not your Master Martin. Once Lady Marian has given the go-ahead and Sir Farquhar and my lawyers in London have ironed out the terms of your sale, that same whorehouse in Colchester will become your permanent residence. You remember the gag with the spike in it? Of course you do. A "brank", Sir Farquhar calls it – but you know that – and claims it was invented in Scotland. I said it was a great shame your father never used one on you. He agreed. Anyway, you'll be locked in one the moment you arrive and will have weeks, months, to repent of your insolence to me.'

The smirk transformed into a gloating smile as she saw that her words had hit home. Deep down, I wasn't at all sure Blanche would even bother to try to win a war of words with Lady Helen and her lawyers. It would be a very convenient way of disappearing me once this hunt for the wraith was over. And Ferchard? Was Ferchard so disappointed in me he would consider selling me to this woman and to a lifetime as a whore? Silly question. He was obviously already considering it. And if he could consider it ...

'Now stand up!' she suddenly barked.

I leapt up so fast I was on my feet before I heard the words. It was my body that obeyed her, not my mind! And then she lashed out with the whip, catching me all unprepared. Just one blow, but across my face. I raised my hand to my cheek, my left cheek, and up to my ear and down to my mouth. My finger tips came away covered in blood. It was from the side of my mouth.

I stared at her.

I was taller than she was, and I was a fighter. She knew she wouldn't stand a chance against me. Knew I wouldn't kill her, only knock her down, but might well kill her two men. I had threatened to, and my pride, what little was left of it, was at stake here. But then I would suffer a terrible death at the hands of the Law. I thought of Master Crackbone. Then of Marjory: I was a whore, not a lady, she and I had agreed. Whores didn't behave as I'd been behaving the last few minutes. Or if they did, they suffered for it,

and never behaved like that again. Lucy was right. Lady Helen was right.

I lowered my eyes. And kept them down.

Submitted.

I heard her move, thought she was going to use the whip on me again, but nothing happened. I didn't dare look up.

Then I heard the horses.

When I looked up, they were gone.

And Lucy was laughing at me.

Mariana la Loca.

Audrey tended the weal on my face and assured me it wouldn't leave much of a scar. I was horrified, thinking of the whip marks across my breasts, but she said that was because they hadn't been treated by her. They hadn't been treated at all, in fact, or not till much later. Then I remembered the terrible burn the real Marian atte-Marsh had suffered, which Audrey had somehow managed to make vanish, and I felt better.

In the evening, I went and sat on the wet pebbles on a little bit of beach I had discovered. It was separated by dykes – or were they dunes? – from the slimy gullies I hated and always tried to avoid.

I rested my chin on my knees and gazed out to sea.

I was aware of the breaking waves, but my mind was still on my clash with Lady Helen and the question that overrode all others: Could I trust Blanche?

Suddenly I felt eyes on me. And there in the water, no more than five or six yards from me, was a face. Hair dark, like mine, I thought, though it was wet and difficult to tell in the dusk. Slender arms. Skin golden, like mine and Marian's.

A mermaid? A ghost? A fetch – the soul of someone – Marian? – sleeping somewhere and travelling in her dreams? Or was the astral traveller wide awake and well aware that she was here in spirit and gazing at me?

She raised an arm out of the water, beckoned, and waited.

Foolishly, I looked round. Somebody behind me? No, I was quite alone. The ghost was beckoning me.

I stood up and walked into the sea.

I swam to within a yard of her, then stopped and trod water.

We gazed into each other's eyes.

Her eyes were black. Not Marian then, if Marian's were like mine. Perhaps Moorish, like part of my family. But I was used, now, to speaking English, so I started with 'Who are you?', ready to switch to Spanish, then Arabic, if she didn't understand. Nothing. So '*Quién eres?*' But she wasn't listening, she was turning away, gesturing for me to follow her.

She swam lightly, almost as if she wasn't swimming at all but simply making the motions, and I followed her further and further out through the darkness.

I was beginning to wonder whether she was taking me to France – or whether perhaps she was no ghost or fetch but a demon leading me to my death – when suddenly she stopped. So suddenly that I bumped into her – or should have done, only there was nothing there. She was insubstantial, an image merely. Which, of course, was exactly how it should be, I admonished myself, trying to calm my panicking heart. A ghost had no physical substance, and neither did a fetch such as Niniane and I had been that night in Paris.

She pointed down.

We were going to dive.

No point in asking what to or what for.

She went down first, her legs high in the air for a second, then she was gone.

No mermaid.

Once again, I followed her.

I had expected the sea to be really deep so far out, but it wasn't. Resting on what seemed to be an enormous underwater sand-dune was the remains of a ship, *una coca*, I had seen them in Spain – a cog, I learnt later, in English. How long it had been there or where it was from, I had no idea. My guide turned to check that I was following (Did she have to? Was she actually using those beautiful eyes?) then swam through an open doorway and down into the hold. Offering up a silent prayer that I wouldn't get trapped inside and drown, I followed her.

In the centre of the hold was the base of the mast, and chained to the mast was a skeleton.

She pointed at the skeleton, then at herself. I understood. It was her. She had died there, chained to the mast and unable to escape.

A ghost, then.

But why was she showing *me*? Because I was the first person she *could* show? No, the real Marian atte-Marsh was just as at home in the sea as I was. Perhaps she *had* shown her?

The poor ghost was pointing again, this time at the skeleton's foot. And there on one ankle was a gold anklet, half buried in the sand and sludge that covered the floor. I swam down and peered at it. It seemed to be solid gold, and in the style of the Moors. And she wanted me to take it.

No! I couldn't.

You must! She was insisting.

I could see no way of opening it. I took hold of it to turn it, find a clasp, but as soon as I touched it it fell open in my hand.

Put it on! She pointed to my ankle. *Put it on!*

I raised my knee and slipped it onto my ankle. But how to close it? I didn't have to. It closed itself.

And now? I looked back at the ever-more-mysterious ghost. But she had vanished.

I went up to the deck. There was no sign of her.

Had I inadvertently freed her? *Exorcised* her? Had she been unable to leave this earthly sphere until the anklet had been passed on?

I kicked off and rose to the surface. Time to go home and tell Audrey the news. *Home?* I laughed to myself, and felt the weight of the gold on my ankle as I set out on the long swim back to the shore.

In the morning, alone in the bothie, I examined the anklet. It was solid gold and though made perhaps in Granada or Fes, was more like an arm-band than anything I had ever worn on my ankle. Once again, as soon as I touched the clasp, the anklet opened and came off. I wanted to see if there was any kind of inscription. Sure enough, hidden inside was the name Miriam, engraved in Hebrew characters – or was it the Aramaic Maryam? Maryam, the name I'd been known by throughout my childhood, and later the name I used when I was passing as a Moorish concubine in Granada. And my name when, according to Blanche, I worked at the other brothel in Avignon! Here, though, it was the name of that poor dead girl. Or,

maybe, the name of the girl, the woman, the anklet had originally been crafted for.

Still, it was a coincidence, and I found it comforting to believe that it had been meant to come to me.

I slipped it back on and went outside.

I had no opportunity to do more than show it to Audrey, tell her how I came by it and assure her the ghost had been laid. She was pleased; it meant that her Marian might still be alive, but she had things to do. Father Peter, too, whom I would have liked to consult regarding the inscription and the possible provenance of the anklet, was busy and did not put in an appearance. Neither did Lucy, which really worried me. If she was still missing the following day, what would I do? How could I possibly manage?

I intended to wait for Merlin on the beach beneath the Clackton cliffs where I had last seen him. Audrey had already offered to bring the chains and conceal them somewhere. They are surprisingly light, chains of adamant, almost weightless. An old woman could carry them easily. 'And I'll bring them down to you when the time comes — but only after the wraith is in the water, and helpless. If we leave them out in the open on the beach ready to use he'll know immediately what you have in mind. Which, of course, he will anyway if he can read your mind. All part of the stupidity of the original plan.'

I could only agree. And yet, while I didn't entirely trust Blanche where my personal future was concerned, I shared John of Gaunt's faith in her ability to rid the kingdom of this scourge. She would obviously have another, different, plan in hand, something that involved Lucy, along with the witch stationed in Margate and other people or forces of whom I was kept in ignorance. Because keeping me in ignorance was, I now understood, essential if Blanche's mission was to succeed. *Blanche's* mission, not *my* mission. There was nothing *I* could do.

When I got to the meeting-place on the Chich Road, Lucy was already there. And in Lionel's arms.

It was too late to take cover and eavesdrop, so I coughed discretely.

They completely ignored me.

After a moment, Lucy said: 'Oh, Lionel, I forgot to ask! Did you manage to issue a reprieve for Jack in time?'

What was this?

'Yes, my dear. Officially, he once saved the life of the old King's son by Alice Perrers. That debt has now been paid.'

'And unofficially?' I asked, attempting to join in the conversation.

'I don't believe that is any of your business.'

I locked eyes with him.

But he persisted. 'You don't know the man. You have no idea what we are talking about.'

'When I first met you, *Sir* Lionel, I thought you very imposing, very much the gentleman. Now I'm coming to realise that you are just Blanche's messenger-boy and really a rather pompous, silly man.'

Lucy looked shocked, and Lionel furious. He opened his mouth to protest, but I went on.

'The Wheel of Fortune has been turning faster for Captain Jack Wade – as it has for myself and for Lady Lucia here – than it ever does for people like you. Due to be hanged on the gallows on the Ipswich Road this morning, he appealed to Lady Helen to intercede for him. Predictably, she declined. It seems Lady Lucia showed more compassion. I'm impressed. But then that's what I'd expect, knowing these two ladies as I do. Now will you please remember that while I may be posing as the local whore I'm not the village idiot, and answer my question.'

Lucy snorted.

I glared at her.

She laughed, and said, 'I like that – "*posing as the local whore*". But seriously, Lionel, I also wish to know what happened "*unofficially*", so do tell.'

'He is now committed to keeping me informed of all developments here in north-east Essex regarding the expected peasants' uprising.'

That made sense.

'And a job?' said Lucy. 'A proper job? He'll need a job or he'll get into trouble again.'

'A job?'

'May I make a suggestion? Before he was declared outlaw, he worked at the Blue Maid as Mistress Marwick's right arm. The bully-boy, you know. He was good at that.'

'You think she'd take him back?'

'Probably. She must have appreciated the way he kept the girls in line. But why not offer him to Lady Helen? Sancha needs someone like that at the Shag. Dan the Man is a wanker.'

