



*Reluctant Press* presents:

# Eve Of Redemption

Stephanie Bennion



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A 'NEW WOMAN' E-BOOK

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# Eve of Redemption

by **Stephanie Bennion**

## Chapter One

The fighting had been hard, but in the end we had won the day. As always. After all, we were knights of the Queen, the supreme authority in this land.

It was just a pity that there were some people who didn't agree with this. One hilarious chap thought it was funny to slice my beard off with his blade, tuft by tuft. He's still smiling now; his expression hasn't changed one iota since I separated his head from his body.

Rushing up a stone spiral staircase, I caught up with a couple of Blackfoot's guards in an ante-chamber halfway up the tower. Lord Blackfoot was one such nobleman who had decided not to pay his dues to the Queen and had instead foolishly declared himself to be the ruler of his own lands. It was not a mistake he would make again. The blood stains on my sword were testament to that.

The guards were ready with their own blades drawn, but the fight had gone out of them. I could see it in their eyes.

"Whom do you serve?" I demanded, approaching them with my blade raised.

The first looked ready to leap out of the nearest window at the first opportunity. The second, however, had more sense. He had seen what had happened to his comrades.

He dropped his sword. "Long live the Queen!" he declared.

"Good man," I said. I turned to his partner. "What about you?"

"Oh, definitely," the first guard said. "The Queen! Long live her, and all that."

I suddenly saw his eyes widen, his stare glancing towards something behind my left shoulder. As quick as a flash, I whirled around to see a third guard rushing towards me from out of some hidden doorway. In his hand he held an axe. In his eyes was sheer fury.

"Death to the Queen!" he yelled, raising the axe.

His expression froze. Stumbling to a halt, he looked at me with a puzzled expression, before falling to his knees and sideways onto the floor. It was then I saw the large cross-bow bolt sticking out of his back.

"That's twice I've saved your skin today," came a silky voice from the shadows.

Sonja stepped into the ante-chamber, cross-bow in hand. She wore our standard garb of a simple chain-mail tunic matched with black leather leggings but boy, did they look good on her. Her long, dark hair was plaited down her back, as always. She was the only female in our little attack force, but she made it look as if we three were the token men on her team, rather than that she was the token woman. After all, it was a Queen's world.

I shrugged. "That's what friends are for, isn't it?"

Perhaps I should introduce myself. My name is Everard. No jokes please. I can assure you that the slumbering beast hidden beneath the bulge in my leggings is anything but a joke. I am thirty-two, six feet tall, built like a Bull Terrier and one of the finest swordsmen in the land. Don't take my word for it; just count the bodies of those who thought they were better than me. Sonja and I were in the services of the good Queen Morwenna; technically we were part of her palace guard, but in reality we were an elite squad of peace-keepers who dealt with insurgency whenever needed. The last few months had seen us working non-stop. There was trouble brewing in the land, the smell of rebellion. I didn't like it one bit.

The first guard had by now placed his own sword on the floor. It was amazing what the sight of a crossbow bolt in the back of a dead comrade can do.

"Four of you against a whole castle," he marvelled. "What motivates you so?"

I shrugged. "Good pension? Plus, you should see what they serve in the staff canteen. Definitely worth fighting for, that."

"Don't tease him," said Sonja, scooping up the swords as she did so.

"Why not? After the trouble they've caused us?" I retorted. Something about this job had been bugging me. Lord Blackfoot was a very minor figure as a nobleman and had never hinted at causing trouble before. Something told me there was more to this rebellion than met the eye. It was almost as if all the recent troubles in the land were somehow co-ordinated.

I turned to the first guard and calmly placed my sword point against his throat.

"Who was behind this revolt?" I asked, rather sweetly, I thought.

The guard spluttered a little before answering. "L... L... Lord Blackfoot, of course."

"Don't give me that," I retorted. "Lord Blackfoot couldn't organise a piss-up in a... Well, you get the picture. He must have had help. Who was it?"

"I... I... I don't know."

"How about you?" I asked, turning to the second guard. "Any ideas before I pluck your friend's Adam's apple from its branch?"

The second guard looked singularly unconcerned. Nevertheless, he did give the answer I was looking for. "He had a special advisor," he said. "A stranger by the name of Damon."

"Damon?" The name shot through me like one of Sonja's crossbow bolts. Sonja herself looked startled at the mention of the name but said nothing.

Before I could take the matter any further, we were interrupted by the arrival of our fellow knights Munro and Jed. They were leaping up the spiral staircase as if their tails were on fire. Munro quickly announced the reason for their haste.

"Our transport's on its way," he said, gasping slightly for breath. "Any minute now. We need to be on top as quickly as possible."