'Dan's all right,' I put in.

'You would say that. Lady Helen is quite set on Marian working at the Shag again. She told her in front of me yesterday. Tell him, Marian.'

'But –'

'Tell him!'

'All *right*! I –'

'All right, *my lady*.'

I glared at her.

'Didn't Blanche order you to address me as Lady Lucia?'

'Yes ... Yes, my lady.' It wasn't important, she was just showing off in front of Lionel, trying to impress him. 'Well, all I know is that Lady Helen has been discussing me with – with –'

'With your master in London,' put in Lionel. 'Sir What's-his-name.'

Lucy laughed.

'Sir Farquhar. Yes.' I said. 'She wants to buy me outright. Or – or failing that, to hire me on a long-term lease.'

'Right.'

'Yes, but ...'

'But what?' demanded Lucy. 'Come on, out with it.'

'But ... It's just that ... I don't know if Lady Helen knows this, but there's no hurry to decide, because –'

'No hurry?' protested Lucy. 'You have to be returned there the day after tomorrow – doesn't she, Lionel?'

'Yes. Unless I receive specific instructions to the contrary, then the moment this mission is over I'm to return her to Sancha. Lady Blanche was quite clear about that. She is very much against the idea of whores running loose around the countryside.'

I couldn't believe it. Well, I could, but ...

'So what was all that about Lady Helen not knowing and there being no hurry to decide?' Lucy demanded.

'When Master Martin left me with Master Henry, they signed a one-year contract. The thing is, Master Martin signed it in Sir Farquhar's name, and the last time I spoke to him, Sir Farquhar told me he had never reneged on a contract on his life and wasn't about to start now. I will have to complete that year ...'

'All right! Now I understand!' She was delighted. 'So you have to go back to the Shag for another – what, eight months? – anyway, so there really is no hurry.'

'And I'll tell Crop-eared Jack that where Marian is concerned he is *never* to spare the rod.'

'Oh, now, that's not fair, Lionel!' laughed Lucy. 'Though after your insolence to Sir Lionel a few moments ago, it's no more than you deserve. And listen, Lionel, I've got another idea. Why don't you tell Jack it was Lady Helen who wangled his reprieve?'

'That is was her who talked me into it? She'd love that. But are you sure you don't mind?'

'I don't want him slobbering around after me, but I love the thought of him licking the ground she walks on for the rest of his life. And it's just what she'll need at the Shag, isn't it, Marian? Someone always there who is totally devoted to *her*.' Lucy was delighted with the way it was all working out, and somehow expected me to be, too. 'Now all we have to do is finish off this wraith, then you can get back to work and stop *posing* as someone you're not, and I – we didn't tell you, did we! Sir Lionel's taking me away from here! I'm going to live in London!'

'That's hardly Marian's business, darling.'

'I want her to know. She'll be so happy for me.'

'You'll be wanting to invite her to visit you next!'

'Oh, don't be stuffy. A lady might have a whore as a friend – sort of – but she would never invite one into her home or to meet her real friends. Marian, Sir Lionel is a lonely widower, and I – he says I am the answer to his prayers! Isn't that wonderful? Tell me how happy you are for me!'

I went forward, took her in my arms and kissed her. 'I am. I'm delighted for you. You deserve some happiness in your life now. And I apologise for what I said about Sir Lionel. I didn't mean it, of

course I didn't. He's a wonderful man. I was just angry, and – well, you know me.'

Now she held me at arm's length. 'Yes, I do. Now run along and start getting everything organised for tomorrow. I'll meet you on Clackton beach tomorrow at sunset.'

I didn't like it. I didn't like it at all, but what could I do? I turned to Sir Lionel. 'I apologise for my rudeness. Please forgive me.'

'I accept your apology. But forgive you? No. You have to be taught to control that tongue of yours. Now go away. This is the last time we shall meet here. The last time we shall ever meet anywhere, I hope and pray.'

'Right. Yes. Thank you. Goodbye, then.' He turned away from me. 'Bye, Lucy.'

She glared.

What?

'Sorry. Lady Lucia.'

'Oh, just go.'

I went. Running suddenly. And crying. *Me!* Bursting into tears! At least they didn't see *that*.

'Marian! Marian!!'

It was Lucy, calling me.

I stopped. I couldn't go back, not with my face all wet with tears. I'd pretend I didn't hear –

'Marian! *I called* you!' She appeared between the trees.

'I'm sorry. I –'

'Come back. We want to ask you something.'

She turned back, and I followed her, lifting my skirt to dry my face. Then, as I let my skirt drop –

'No, keep your skirt up!' ordered Lionel.

What was this?

'I saw you start running and crying,' smirked Lucy. 'And in order to run you lifted your skirt. Then I saw *that*.'

She was pointing at my ankle. The gold anklet.

'I said keep your skirt up!' snapped Lionel.

'I – I am. I –'

'What we want to know,' said Lucy, 'is where you got it. You certainly didn't have it at the Shag – or here, until today. *I* know

that. And Sir Lionel says if you stole it, he'll have to inform a magistrate – Sir George, that would be – and –'

'But I didn't steal it!' I sobbed. 'Of course I didn't steal it! I'm not a thief!'

'Then where did you get it?'

'It looks like solid gold,' said Lionel. 'Take it off and give it to me.'

'No!'

'What did you say?'

'Marian, you're in enough trouble already. Don't make it worse for yourself.'

'She's already made it worse for herself, darling. When I banned the Great Hunt, Sir George asked if it would be all right to authorise the local hangman to shave her head and stand her in the pillory for a day before I returned her to her brothel. I said I couldn't see any reason why not – as long as I don't have to be there. I've seen enough hairless whores hopping up and down and cursing and wailing to last me ten lifetimes.'

'The hangman must still be Ned Smith, Balthild's husband. You know him, don't you, Marian?'

'Yes, but I didn't – I didn't know ...' I couldn't stop sobbing!

'You didn't know he was the local hangman? No, well, there was never much call for his services. One hanging a year, perhaps. A few brandings, a few ear-croppings, a whore's head to shave, a couple of hands or fore-arms to lop off, the occasional whipping, and two or three people in the pillory on market days. He shaved Liza's head for her a couple of times, I remember. Once when I was little, I remember her bald head, all scraped and bloody, in the pillory, and another time when I was older, about fifteen, the same thing. They were throwing rotten fruit and entrails and other muck at her. I didn't join in, but I remember teasing Marian, saying it would be her turn soon to lose all that lovely hair and be made a mock of. And not just that. Ned whipped Liza, too, once – perhaps more than once, I don't know, I never saw it, but I saw her back. He's good with a whip.'

'Who – who ordered that? Your father?'

'Of course, yes. He had a soft spot for Liza, but she used to ask for it. Soliciting in Great Clackton outside the church. How could

he say no when the priest complained, and the women? It's Sir George now, though, and he'd be more than happy to order a whipping for you.'

And Master Ned would be more than happy to administer it. I could see that now – me wandering around naked, and claiming to be a lady.

I gave a compulsive sob.

Balthild had warned me! She'd said I mustn't come into the house, mustn't disturb Master Ned, she'd said he had an ear-cropping next morning, but I hadn't thought, hadn't understood, had shown no fear, no respect. Oh, I was such a fool!

Of course Marian had been terrified of him!

'Now why don't you take that thing off like a good girl and give it to Sir Lionel,' Lucy went on. 'Every minute you keep him waiting only makes it worse for you. And come up with a plausible story as to how it came to be on your ankle, then I'll try to make sure you only have your head shaved and a few hours in the stocks. No whipping. All right?'

She was being kind again. No whipping sounded good to me. And all common whores had their heads shaved sooner or later. Look at Long Will's wife, poor Kitty. And Petronella. And Sancha! Yes, even Sancha.

I knelt down and took it off, and handed it to him.

He examined it greedily. 'It's solid gold,' he murmured. He was going to keep it. Let Lucy wear it for a day, perhaps, but after that she'd never see it again. It would become a family heirloom.

'How did you come by this?'

'I – I found it,' I sobbed. And the tears started flowing again. What was the matter with me?

'Oh, yes. There are bands of worked gold lying all over the place on the Essex Marshes. Who did you steal it from?'

'Lionel, no one around here has anything like that for her to steal.' Lucy was coming to my rescue again. 'No one. Not even my family. Tell him where you really got it, Marian. And the truth this time. I'm trying to help you.'

'It was under the sea. A long way out, there's a – a sandbank, and a wrecked ship on it, down deep, well not very deep because of the

sandbank, but no one ever sees it. In the hold was the skeleton of a woman. This was on her ankle.'

'So you helped yourself.'

I nodded. He seemed to believe me. He wouldn't believe the story of the ghost. No one would.

'I don't believe a word of it. But even if it were true, what makes you think that a common whore like you, a creature with no rights at all under the Law, can just *keep* something like this?'

I was still on one knee, and looking up at him. I tried to hold his eyes, but couldn't. I looked down, and my tears fell on my bare thigh. I don't think I had ever cried so much in my whole life.

'This is called Treasure Trove. Failure to hand in buried or found treasure is a capital crime.'

A *capital* crime?!

'H-hand in?'

'To the authorities. In the case of a creature like you, it would be to your bawd or whoremistress or pimp or whoever was in charge of you. They would hand it over to a public official, a bailiff or magistrate, or the representative of a great lord, such as myself, and he or she would decide what to do with it.'

'Then I – I should give it to Sancha –'

'At the moment, you are not working at the brothel, and Sancha is not responsible for you. I am. The matter is now out of your hands.'

'And Lionel, please, can we forget that she tried to keep it for herself? She didn't know.'

He nodded.

'So you can stop crying and go away and leave us in peace before Sir Lionel changes his mind.'

I jumped up. 'Yes, of course, thank you, my lady.' I didn't dare meet Sir Lionel's gaze again, I just turned and ran down to the sea with Lucy's laughter echoing after me.

* * * * *

I had told Audrey the story and was about to set out for Little Clackton to replace Mathilda's things when we heard a horse outside.

It was Martin.

What did he want? Wasn't I in enough trouble already?

He dismounted as only a tall, strong, fit, young man can dismount and, uninvited, sat on the bench in the beautiful summer-evening light, spreading his legs as though he owned the place. And us. Or at least me.

'Sit down, Marian.' He meant on the grass at his feet.

I did so.

Audrey stood her ground immediately behind me.

We waited for him to speak first.

He studied me in a manner I might have called insolent were I still Lady Marian MacElpin.

Finally, he said: 'A little bird told me that you are off to Engaynes tonight to return some stolen property before anyone notices you have stolen it.'

Mathilda's clothes and mirror. Right. Good thing Lucy didn't mention *them* to Sir Lionel. Or had she?

I nodded. Then said, 'I cannot imagine why this little bird should choose to tell *you*.'

'I imagine it chose to tell me because when you get yourself into real trouble it falls to me to sort the situation out. As I did in Paris.'

I wanted to protest that he had done nothing in Paris, but I knew now that he had. Instead, I said, 'I'm not in such big trouble this time as I was then.'

'You think you're not because Lucy Longlegs told you you're not.' He smirked.

'You mustn't call her that. Sir Lionel's going to take her to London and –'

'You believe that, you'll believe anything.'

'He's got that right,' said Audrey.

I looked round, shocked. Saw she was serious. Thought back over the last few days and what I knew of Sir Lionel ...

Was she *so* naïve? Was *I*?

'It's not naivety,' said Audrey. 'It's hurt and shame and ambition. She wants so desperately to be accepted in such circles, be Lady Lucia, that she'll do anything, believe anything.'

Martin grinned. 'Lucy's the wildest person I ever met, ever heard of. They think those ten years locked away in that whorehouse have

tamed him, they're very mistaken. I wouldn't like to be poor Lionel when he eventually says "Surely you never seriously believed I'd take a shagged-out strumpet like you to London with me?" He won't die a nice death.'

He put his hand to his crotch, moved his cock into a more comfortable position. Was he getting an erection? Getting excited at the thought of Lionel's gruesome demise? Or did he actually fancy me? He always treated me like scum – pretentious scum, but scum nevertheless. Like when he'd taken Lucy upstairs that day at the Shag and totally ignored me. And I'd been jealous. I realised that now, too.

He was watching me watch his hand. I jerked my eyes away, and blushed.

'What's this? A whore who blushes?'

'What can you possibly do to help me this time? Even if you should want to. And I can't imagine why you would want to.'

'No. After all, you haven't exactly been sweet and friendly to me since I brought you down here to the sea *at your request*.'

'You're right. I'm sorry. But what *can* you do to help?'

He pulled out a folded document. 'You still belong to me.'

'Sir Lionel said I don't.'

'This says you do.'

'You're not supposed to have that.'

'No one has ever demanded it or informed me officially that it is no longer valid.'

'The original in Paris has gone – disappeared.'

'Has *been* disappeared, you mean. But no, in fact it hasn't. I asked a friend of mine to check, and it was still there last week. Like it or not, Marian atte-Marsh is still the property of Master Martin Wickman of Chich. And you *should* like it. With the only people responsible for you being the elderly and distant Sir Farquhar and the elusive Lady Marian MacElpin, you really need a master who is *here, now*, beside you, and willing to speak for you.'

He was right. Again. I did.

But then Audrey spoke up: 'This is not Marian atte-Marsh. I knew *our* Marian much better than you did, and I know *this* Marian much better than you do, and I can tell you that they are not one and the same. This one, Mariana de la Mar, is –'

'A Spanish whore, yes, I know – who moved to Paris and – '

'*What?*' I couldn't believe it! 'You knew all along I wasn't the Marian you sold to a ship's captain – the Marian who – *Audrey's* Marian?'

'I did think at first you were our Marian. But when this whole business of saving Lady Marian MacElpin from that Dominican witch-hunt came up, I soon realised that the things you were accused of thinking and doing – many of which you were in fact saying and doing! – were things that would never cross the mind of our rather simple Marian. But I had to pretend in order to save you. That was all right. Everyone wanted me to. I also had to pretend there was a Lady Marian who was *not* you, who coincidentally looked rather like you. I said she lived in Southwark, but visited Paris from time to time. Once that was all done and you now belonged to me, legally, I began to follow you around. I discovered the real you was not Lady Marian at all, but the Spanish whore Mariana de la Mar, who had worked at brothels in Spain and Avignon – two different ones in Avignon – before coming to Paris, where it seemed she was working part-time in *three* different brothels.'

'*Three?*'

'Mère Veronique's La Adriatica, Mère Mireille's La Fille d'Or, and Mère Blanchefleur's Aux Belles Poules.'

'I never worked at the Belles Poules! I've never even met Mère Blanchefleur!'

'No? Well, at least you've finally admitted to working at the other two.'

'I haven't! I simply said – '

'You have. Anyway, that was *you*; Lady Marian was just someone you posed as, pretended to be. Père Pierre – you remember him? – decided finally there was no such person as Lady Marian, she was just a name you used sometimes, quite innocently. Canon Herault, on the other hand, believed there was such a person, that she'd been in Paris recently, that you knew her and traded on your similarity to pass as her in situations where, as yourself, you would not have been welcome. In fact you'd have been kicked out into the gutter for the whore you are. Later, after you'd left Paris, I heard the Dame de Montrouge had made enquiries and had learnt

that you're a penniless relative of Lady Marian's and a life-long embarrassment to her, but so far she's been too soft-hearted to cast you off entirely. You know who told *me*? Her gorgeous daughter. You remember Natalie? We had a chat and it turns out she knows you *very* well, so I told her the situation and she told me to keep up the charade that you're a half-witted whore from some God-forsaken Essex village until everyone believed it – even you! Last time I was in Paris, I told her you were working as this slut-of-the-marshes in a pokey whorehouse in a small country town, servicing queues of eager peasants, and she loved it. Wait till I tell her about your head being shaved!

She would love that. 'Did she send any message?'

'For you? No, of course not. But she did ask me to tell Lady Marian there was a place for you at La Fille d'Or, if she should ever consider sending you back to Paris. You'd be kept very busy there and you'd have no opportunity to prance around the city pretending to be her.'

'Did you tell *her*? Lady Marian?' I asked, knowing of course what the answer would be.

'No, she's in Scotland, but I talked about it with Sir Ferchard one night when we were at the dog-fights. He found the idea very appealing – the further away the better!'

Why does everybody love me so much?

'He doesn't like Mère Mireille but he does have a soft spot for Natalie,' he laughed. 'I think, though, that if Lady Marian does decide to send you back to Paris he'll recommend her to indenture you to Mère Blanchefleur. He admires her.'

'I don't believe it.'

'Yes, you do. You know they all want to be rid of you.'

I did believe it, yes. 'Where would *you* prefer to see me indentured, *master*?'

'Oh, Colchester, the Shag, of course. And you? Not that you'll be consulted.'

'The Shag?' I thought about it. 'I liked it at the Shag, but Lady Helen and Crop-eared Jack will make life unbearable there now, especially for me. La Fille d'Or is nice, too, but Mère Seraphina wields the rod there, and she's a demon from hell.'

'You speak from experience,' he laughed. 'But you don't need to worry about Crop-eared Jack. They stretched his neck for him this morning out on the Ipswich Road.'

'No, they didn't. Lady Helen put in a good word for him, and she's giving him Dan's job.'

'Yes? Shame. I like Dan the Man. Jack's all mouth. Well, come on, let's go and get this job done. You want to sit on my lap or run behind, tied to the horse so you don't get lost?'

I sat on his lap, of course.

And of course, once I had replaced Mathilda's things and retrieved the old skirt and blouse I'd left in the chest, we sat on the bed together.

Again he insisted I had behaved very badly to him, considering all he had done for me, and again I apologised. He made me promise that from now on I would be sweet and nice to him, would always smile when I saw him and show the world how much I loved him. And in return he would always keep me safe from the whip.

I needed that.

We kissed.

But determined not to let him have it all his own way, I said: 'So why was it you ordered them to put that gag on me? You call that protecting me?'

Another long kiss while he thought about an answer.

Then I heard someone outside, but he said it was nothing, just the wind, and went on: 'I'm all for the frequent use of the rod on your bare arse by the likes of Mère Seraphina and Dan the Man, but the gag's the only way to shut you up. Ferchard agrees.'

About the frequent use of the rod, too? I didn't dare ask. I just said, 'Yes, all right, but the spiked gag? That's cruel!'

He laughed. 'You know, you're becoming a real whiner. It's not as if the spike actually went through your tongue.'

A whiner? Me? 'I am not!'

'Next time I let you go swimming I'll come and catch you, pull you up out of the water with a sharp hook through one of those lips. This bottom one.' He took hold of it between his finger and thumb, pulling me towards him. 'Then leave the hook in, permanently. That

should keep you quiet. *Cruel ...*' He snorted. 'Who do you think you are? Lady Marian? You're as crazy as "Lady Lucia".'

Still holding me by the lip he thrust me down onto my knees.

'And as wild as her in your own way, perhaps. Only you're a creature of the sea, a mermaid, while she's a creature of the forest. A wulcat. You can't tame a wulcat, did you know that?'

'You can't tame a mermaid, either.'

'There's tame, and then there's tame. I've been sucked off many a time over the years by Lucy, but she's never *wanted* to do it. You've been dying to get into my hose all day.'

He released my lip and I bent my head and felt for the draw-strings on his breeches. I'd spent nearly two years making it clear to Martin how much I despised him, and avoiding all physical contact with him. Now that had to stop. I needed him.

Martin was a good lover, and a couple of hours later the Harvest Moon was shining in through the window and I was thinking we should do this together more often, that I really didn't mind being *his* Marian at all, when again I heard sounds from outside the room, and half-a-dozen men burst in.

Martin's mates.

It had all been a set-up.

Laughing, he handed me over to them with the words 'Look on it as just another evening's work, darling. If you don't get whipped when they shave your head, you'll have been well paid.'

I spat at him and lay back for the first one, a skinny ginger I remembered as a drinker at the White Hart in Chich. He'd wanted me then. Now he had me.

As did all the others. Again and again.

When I woke up, it was light and I was alone.

Oh, God! If I was found here now! I had to get out and into the woods without being seen. I put on the other clothes, the skirt and blouse Balthild had given me, and hid the ones I'd been wearing, which were torn and filthy.

That bastard.

But what had it all been about? Why had he organised it? It didn't seem like Martin. The story he had told yesterday all sounded true – or at least plausible. It could well have been "gorgeous"

Natalie who suggested perpetuating the myth that I was Marian atte-Marsh. And it was very likely her mother who spread the rumour that Lady Marian was my rich kinswoman. Had she got that from Blanche?

I crept down the stairs and peered out.