I nodded. "I'll be right with you as soon as I've dealt with these two."

Sonja beckoned to Munro and Jed to follow her and they quickly exited around a corner and out of sight. I turned to my two captives, sword in hand.

"I may let you live," I said, "Or I may let you die. It all depends on how you answer my next question. Where can I find this Damon?"

The first guard looked petrified. I guessed he wanted to live, but didn't have the necessary information to give me. I turned to the second and showed him the crimson-stained point of my blade.

"His chambers are in the Bloody Tower," the guard whispered. "That is where he breeds his strange creatures. Damon's demons, they call them."

I lowered my sword.

"Go," I told them. "Join the other prisoners in the courtyard."

Not waiting to be told again, the two guards quickly headed straight for the staircase. I didn't even watch them go. My mind was filled with more pressing concerns.

"Damon's demons, eh?" I murmured to myself.

The Lord Damon I remembered had a penchant for conjuring incubi, too. But we had exiled him to a fortress island many years ago.

I left the ante-chamber the way Sonja, Munro and Jed had and found myself faced with two choices. In the passageway beyond there was a stone staircase, leading up to the top of the tower and presumably the route my comrades had taken. Straight ahead, an archway led out onto the battlements on top of the thick castle walls.

On the far side of the battlements was the Bloody Tower.

We had seen it on the way in; a great stone edifice capped by a iron-plated spire. The tower was larger than its counterparts, though strangely deserted when we stormed it during the fighting. Even so, I was sure there was someone or something within; watching, waiting.

I stared at it now, rust running down the great spire like congealed blood. The spire was punctuated by a number of vents, similar to those in a pigeon loft but much larger.

I quickly ran out onto the battlements and took stock of the situation. From here I could see Sonja and the others at the top of the tower, waiting for our ride. Just at that moment

the Dragonfly, our sail-powered airship, hove into view on the other side of the valley. Judging by its speed, it would be at the castle within five minutes, maybe less.

My decision was made. Ignoring the cries of my colleagues, I ran across the battlements towards the Bloody Tower. It was time to meet Damon in his lair.

At the far end of the battlements was a large black door which looked stout enough to withstand an army. As I approached, it slowly swung open, revealing the dark interior of the tower beyond. I halted at the door, then resolutely stepped through.

My eyes adjusted quickly to the darkness, but barely quick enough. No sooner was I inside when a shadow fell upon me, closely followed by the sweeping glint of the edge of a blade. I turned, parried and lunged, all in one fluid movement. The hidden attacker withdrew, then stepped out of the shadows.

I gasped. "It is you!"

The countenance was the same, the clothes a little richer, but time had not been kind to Damon, Lord of Dethridge and sworn enemy of the Queen. His face was lined and scarred, his long beard and whispery hair greying, yet it was the look of intense loathing in his eyes which captivated my attention.

"Everard!" he spat. "Long time, no see, eh? A curse upon you and the rest of the Queen's snivelling servants!"

"Damon! You were exiled. How...?"

"You should have killed me when you had the chance. Queen Morwenna's mercy will be the undoing of her!" Damon stepped forward again and raised his blade. "Mercy is not a quality which impresses me, as you are about to find out."

With surprising speed, Damon lunged forward and attacked again. It was all I could do to parry his blows and I found myself being driven back through the door and onto the battlements once more. His long exile had obviously given him time to brush up on his swordsmanship skills.

It had been a long day and I was tiring. A brief slip of concentration left me bleeding from a cut upon my arm.

"You fight like a woman!" snarled Damon.

"Don't let Sonja hear you talking like that," I retorted. However, despite my bravado, I began to think a strategic withdrawal was in order.

"Everard! Quick! Up here!"

Sonja's voice had come from above. Looking up, I saw the huge bulk of the Dragonfly drifting slowly overhead, sails furled. Sonja was standing in the hatchway of the front gondola, the crossbow in her hand aimed squarely at Damon. A rope ladder hung from the hatch, inviting me on board. I had seconds to spare before the airship drifted past the battlements and out of reach.

I quickly jumped back, away from Damon's blade.

"Just like old times, eh?" I quipped, "But reunions do bore me so."

Without waiting for his retort, I dashed across to the rope ladder and started to climb. Moments later the battlements were behind me and I was left dangling in thin air.

I paused in my climb and glanced back to see Damon shaking his fist at me. Now that I was safe, it was quite amusing to see him jumping up and down on top of the castle walls. Then he was gone, back into his refuge in the Bloody Tower.

I continued to climb and was soon within the safety of the Dragonfly.