This with all his mates, though, was strange. Martin was really quite a solitary man. Even the outings with Ferchard and English were no more than that. Ferchard and English were friends – real friends. Martin was no more than an occasional drinking companion who had something in common with them. Me.

He was actually quite obsessed with me, I suddenly realised. But that didn't explain last night.

I went through to the back of the house. Easier to get among the trees and under cover from there.

And who was "the little bird"? All this had been organised by someone else. But who? Only Lucy knew I'd been to Engaynes. And Lionel? Had he noticed the clothes I was wearing? Had she told him where I'd got them?

The grounds were deserted. All the farmwork, all the business of the manor, was managed from the other house. *Gracias à Dios*.

I went over the wall and into the wood – Martin's primrose wood, though there were no primroses now – and headed towards the distant sea.

Only in the sea did I ever feel really safe.

ALBAN ELUED

Standing by the sea as the sun set, I cast pebbles and shells into the water as my Scottish father had all those years ago in Spain. 'Alban Elued, the Autumn Equinox,' he would say, 'is the time to cast off all regrets and failures and all the unfinished business that you do not wish to carry with you into the coming year.'

But that had stopped by the time I was ten or eleven. Had he even been at home for Alban Elued the last three years? I didn't remember. Perhaps he'd been with his other daughter and her mother. I didn't know about them at the time, but even so, did the fact that I couldn't remember whether he'd been at home mean I hadn't cared? And if I hadn't cared, then perhaps he'd been quite right to spend his time with someone else.

I wiped away another tear. What was all this crying? I never used to cry! A voice beside me said, 'Here are the chains. I helped Audrey with them.'

Lucy. I didn't even bother to turn my head.

'She's up there at the foot of the cliff ... You're further along than we expected ... Why did you come by yourself? What if the wraith had shown up while you were alone and nothing was ready?'

I watched as she dropped the chains into the water, out of sight.

I didn't care, not any more. What did I have to look forward to when it was all over? Having my head scraped and being made a mockery of, then being returned to the Shag – and Lady Helen and Crop-eared John. And to the embarrassment of being seen, in that state, by Hugh. I would rather die.

Did she know what I was thinking? Everyone else seemed to.

'Still, you're right. He was never going to appear till after sunset.' Apparently not. Or if she did, she didn't care.

But then she snapped, 'You're not going to have your head shaved! Apparently Lady Helen wants you *beautiful*!'

I said nothing, not sure I believed her.

'Anyway, what were you getting so upset about? Getting her head shaved is nothing to a whore. I'm just surprised it hasn't happened to you before.'

'I don't believe *anyone* ever deserves *that* to happen to them.'

'You're ridiculous.'

We sat in silence for a while.

Finally, I plucked courage and asked what Lady Helen had meant about us being sisters.

More silence.

Then she laughed bitterly. 'No, they decided you're not my sister. But I'm your sister, if you see what I mean.'

I did, actually, but was tactful. Me, tactful? Must be the gag working. 'No, sorry. Can you explain?'

'They say I'm Marian's half-sister. That Liza was my mother. But you're not Marian, not really, everyone knows that now, you're just some Spanish whore Martin picked up on his travels. You're some kind of poor relation of this Lady Marian, and it's her who has to decide what to do with you. But like you said, there's no hurry. By the time your year at the Shag is up, she and Lady Helen will have met and talked and money will have changed hands. Who cares? Tomorrow you'll go back to the Shag. You're lucky. You could have been spending tomorrow in the pillory with your head all skinned and bloody.'

Lucky to be going back to the Shag. Yes. And after all, that's what Blanche had said would happen if she didn't manage to get here in time. But Lady Marian meeting Lady Helen? That would never happen – though I would love it to! Imagine the look on her face when she realised who Lady Marian MacElpin really was!

Dusk turned to darkness.

Here, with the cliffs behind us, there was not a sound apart from the breaking waves.

'I suppose – I suppose you don't know whether what they are saying about you is true.'

'Of course it's not true!'

'Ah. Right. Sorry.'

Another long silence. Then, 'It might – *might* – be half true. Papa ... Papa ... I don't know. There was ... there was ... '

'What do you mean, "half true"?' I prompted her.

'They say Liza was my mother and because she was a whore my father might have been anyone. But that's a lie! If Liza was my mother – if – then it was Papa who got me on her. Otherwise, why would he – why did he ... ?'

Another long silence. Then, 'We ought to get ready.' As though *she* was in charge.

'I am ready.'

'You're not. Stand up.'

I stood up.

She stood, too. She was holding two spears, and on her belt were the short sword and a hunting-knife.

Seeing her naked like that, I went to take off my skirt and blouse. I had no weapons, but at least I'd be able to slip out of his grip.

'No, keep them on.'

'What? What is this?'

'I'm just repeating what Blanche told me. Didn't she tell you?'

'That? No.'

She smirked. She knew Blanche hadn't told me that. Hadn't told me *anything*. Of course. Merlin couldn't read Lucy's mind.

'Now stand there. No, not so close to the water. When the wraith comes it will do so between you and the sea. It won't want you slipping out of its grasp and into the water again, like last time.'

'What it wants and what I want are two different things.'

She rolled her eyes. 'Think back over your conversations with Blanche and *try* to understand.'

Lucy speaking to me as if *I* ... But after a moment of reflection I went and stood where she told me to.

A wind was blowing up and the sea was growing rougher by the minute.

'No, not like that. You must face me, your back to the sea.'

My back to Merlin? No, thanks.

But I did as I was told. I really didn't care any more.

She stepped away a little, giving herself more room to throw the spear. Her eyes were fixed on me, and whatever was behind me.

She looked like some ancient goddess standing there with her spears and her belt, her long blond hair blowing in the wind.

But what was she going to do? I would be between her and him!

The sea was growing noisier. I could hear nothing. I wouldn't know he was there until I felt his hands on my neck, his fingers on my throat. Powerful hands. Ice-cold fingers.

I *would* know, because I could see her eyes and they would widen with shock.

My heart was racing ...

A big wave broke with a crash and the water came swirling around my feet.

'The tide's coming in,' she said, and backed away from me, motioning me to follow her. Four paces. Enough room again for Merlin.

What shape would he take? Not that it mattered to me. I wouldn't see him. Only she would see him, and she had never seen him in any form. If it started with the empty black cloak and burning eyes, she'd be paralysed with fear. Which wouldn't matter. No spear would affect that form anyway. And the wulboar brute with the great bristly beard? Would a spear pierce that hide? I doubted it. What if he appeared as the beautiful boy? Would she hesitate? Of course. Anyone would.

Time passed, and again we had to move up the beach away from the breaking waves.

It must have been midnight when I sensed him behind me. I swung round to face him. The hood was up and all I could see were his eyes. They didn't gleam as they had in my memory, like rubies in sunlight; now they were like blood by the light of a candle, blood behind glass; red, yes, but cold and dead. Not dead. *Undead*. What did they see?

It was not his eyes alone, though, that he was using. He snuffed the air, shorter suddenly, and heavier. 'There is a witch here, watching,' he growled. 'And a priest.'

He threw back his cloak – in the blink of an eye he had changed into the wulboar man.

'You did not know about the priest.'

No.

'And who is this? Another whore for me to sacrifice?'

But to my right now, something was happening. A warm hand held my hand. Who? I turned to see and the brute seized me by the hair, bent my head back and bared his teeth, huge yellow teeth with two great tusk-like canines. I was going to die.

'Niniane?' he growled, lifting his head.

Niniane! Suddenly I understood. There was no "Esmeralda". It had been Niniane all along who was coming to my aid, but they'd had to keep it from me.

Now his attention was all on her.

'Get out of the way!' screamed Lucy.

He was still holding me by the hair. Why couldn't they have shaved my head *before* – I twisted round to see, and it *was* her, my Niniane from Paris, but her attention was all on him and even as I looked she disappeared. She had entered him! He let go of my hair and I leapt aside as Lucy hurled a spear. It bounced off his chest.

Then she threw the knife, straight at his heart, or where his heart should have been, just as she had with the revenant in Colchester – and *he* disappeared! *They* disappeared – for Niniane was still with him, of that I was certain.

And then there was only Lucy panting, me panting.

We got our breath back.

Silence.

Only the waves breaking. What are our little lives – even Merlin's little lives – compared to the sea and the sky and – ?

'My knife,' she whispered.

It had gone. Gone with him. With them.

Then Niniane was there on the beach with us, holding Lucy's knife – holding it out to her. She tossed it to her. Lucy caught it, and fast as a lizard striking threw it back at Niniane's heart. It went straight through her and splashed into the sea.

'No! Lucy, that's not Merlin!'

'Of course it is!' preparing now to hurl her other spear.

'Of course it's not,' said Niniane. Her lovely voice, imitating Lucy's English but with a strong French accent – and inside our heads. 'You've lost your knife,' she went on in French. 'Do you think it was easy for me to bring it back? Don't lose your spear as well.'

'Niniane! Oh, Niniane! How much I've missed you!' I cried. 'And how much we need you here with us now!'

'I don't think you do. All I've done is return the knife – which you might fetch up out of the sea, Mariana, but quickly, before Merlin –'

'He's coming back?' gasped Lucy.

'Of course. He returned to his grave in Broceliande, the one wherein the other, earlier, Niniane entombed him. He does, at times like this. And there he pauses for a moment or a century.'

'A century? Then –'

'You were always overly optimistic, my sweet Mariana. And slow to obey! *Now where is that knife?*'

'Oh! Sorry!'

I turned and plunged into the sea, down to the spot below where I saw the knife sink. It took only a minute to find it, but then I heard Niniane's voice inside my head – *He's here! Be careful!* – so instead of rising up out of the sea with a whoosh, knife held up in triumph, I stayed underwater, swam slowly back to the beach and poked the top of my head out.

Merlin was there, his back to the sea and to me. This time he was the tall white-bearded brown-robed wizard that was no doubt his real self as he had been in life. Had he donned this persona for Niniane? He was gazing at her, moving towards her. She was not backing away. But Lucy was – and was once again readying herself to throw the spear.

Without even bothering to glance in her direction, he pointed at her. The spear dropped from her hand and she fell to the ground unconscious.

'*The chain, Mariana!*'

Oh! Yes! Silently I sank back down. Where was it? Ah.

'Leave the knife. Bring the chain – silently! – I am distracting him! – and when I say NOW! put the chain round his neck. At that instant I will enter him again – the chain will hold the doppelganger here – and I will attempt to run him into the sea. Do not let the chain come off him whatever happens!'

I rose up out of the water without a sound and onto the beach and crept towards them. Thank God it was soft sand, not pebbles!

'Niniane!' he breathed.

Foolishly, I wondered what his breath was like. Would it be sweet, like Brother Edmund's had been? But Brother Edmund – Tom Watt – had not been undead.

Lucy stirred.

He leant down, seized her by the hair with one long arm, and lifted her to his face.

No! I dropped the chain and grabbed at the knife.

'NOW!'

Oh, God!

I dropped the knife, grabbed the chain again and leapt at the struggling figures. I pushed the end of the chain between the writhing Lucy and Merlin's throat, then pulled it round and held it tight with both hands.

Lucy wrenched herself out of his grip and turned and plunged the sword into his belly, a knife into his throat.

He seemed paralysed, lost. His blood was flowing down over his belly and onto the sand.

Then they came, the undeparted dead.

Whimpering and gibbering, they feasted on his blood, and I saw that these were the girls, the women, he had killed. Their flesh was silver-white in the moonlight, their torn-out throats black, and the sheer weight of them was forcing him backwards into the water.

What would happen to them now? Surely ...?

Suddenly Father Peter was there, blessing them, sending them on their way. '*Requiesce in pace, Requiesce in pace, fila mea, Requiesce in pace, Requiesce in pace,*' on and on, while the undeparted dead drank the black ichor, took bodily form for a brief moment, then vanished as Father Peter touched and blessed each one.

Another big wave broke and water swirled up around Merlin's legs. He gave an eldritch howl that nearly made me drop the chain and dive into the sea, but Lucy shoved me from behind, then she and I together took over from the departing dead the task of pushing him inch by inch into the sea.

He changed again!

A great black dog lunged for my throat as it tried to get back onto the beach. I ducked down under it, into the water, then up in time to see Audrey throw Lucy another chain and the dog stand still

as a statue while they wound the chain around its body then gave the end of the chain to me. I heard Niniane in my head say 'I can't hold him any longer!' and she was gone and the dog was floundering wildly in the water but the chain was long and I was fast. I kept my distance from it as I towed it out and out and out ...

'Stop!' cried a boy's voice. 'Please stop!'

Oh, no.

Fortunately, I didn't have to make the decision. Lucy was right behind me, her hunting knife in her teeth. She grabbed the beautiful boy by his beautiful hair, and pulled his head back just as he – for the boy was Merlin – just as he had pulled mine back. Then she cut his throat so brutally, so viciously, it would have cut his head right off if he hadn't instantly resumed his wulboar-man form. And his powerful arms were free of the chain. Like the revenant in Colchester, he would tear Lucy apart if he managed to catch hold of her,.

I had no weapon, could do nothing. Except dive down into the depths, taking him with me.

Fortunately, the Harvest Moon was now shining at full strength and even quite far below the surface there was some light. I needed a rock, a wreck, anything I could fix the chain to, but there was nothing, just mud like the rippled mud of low tide, stretching out in all directions. At least he wasn't struggling. Was he dead?

I giggled. And choked. You shouldn't giggle underwater.

Ah! There was something.

A boulder with a chain already attached to it. Some boat had lost its "anchor".

Perfect.

I tied the end of the chain of adamant to the old corroded chain already there and inspected my prisoner. It was the wulboar-cum-woodsman, alive still but apparently helpless.

'Free me and get me to land and I will save you from the hangman,' his voice growled and bargained in my head.

And then what? What do I have to look forward to?

'I know of buried gold, untold riches ... It will all be yours. What use is it now to me?'

Of course I hesitated. Wouldn't you have? Perhaps you wouldn't even have hesitated. You would have jumped at the offer. But I

needed to go up to breathe, and that saved me, for up there, treading water, Lucy was waiting, and there was no way I would lower myself to accept it in front of her.

She swam down with me, and now, before our eyes, Merlin changed into a beautiful woman with grey eyes and silver-green hair. Lucy, who had been about to hack the wulboar-man's head off, stopped and stared, sword-arm hanging limp.

That "woman" was Merlin. Lucy had the sword. Why was she doing nothing?

Then I realised he was making her the same offer he had made me. There was no conversation to overhear, we were under water, it was all in their minds. I watched her drop her sword and rise to the surface with a whoosh of exultation.

Now Merlin's icy grey eyes focussed on me.

He was the silver-and-green-haired woman still, and as I watched her legs turned into a long, long, shimmering tail. *My dream! No! NO!!* (Yes, my coward soul cried! What have *you* got to look forward to?) *NO!!* I grabbed Lucy's sword and plunged it into the mermaid's belly where fish tail and white flesh met, and in a trice he was the wulboar-man again, groping with huge fists for the sword – and Lucy too was back and fighting me, grabbing at the sword! What was she doing? Did she think if I killed him, she wouldn't get her gold? This wasn't about her gold – or my future – it was about all the girls – the "sluts" – who would never now be killed! I left Merlin, who was helpless there, underwater and bound in chains of adamant, and went after her.

We grappled, and she wrenched the sword out of my grip – she was strong! – but in a straight fight with her I was better off without it. My father had never got round to teaching me sword-play (despite all the promises) but Ferchard had spent hours, weeks, months training me in unarmed combat before we reached Paris and things soured between us. He reckoned I could take on anyone – any two people – with little fear of being overcome. And down here, where movements were so slow, so heavy, I was at an enormous advantage. I had grown up in the sea.

In seconds I was behind her while she attempted to wield the sword in the water. I locked my left arm round her throat and with the fingers of my right hand rendered her unconscious.

But now she would drown!

I glanced at Merlin. He was once again the tall white-bearded wizard, but without the cloak, just mottled skin and poking bones.

His head was hanging loose and there was little of that black ichor left to sully the water. The poor dead girls had drunk it all. How nearly I had been one of them! And thank God Father Peter was there!

This was a living skeleton. Living?

The eyes were closed, but he was aware of me. Aware of what I had done, of the quandary I was in?

Oh, yes. And ahead of me. He knew it was no quandary. I had to take Lucy to the surface – and not just to the surface, but to the beach – immediately. And he had to stay there. Neither of us had any choice.

I kicked off from the sea bed with Lucy in my arms and swam towards the coast, saw the the outline of the cliffs and dragged her out of the water onto the beach exactly where we had left Audrey and Father Peter standing watching us.

There was no time to explain. 'She's all right,' I gasped. 'She will come round. Do nothing. Just dry her, keep her warm.'

Then back into the water.

But how to find him again? I gazed out over the vast black moonlit sea, the great waves that had helped me bring Lucy in were against me now ... then I felt him calling me. He needed me to finish the job I had started.

When I knew I was directly above him, I dived back down. His head was still hanging loose on that skinny neck, now so like a plucked chicken's, but his eyes were open and on me.

I picked up the sword, but felt I ought to say something first. Something significant. What though? Then I remembered my father's message to him. 'My dead father told me to tell you to forget this life, let it go. Another life, another chance, awaits you.'

I raised the sword.

'Wait. I've been thinking I should have killed you when I had the chance.'

'You never had the chance.'

'Oh yes, I did. Many a time you wandered the marshes during the last few days. I stood beside you and watched you pass, I stood

behind you while you sat and dreamt. But we had this rendez-vous on Alban Elued and that seemed sacred so I let it go. But now, with this message from your father – the first words addressed to me in a thousand years apart from pleas for mercy and screams of agony – I remember Merlin and realise that I am but a wraith, a shadow, a phantasm, not Merlin at all ... Tell your father Merlin did let it go and is no doubt even now leading some other life, even as your father is. Sever the head and destroy it. Let these poor bones rest at last in peace.'

I wanted to curse him for all the girls and women he had killed so senselessly but, finally, did not have the heart. I simply sliced through what was left of his neck and made sure the body was securely attached to the boulder.

Now I had to find another resting-place for the head.

Nothing.

I rose to the surface with it clasped to my breast, wished I could *chuck* it over the wall into the monastery, giggled again, took a few breaths and dived again. On and on – too far out – head back in with the waves again ... Ah, what was this? Not one great rock, but several large pebbles. I picked one up. It was heavy and thick and flat.

I remembered what he had told me: destroy the head. Could I?

I laid the head down on a bed of pebbles and bashed it with the big pebble.

Nothing. Well, perhaps a bruise.

No giggling underwater.

Again. And again.

As I said, it is difficult to hit something really forcefully underwater. But I kept trying, concentrating on the face now, which was surely softer, more fragile than the hard, round cranium. I pulled the eyes out with my fingers, and carried on bashing it. It began to crumble. Soon I had the brain out, and now the eels came, and the crabs.

I wanted to watch, but I had to go up to breathe. I grabbed a large piece of the cranium and took it up with me.

Would Lucy have woken up? Would she wait? Or had she already left for Little Clackton and Sir Lionel? They probably had a rendez-vous.

Again, I was tempted to swim away, swim miles to the north then go ashore where no one knew me, somewhere ... anywhere but Chich or Clackton beach. But I had promised Blanche and she had trusted me; now I must trust her ...

Now only Audrey was there. I gave her the piece of bone, a piece the size of my hand, and muttered 'Don't ever tell anyone what that is,' and let her lead me up to a dry and sheltered spot under the cliff.

There I slept.

* * * * *

'Wake up, child. They're here.'

Audrey was shaking me gently. It was morning.

'They're here,' she repeated. 'For you.'

I sprang up, and found myself towering over a short fat man with protuberant eyes. Two other men stood one each side of me.

It was fortunate Audrey had made me put my clothes back on before I slept.

'The old'un's a witch, Master Gilbert,' warned the one on my left, a tall skinny man with long straggly white hair and a white beard.

'Audrey? Yes, I know her. She won't do anything stupid that might get her hanged or worse, will you, Audrey.'

He was clearly in charge, this spherical Gilbert whose head reached no higher than my breasts. And equally clearly, not a man to be trifled with.

'No, and don't *you* do anything stupid that might get you hanged or worse,' Audrey murmured.

I was shocked at her response – then realised she was speaking to me, not him, that he hadn't even heard her. And she was right. What was having your head shaved to a whore? And a few hours in a pillory? Nothing. But Lucy had said it wasn't going to happen! Would she be there? And Sir Lionel? And Lady Helen and Sir George? Would Master Martin? Would Balthild, with little Linette. And of course, Master Ned would. Master Ned, who had cropped

someone's ears a couple of days ago and I hadn't even registered it when Balthild told me.

I would never be able to face any of them again.

All this raced through my head as Master Gilbert pulled out a warrant and began: 'Marian atte-Marsh, for gross insubordination to a royal official and to the lady of the manor, Lady Helen Hartley, and for –'

'This is not Marian atte-Marsh,' Audrey interrupted. 'Marian atte-Marsh was killed last night by the creature, the wraith, that's been murdering girls like her in these parts off and on for years now.'

'Girls like her. You mean girls with green eyes and bodies from hell that make men sin. Sluts like this one.'

'Yes, but not this one. This one is Mariana de la Mar, a Spanish whore who –'

'It actually says here Marian atte-Marsh, also known as Mariana de la Mar, so –'

'Who issued that warrant? Sir George? He has obviously been misinformed. They are not the same girl and this is not the one you want.'

'They may not be the same girl, but this is the one I want. Lady Helen, God bless her, foresaw some such nonsense as this and told me I would know the girl in question by the mark of a lash on her face, left there by Lady Helen's riding whip when the slut answered her back the day before yesterday. That mark is there for all to see. Do you deny it, Marian, Mariana, whatever your name is?'

'No, sir.'

'Lady Helen also bore witness that the slut in question has whip-marks across her breasts, older weals but still clearly visible. Tear that blouse off her.'

He meant the other one, who had a bushy black beard, but I pulled it off over my head and chucked it to Audrey before he could get a hand to it.

Master Gilbert stepped right up to me in what I suppose he considered a threatening manner, his bulging eyeballs inches from my nipples.

The urge to raise my knee to his chin and break his thick neck was almost irresistible.

A year ago, I wouldn't have hesitated. There would have been three dead men on the beach and me disappearing into the sunrise.

But something had happened during the last few months. Was I no longer Mariana la Loca, the Fool on the Tarot card, fulfilling the destiny the old gypsy had foretold for me?

I was still the Fool, or I wouldn't be here now listening to Master Gilbert.

'For gross insubordination, then, and for parading around naked, and for generally being a public nuisance, you are sentenced to ...'

He droned on, but I knew the rest, and the most embarrassing thing of all had just occurred to me. Ferchard would never allow me back into his house (*his* house?) with my head shaved, he would never allow me into his presence. It would be the end so far as he was concerned.

I felt the two men grab my arms, saw Audrey shake her head – *Don't fight, don't give them the excuse* – and I was being hauled away through the trees to the road. They tied my wrists together with the end of a long cord which White-beard then held as they rode to Great Clackton dragging me along, running and stumbling, behind them, running and tripping and falling, unable to lift my skirt, and in the end just lying there, dragged along the ground, as the three men arrived triumphantly in the square outside the church where the whipping-post and a three-man pillory and the scaffold and Master Ned stood ready and waiting.

And Sir George, who came galloping up on his horse from the other direction, closely followed by Sir Lionel, who was clearly anxious not to miss the opening moments of this morality play.

Everyone turned to look at them.

Me, I was still praying desperately for Blanche to arrive and save me!

They didn't dismount. Sir Lionel read out once again the charges against me while Sir George sat on his horse nodding approvingly – he probably couldn't read – then finished with the sentence – no whipping, thank, God! – and looked at Sir George.

'Haven't I been punished enough already, being dragged all the way here at the end of a rope?' I indicated my torn skirt and bleeding knees and feet, and my forearms and elbows where I had tried to protect my breasts.

His response was to lash out at me with his whip. My protest had come out more like a whiney sob, but this was too much, and he was slow. I caught it with my tied hands and jerked it out of his grasp.

There were titters and some murmurs of approval from the growing crowd.

'Give that to me, you hussy,' ordered Master Gilbert.

I let him take it, and watched – *insolently* – as Sir George snatched it out of his hand and turned and rode away.

But Lionel stayed to watch as Master Ned and Master Gilbert's men converged around me and the crowd, all goggle-eyed, inched closer.

SISTER MARÍA BIANCA

My hair had gone. My head felt cold and numb and raw.

Once they'd established that I was Liza the Whore's daughter and deserved all I got, and my head was raw, and I'd been locked in the pillory, most of the crowd dispersed. There hadn't been much in the way of pelting me with rubbish – it wasn't a market-day – but some young boys were still tormenting me when out of the one eye I could still see with, I noticed men in livery approaching. The Lancaster livery. And with them, showing no qualms about walking through the mud and filth, was Blanche. The Queen of France.

Where the fuck had she been three, four hours ago, before all this began?

She saw me – of course she saw me! How could she miss me? – but she didn't stop. She saw me watching her, rolled her eyes at me, and walked on into the inn with her four men.

Nice. They were just going to leave me here.

Sir Lionel was in there. Lucy there'd been no sign of. And thank God she hadn't been present when my hair was cut off and my head scraped, because I'd been screaming. The only people I knew who witnessed that were Balthild and Linette, along with Sir Lionel and Martin. Martin had enjoyed the whole thing, of course, but Balthild looked upset and Linette was crying. Why was Papa doing that to me, she wanted to know. Because she's been bad, going around with no clothes on, and speaking disrespectfully to important people. And is Papa going to whip her? Not today. Another day.

Another day. Nice.

Later, after I'd been locked in the pillory for a couple of hours, Sir Lionel returned. He had ridden away at some point. With him, on horseback, were Lady Helen and Sir George.

The peasants drew back and the three nobles drew up close to me, still on their horses.

It was Lady Helen who spoke. 'I specifically asked you not to shave her head!'

'I was about to tell Lionel that when the slut grabbed the lash and jerked it out of my hands. I couldn't *then* grant her mercy.'

I didn't believe it.

'Better,' said Lionel. 'Now everyone can see her for the common whore she is.'

'Send off a message to Sir Farquhar, Lionel. I may have wanted to save the creature's hair but Lady Marian will be delighted. It infuriates her the way this creature goes around claiming to be her.'

'At least there'll be no more of that.'

'It's such a shame I missed her. But Sir Farquhar assured me she'd be in Southwark for a few days this week or next. He'll get a chance to discuss my proposal with her then.'

Sir George had ridden round behind me, and I felt him flick the back of my skirt up with his riding-whip, to the delight of the peasants, who'd been prevented from removing the remnants of my skirt and baring my legs and buttocks by Master Gilbert's men, some of whom had been left on guard.

Now the bastard whistled. 'Nice haunches.' Laughter from the peasants and some lewd comments.

'So when will she be returned to the Shag and made available?' he asked.

'Lionel will be returning her tomorrow.'

'Excellent, excellent. I'll ride over next week some time and check she knows her job.'

Lady Helen snorted. 'She knows her job all right, George. She's whored in Spain and in France and in Southwark and here in Essex. I'll wager she can teach even you a thing or two.'

Everyone loved that.

I felt my skirt fly up again, then the whip came down across my bare buttocks. I squawked.

They all laughed, and Sir George said, 'Well, can't hang around here all day. We've witnessed justice being done. Now let's go in and have a drink.'

And in they strutted.

Finally, the boys, too, went. I was alone at last, *Gracias a Dios*, but still waiting for Blanche to *do* something. All right, she'd arrived too late to save me, but at least now she could have me released, get me the cleansing and healing lotions I needed. And a drink! I was desperately thirsty.

More time passed. Another hour? I had no idea.

Lady Helen came out with the two men. They mounted their horses and rode off the way they had come.

Not even a glance in my direction.

Without my hair, I was no longer a person, just a thing, like part of the pillory. When a person was in the process of being hanged or caged, that was interesting. But when you passed by a silent gibbet or cage on the roadside, did you notice whether it was bare and empty or bore a shrivelled, blackened thing that once had been a person?

At least I hadn't been shut in a cage high up in the air and left to die. Though I could easily have been hanged for stealing that gold anklet. I was lucky there, and had Lucy to thank. How many times now had she saved my life? And how would I ever be able to repay her?

And where was she? Had Sir Lionel sent her packing?

Ah! Here came Blanche!

But she walked straight past just like the others had. And her men followed her. Wait – one was coming my way!

He leant down, his head close to mine. 'She can do nothing for you here. If she interferes in any way, it will break your cover.'

Fuck my cover! I wanted to scream, but he went on: 'When they release you, which shouldn't be long now, go straight down to the sea. You will see a ship anchored off the coast. Swim out to it. She will be waiting for you.'

'But – !'

He had gone.

The sea. Yes. The sea would clean me. The sea would heal my wounds. The sea would protect me from all this.

A little later Blackbeard came and unlocked the pillory. No ceremony. Just a kick to send me on my way, and then another one when I wasn't fast enough.

I suddenly remembered poor Rosa Love's bruised buttocks. And her laughter, and her man Ralph's new boots.

Blackbeard had been wearing heavy boots, too. But he had set me running, and I ran all the way to the Clackton cliffs. From the top of the cliff, I peered out over the sea with my one good eye. Yes, there was the ship. I was in no hurry to get to it, though. I walked slowly down the steep path and across the pebbles and into the clean, cool, soothing and welcoming sea.

* * * * *

'Now what am I supposed to do with you?'

I didn't trust myself to speak. My whole face felt swollen. I shrugged my shoulders.

'Don't shrug your shoulders at me!'

I tried to glare back, but couldn't. I dropped my gaze to my feet. Noticed the toes of both feet were still bleeding, even after the swim. Those little bastards, when the guard had gone and left me alone with them. They'd hammered each toe with what felt like a big stone, got me screaming and dancing while they laughed. People had looked out from doorways but no one had cared. It was just the whore making a nuisance of herself again. Liza's daughter. Worse than Liza she was, by all accounts. Needed a good whipping. Why did they let her off so lightly?

When I'd been hauled up onto the ship, one of Blanche's women had given me some clothes to wear and a cup of wine and water to drink, then ushered me straight over to where Blanche was standing with her back to me, gazing at the distant coast.

'Now what am I supposed to do with you?' she had asked. And she was apparently expecting an answer.

I raised my eyes tentatively. She was still glaring at me. I dropped them again, fast. And waited. While she studied me in silence.

I had never been as good as everyone else seemed to be at reading minds. However, it was not difficult to guess her thoughts. I might as well have died at Merlin's hands for all the use I was to her now. What she was *supposed* to do I had no idea, but what she *would* do was obvious. She would hand me over to Lady Helen and encourage Ferchard to leave me at the Shag permanently. Where she and he and everyone else could forget all about me.

'Do what you were going to do with me anyway. Sir Lionel made it quite clear that you'd ordered him to return me to the Shag and leave me there the moment the mission was accomplished.'

'Would I do a thing like that?'

The look on my face must have been answer enough for the glare gave way to a grin and she said, 'Well, perhaps I would, yes, if your usefulness to me and the Net were at an end. It would be the kind thing to do. No girl working there would ever get into the sort of trouble your poor mother got into regularly – trouble you inherited as soon as you stepped into her shoes.'

'Liza atte-Marsh was not my mother, as you very well know. And I doubt if she ever wore shoes in her life.'

'But my order to Sir Lionel was only ever intended to be a temporary measure, to get you out of the way fast, until I was able to have you collected and organised for your next two missions.'

'That's not how Sir Lionel saw it. He said Lady Helen had come to some agreement with Ferchard. That your only interest in me was as live bait and that if by some mischance I survived the experience I would certainly have outlived my usefulness.'

'Sir Lionel knows nothing of the real you or your status as one of my agents. Listen, I came here today *in person* on this ship to collect you and take you to Normandy. Imagine my shock when I saw the state you'd got yourself into.'

'I'd got myself into?!'

'I needed you to be able to pass as a lady. That is no longer possible. There is only one thing you can pass as now. Well, what is it? You tell me.'

'A common whore,' I muttered through clenched teeth.

'That's what you *are*.'

'And proud of it!' If I couldn't go down fighting, I could at least go down with some measure of my pride left intact.

'I asked you what you could *pass as*.'

I had no idea.

'Well, we'll come back to that. First, I need you to tell me exactly what happened last night.'

I told her the story. When I came to the end (with no mention of Lucy's treachery – or the piece of Merlin's skull I'd kept for Audrey!), I said: 'I'd already realised you couldn't tell me the real plan, and that you were confiding in Lucy, not me. Niniane, though, was a surprise.'

'She had to be. *Esmeralda*. The name suits her, doesn't it. And she was directly across the sea from you, but in the other direction, not far from Bruges, in a village called Ostend ... Well, Mariana, for the part you played in despatching the wraith – Lucy and Niniane couldn't have done it without you – John – Lancaster – will be forever in your debt.'

John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, Regent of England and possibly the most powerful man in Europe. *In my debt*.

'If ever your situation is desperate, you can appeal to him. He doesn't know your name, only what you did. But I do mean desperate – in danger of death or worse. Don't waste his time over a simple whipping. Grin and bear it. But – oh, suppose they were going to slice off your lips. Serious mutilation that cannot be recovered from and would make life no longer worth living. Your nose, your lips, your cheeks – all those things they do to whores, especially in France. A hand. You get the idea.'

'Oh, yes,' I said, and dared to add sarcastically, 'I shouldn't bother him over – say – an ear?'

'No. Or a finger.' She grinned. 'Or your hair. Is this the first time you've had your head shaved? Yes? It certainly won't be the last. There's money in shearing whores' heads. The hair is made into wigs to sell to well-off ladies. And certain gentlemen.'

Blanche found all this funny! Well, she would. But then she grew serious again. 'Listen. If you do ever have to invoke his protection, simply say the one word "Merlin" to him. That will get his attention, but knowing John it won't be enough. "Merlin?" he might say. Then you will say, "I was there – the whore, the live bait." Have you got that? Of course you have. If you hadn't turned

to whoring when you were a student in Paris, you might have become the Heloise of our age.'

'I've told you and told you, I did *not* turn to whoring. And Heloise was a nun. Spare me that.'

'Which brings us back to what you can pass *as*.'

Oh, no! But of course. When nuns took their final vows, they had their heads shaved. Beneath their wimples, they had little or no hair. Not that anyone would ever check.

'So let's see. The best thing we can do with you now is return you to Old Audrey's hovel –'

'You mean I won't have to go back to the Shag?' I interrupted, astonished.

'Of course you will. Eventually. Lady Marian agrees with Sir Ferchard that you should – you must – complete your contract with the Shag. A gentleman like that cannot have his word and his honour dragged through the muck by a silly little whore like you. Well, can he?'

'Er – uh, no, my lady.' *Eventually?* I would die *eventually*. And so would she.

'Old Audrey will care for you. You will stay with her for a month, by which time you should have recovered. You will then make your way to London, arriving there on the Feast Day of Saint Simon and Saint Jude – patron saints of the hopeless.'

My birthday, I thought but didn't say.

'Your birthday.'

I waited for a sarcastic comment, but all she said was, 'How old will you be? Twenty-two?'

'Yes.'

'In London, on your birthday, you will go to Sir Farquhar's house –'

His house? 'He won't let me in like this!'

'No, he probably won't. You will then go to the Green Unicorn. Ma Lethbridge will give you your detailed instructions. You will tell her you plan to travel via Dovercourt or Harwich – anything but the truth – then you will proceed, *alone* and in secret, to Maldon, where an agent of mine will be awaiting you on the Feast Day of Saint Martin of Tours, patron saint of ... ?'

'Beggars.'

'Right. Well, at least you aren't a beggar any more. Master Whyntington has your second instalment of twenty-five gold nobles ready. In Maldon, at sunset, outside the Church of Saint Peter, you will be met by a nun. She will have a spare habit for you. She will also have booked passage to Normandy for the pair of you ... Now do you see what you can pass as?'

Oh, yes.

'While you're at Duclair, I want you also to look into the disappearance of Sire Thorbald's daughter Marie. Sire Thorbald is a neighbour and friend of mine. His son Humphrey was the favourite squire of Ranulf d'Evreux. Humphrey is dead. Marie, his sister, the one who has disappeared, is now the heir to the estate. Or rather her husband will be.'

'Marie is married?'

'No. But according to Margritta, the younger daughter, Marie was pregnant.'

'Do they know who the father was?'

'One Ivar de Montdidier. You may have to kill him. Apart from sanctioning that, I don't wish to influence your thinking with my thoughts and guesses. You will find out everything you can about these people, do what you have to do, then follow your nose to Marie.'

In the silence that followed, I glanced up at her. She was gazing out over the heaving water, but her mind was racing, I knew.

Another huge roller passed under the ship, lifting it high in the air and then dropping it again. When we'd regained our balance, she said, 'Actually, I'm rather pleased about what's happened to you. I may not see you again for two or three years and your bare head and that scar on your face make it so much simpler to define and clarify your situation, to clear up the confusion you have created in the minds of everyone from Geoffrey Chaucer and Will Langland to that very fetching Bailiff of yours in Colchester. After you return from France, I'd like you to make a point of socialising with Will Langland's whore, Kitty. She is your friend. Will himself is not and never has been. Neither is Geoffrey Chaucer.'

'But they are!'

'They are not! They are friends of Lady Marian's. From this moment on, you will be a prostitute body and soul. There must be

no more confusion. The real you, the basic you from now on, will be Mariana la Loca, Crazy Mariana, Mariana la Puta. You will live in Southwark, and quickly become well-known there – make a point of it – a familiar figure everyone fleers at. You will, of course, continue to work part-time for Ma Lethbridge at the Green Unicorn. Or full-time, should Lady Marian so decide.'

'But –'

'Lady Marian's wishes will be communicated to you via Sir Farquhar or Ma Lethbridge – she is in touch with both of them. I believe she also intends to get in touch with Lady Alice. You may, if you wish, run messages for such as Master Whytington's wife, but as yourself, not as a boy. I don't want you dressing as a boy except on those rare occasions when it is deemed necessary for a mission.'

'A prostitute body and soul? Doesn't the Church teach that prostitutes don't have souls?'

'The new Mariana will not have Lady Marian's erudition. She will certainly not play at being a theology student. And she will be trained to keep her mouth closed in the presence of her betters – i.e. everyone,' she smirked. And paused while I digested this.

'You may, however, be required to make an occasional appearance as Lady Marian, heavily veiled, in order to visit such notables as Joan of Kent or Lady Joan FitzAlan. These people can spot a whore or an imposter at a thousand metres.'

'Lady Joan is extremely short-sighted.'

She glared at me, and I hurriedly dropped my gaze again.

'This switch from whore to lady will only become necessary once or twice a year, if that, but when it does it will be extremely important and under no circumstances must they suspect you of being an imposter. Lady Joan, interestingly, doesn't call in question your claim to be Marian MacElpin the daughter of Sir Andrew MacElpin, she simply says you have no right to the title Lady. And by arguing with her – being impudent – you were behaving in character as Lady Marian. The poor, sore, bruised and battered whore Mariana, the butt of everyone's jokes and boots, would never have dared raise her eyes in such company, let alone open her mouth. Remember that. And remember, as Lady Marian, to purse your lips and make your mouth smaller, prettier.'

'You said you liked my mouth as it is.'

'I do. On a prostitute. Stop talking and do it. Show me you can.'

I pursed my lips into a rosebud.

'Hm, it needs working on. But when you are Mariana you'll make a habit of biting your lips and keeping them red and swollen. You do that anyway, don't you?'

I blushed. It was something I'd been taught to do in Cuenca.

'And put grease on them to keep them glossy, capsicum ointment if you can get hold of it – that makes the lips swell up and look bigger. You know it? Yes, of course you do. And wear rouge on your cheeks and nipples, and black around your eyes. I'll have Ma Lethbridge see that you do. And not only in the brothel but at all times, whether you're working or not.'

'In the street, well, all right. I'm used to that, as you know. But not at home. Ferchard would go mad!'

'Sir Ferchard already accepts you for what you are. Haven't you realised that yet? It will be when you clean all the muck off your face and purse your lips into a tiny rosebud and put on elegant clothes and pretend to be a lady that he will raise his eyebrows. However, he won't argue, once you inform him whom you are visiting.'

'He'll probably know already. His insists all letters and messages addressed to Lady Marian be delivered to him, unopened.'

'There you are, then. Did you know he spent a lot of time with Lady Helen when she visited London. He was very taken with her.'

'He would be. She's everything I'm not.'

'She is, isn't she. And apparently they became great friends.'

'I know. I told you, I think he's going to sell me to her, or at least agree to lease me to the Shag on a permanent basis.'

'And I've told you that's not going to happen, not for a couple of years.'

Well, that was something to look forward to.

I followed the circling seagulls with my eyes for a moment, then gazed down at the heaving, swirling, water. I would have loved to simply dive overboard and swim away from Blanche and Alice Perrers and Ferchard and – and everyone and everything. But I knew I wouldn't, that I would swim home to Audrey and ... *home*.

For Blanche was right. We had to sort out my identity, especially if she wasn't going to be around. And of everything she'd said, what had brought it home to me was being forbidden to mix on equal terms with Long Will and having to socialise with Kitty instead. That really summed it all up. I would do so, happily. Perhaps she would even introduce me to the pleasures and perils of soliciting outside St Paul's and in Gropecunt Lane. If Will Langland and Geoffrey Chaucer spread *that* around, it would finish me for ever.

'Your ability to pass as a Spanish nun,' she said, suddenly, 'will be put to the test during this mission. If you pull it off, then Sister María Bianca may become your main alternative to Mariana la Puta, which would be no bad thing. I must admit I'm beginning to seriously doubt whether you will ever again be able to play the part of a Scottish Lady.'

Ferchard would agree about that. But *Sister María Bianca*? I was to be named after *her*?

'You like it?'

'Yes,' I said. 'Actually, I do. But who is to know? Ferchard?'

'No one. No one at all, apart from me. The nun you meet in Maldon will know you only as Sister María Bianca. You will know her only as Sister Joséphine.'

'But she will know I'm not really a nun.'

'She is not really a nun, either. But who she really is, who you really are, must remain secret. I told you once that from the first time I met you, in Avignon, I knew you could pass as a lady and as a scholar, but that it was the pleased-with-herself little slut I also observed in Avignon who bothered me. Now we have successfully separated those two conflicting personalities into two separate persons. But what about Sister María Bianca? What traits and features of the original girl I met in Avignon should we attribute to the nun? Erudition? Especially on the subject of religion. All the languages you know? Perhaps some knowledge of the Occult Arts, but she keeps that to herself. Kindness, I think. Indeed, kindness and courage will be what all three have in common – and any other roles you play, like Jack Cutting. Marian atte-Marsh, for instance, is illiterate and totally uneducated, a peasant, unlike Mariana la

Put a. But she shares with Mariana that kindness and courage, along with fluency in Spanish and being at home in the sea.

'Are you beginning to get the idea?'

'You mean I may one day have to be Marian atte-Marsh again?'

'You are now, and will be for the next month.'

'Well, yes, but – '

'And it will always be your bolt-hole. Now I'm off to France. Without you. Will you jump overboard or shall I have a couple of men throw you over?'

With a grin, I tore off the clothes they'd given me, jumped onto the railing and dived down into the sea where I belonged.

EPILOGUE

"Home is where the heart is."

The rumour soon spread that I was back home on the marshes. Men and boys came looking for me, at first in ones and twos, then in ever-increasing numbers. Finally, Audrey had had enough. As of course had I, but that didn't seem to matter, even to her. Anyway, she wove a "cloud of unnoticeability" around me.

'Like the skirling ointment?' I asked her.

'No, nothing like that. When this spell takes – which will be at sunset this evening – no one will notice you, ever, unless you do something to draw attention to yourself. Like speaking. Or making an odd movement. Or touching someone.'

'Lucy never told me about that.'

'Lucy doesn't know about it. She didn't need it, she was just playing. She may need it in the days to come, though, if things go as I fear they may.'

I knew what she meant about Lucy. I also knew what she meant about this being different. The skirling ointment – "witch ointment" – was the product of herbalism pure and simple. No witchcraft involved. The cloud of unnoticeability, by contrast, was a spell.

It was magic.

But it gave me the freedom to move about the marshes and woods as I wished without anybody noticing me. Even Father Peter! All right, the sheep still followed me with their eyes, and whenever I sat or lay down, cormorants still came and spread their wings to dry and watched me with their beady black eyes, but that was companionable, not threatening like humans.

I spent most of that month in Audrey's care in the sea, or sitting on mud or sand or pebbles gazing out to sea. I was thinking. I had much to think about. But now, looking back on that time, the days

are a blur. Only two events stand out in my memory. And the conclusion I came to as a result of all that solitude and thinking – solitude such as I had not known since my childhood beside that other distant sea.

First, I remember the day Martin paid us a visit.

I was there but he hadn't noticed me. He was talking to Audrey. I was listening, of course.

'So she *is* still here.'

'Oh yes, she's still around. But since what you people did to her she's become as reclusive as any wounded wild thing. As reclusive as her mistress, Lady Marian, seems to be.'

'Yes, but Lady Marian does get spotted from time to time. She was definitely in Paris last week.'

That startled me, and my sudden intake of breath gave my presence away.

He turned round and saw me. 'Ah, Marian! How long have you been standing there?'

'Only a moment. But I heard you say something about Lady Marian being seen in Paris.'

'My mate saw her. He knows you, he saw you when you were filling in for Hild at my place, then had you a couple of times at the Shag. He says she's the spit and image of you. Well, not you as you are now,' he laughed, 'but you as he remembered you – and I remember you. Oh, and he says *that* document is still in place, so you are still mine, legally, to do with as I will.'

What was Blanche playing at? Why hadn't she kept at least *that* promise?

'What? You want to use me yourself again, then leave me with a gang of your uncouth mates?'

'Now, wait a minute. First of all, I didn't "use" you. *You* used *me*. You willingly gave yourself to me in exchange for my continuing protection. Don't deny it, because those were the instructions and I made sure to follow them to the letter.'

'Instructions? What instructions?'

'First I was to get you to whore yourself out to me – I'm not sure whose orders these were but they came through Sir Lionel. You needed no encouragement from me to do that. Then I was to ensure

you were royally fucked by as many men as possible. And all this had to happen on the Eve of Alban Elued.'

'But – but *why*?'

'No idea.'

Then suddenly I understood. Only Blanche could have issued such orders via Sir Lionel. She wanted to ensure that when we were on the beach facing Merlin there was no confusion over which of us was the whore. It would have been catastrophic if Merlin had ignored me and gone straight for Lucy. But why couldn't Blanche have told me? Because Merlin could read my mind. And more importantly, if I'd known about it, then I wouldn't really have been "whoring myself out". But I didn't know, so I really was "whoring myself out". For the first time in my life.

'All right, I understand. '

'Sir Lionel has disappeared, by the way.'

'Disappeared?'

He shrugged. 'He never went to London, as he was supposed to. At least he never turned up there.'

'And Lucy? Don't tell me she's back at the Shag.'

'Your "Lady Lucia"? That's where she should be. But they weren't quick enough and she's disappeared, too. Though definitely not together with Sir Lionel. I did hear a rumour that she's now in the service of one of the highest in the land.'

'Lancaster?'

'No, not Lancaster. But one of the family ...'

I could get no more out of him. And he could get no more out of me. I had no intention of telling him I had to be in London on my birthday. After he'd gone, I asked Audrey if she remembered when Liza's Marian had been born.

'In the spring. She was a Pisces girl through and through. I think maybe it was a Sunday.'

I was going to have to let myself be seen by Father Peter at some point. I needed to set out on the twenty-fourth of October to be sure of being there on the twenty-eighth. He would know the days and the dates.

And I remember the morning I swam out to check that what remained of Merlin Redivivus was still in place. It was.

Chained up with it, though, was another body. A very human body. Much of it had been eaten by crabs and fish, but there was enough left for me to tell that it could have been the body of Sir Lionel. It was the right size. The hair was the right colour.

Only Lucy and I knew about this boulder, this chain.

If it could have been Sir Lionel, then it was Sir Lionel. Martin – and Audrey – had been right. And Martin knew. He just didn't know where she had hidden the body.

Only I did. And I will never tell.

After a few days of watery sunshine, the twenty-fourth of October dawns grey and wet. I hide my purse of coins – which I still have, thank God! – under my ragged skirt, give Audrey a last hug, and set off on foot in the drizzle for Colchester enfolded in my cloud of unnoticeability. There, I purchase some boy's clothes and a cloak and a pair of boots from a pawn-shop just inside North Gate. I could have gone further in before I drew attention to myself, but any respectable shop-owner would immediately have set his dog on me.

Then I walk round outside the Wall till I come to the London Road and Mistress Joan's house. I long to run in and say hello, but how can I? I walk on past and go into the stable and hire a horse and set out on the long journey home.

As I ride, I think about that word: Home.

I remember my Moorish master, Abdelrahman ibn Khaldoun, quoting a Latin author – some Roman admiral called Plinius Secundus: "Home is where the heart is."

Ibn Khaldoun's heart was in Fes, but if he returned there his life would be forfeit.

And my heart, now?

My head is mostly healed after a month of Audrey's ministrations and all that time spent in the sea, but Blanche let me down and I owe her nothing. With my hair I have paid. I am no longer under any obligation to follow her instructions. I am no longer under any obligation to be *the poor, sore, bruised and battered whore Mariana, the butt of everyone's jokes and boots, who would never dare raise her eyes in such company, let alone open her mouth*, that she wishes me to be. I do not have to humble

myself to Alice Perrers for no better purpose than to retrieve some jewels the old King squirrelled away for her in France. I do not have to be Blanche's paid assassin when some young man with more in his codpiece than under his hat gives offence to members of her family. My mission on the Essex coast was something special, something worth undertaking and risking my life for. Something to be proud of. Charles, my poor dead Emperor, would have approved. Against all the odds I survived. My life still lies before me. And in Los Alcazares the bulk of my silver treasure trove still lies hidden where I left it. A treasure trove which no man, young or old, is ever going to steal from me.

How wise I was not to tell Ferchard about it!

Nor shall I tell him or anyone else when I leave London that I am setting out not for France but for Spain, in search of a girl from the Saxon Sea called Marian atte-Marsh, and of the self I left on the beach by the Mar Menor and almost forgot.

THE END

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Yes, I could have gone on – I *wanted* to go on – Mariana's arrival in London, Marell the Harpy, Alice Perrers, and this "cloud of unnoticeability" that Old Audrey, the Witch of the Marshes, came up with – but I had to stop. For now.

Mariana's ride on the Wheel of Fortune continues in the forthcoming **MARIANA IN REVOLT**, where we shall see whether she goes to France as Sister María Bianca (named after her mother, María, and her patronne, Blanche) or she rebels against all that and returns home to Spain.

Why the title **MARIANA IN REVOLT**? Because not only is she in the mood to rebel against Blanche and Ferchard but when she returns to England, she gets caught up in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 – on the side of the peasants. Then finds herself trapped in the blazing Savoy Palace trying to save the life of Katherine Swynford, long-time mistress of John o' Gaunt, the Lord Regent.

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Other Books in this Series

WRONG WAY ROUND THE CHURCH (The Mariana de la Mar prequel – set in Spain and Avignon)

THE DEVIL IS A WOMAN (Mariana de la Mar 1 – set in Paris during and after Christmas, 1377)