"Unfurl those damn sails!" yelled a voice. It was Cara, the airship's pilot. "The quicker we are away from this place, the better!"

Munro and Jed rushed away to do her bidding.

"What's the rush?" I asked. I slumped wearily into a sitting position on the gondola floor. The sleeve of my tunic was red with blood and my arm was starting to throb.

"We all saw who you were fighting down there," said Sonja. "Who knows what that madman has in store for us."

The cabin jolted slightly as the twin sails dropped into position, one on either side of the huge gas bag keeping us aloft. The swaying motion of the airship became more regular as the Dragonfly began to pick up speed. I climbed to my feet, stepped over to the hatchway and watched as Lord Blackfoot's castle receded into the distance.

Sonja was still holding her crossbow. "Why didn't you fire?" I asked her.

"From a moving gondola, this high up, in this wind? Even I'm not that good," she admitted. "The bolt could have hit you just as easily as him."

"We should have stayed," I said. "We could have finished Damon off once and for all."

Sonja held my hand. "We didn't know he was there. Besides, you know Cara can't choose when to pick us up when she's riding a good wind."

I wasn't convinced. "I'm tired," I said. "I'm going to bunk down for a while. Care to join me?" I added, with a sly wink.

"Only if you promise not to snore," she said. "You old lecher!"

Munro and Jed had clambered down from the rigging and returned to the front gondola. The sleeping bunks were in the rear gondola, which was reached by crossing a narrow walkway of rope and timber suspended beneath the airship's gas bag. I took Sonja's hand in my own and together we crossed over to find some seclusion.

No one was watching the castle, now. If they were, they would have seen the black shapes spilling out of the portals in the Bloody Tower's spire. Winged demons, creations of Damon's evil genius. They were out to get us.

I lay in my bunk, my freshly bandaged arm holding Sonja close to me. We were close in many other ways, but we had never been intimate. Marriage was permitted between Guards but as I'd never found the right person, I stuck to my belief that it would not do for fellow knights to become too involved. However, everyone needs a bit of company now and again and there was nothing wrong with a good, old-fashioned cuddle.

Sonja was not above teasing me, however.

"When your mother named you Everard, did she ever get to realise how appropriate that name would become?" she asked me.

I realised she was lying on a part of me which always betrayed my lustful instincts towards her. The leather leggings were a snug fit and left little to the imagination. "I don't know what you mean," I lied.

"Liar, liar, pants on fire... eh?" she purred. "You naughty boy."

"What do you expect when I've got a minx like you on top of me?"

She moved away, but only a little. "I'm sorry. I do tease you so. I am very fond of you, you know."

"Oh yeah?" I gave her a lecherous grin. "How fond?"

"You know what I mean. You're like a brother to me. But if I wasn't a full-time feared defender of the realm, things may have been very different." Sonja leaned back and sighed. "Don't you ever crave the simple life? A normal life? I live for the day when I can get to hang around with my friends and not have to take a crossbow with me in case we get ambushed. Is that too much to ask?"

I thought about this. "Leave the Guards, you mean? I don't know anything else."

"Me neither. And I'm not asking you to marry me, either."

I shrugged. "I never saw you as the marrying type. But is there anything to stop us spending a little free time together, doing what men and women do best?"

"We don't have any free time. You know that."

"True. How about a quick blow job now and we'll talk about it in the morning?"

All of a sudden, the airship gave an almighty jolt. Startled, Sonja tried to get up off the bunk, then lost her footing as a second jolt sent her sliding out of my arms and onto the floor. She was still trying to stand up when the gondola rocked again, the timber supports of the Dragonfly's frame groaning in protest.

"That wasn't funny," muttered Sonja. "I'm sure Cara does it on purpose."

I too was now out of the bunk and trying to find my feet. "It's not Cara mucking about," I said. "Something's wrong."

With both of us hanging onto the edge of the bunk for support, we hurriedly made our way to the hatchway which opened onto the walkway leading to the front gondola. We had a good view of outside the airship from here. What we saw, I didn't like at all.

"Oh hell," whispered Sonja. "We're under attack!"

The airship was surrounded by black, winged creatures, the like of which I had never seen before. I counted more than twenty of the huge, leathery gargoyles, each with a wingspan twice the height of a man. Their feet and wing tips ended in venomous-looking claws and their jaws held fangs like a wolf's. All in all, they had far too many pointy bits for my liking, considering we were only up here thanks to a big bag of gas.

"Damon's demons!" I spat, bitterly. "He sent them after us."

Across the walkway, we saw Jed take up position with a bow and let loose some shots at the nearer demons. He was finding it difficult to aim with the airship rocking so much; the few shots which did find their mark simply ricocheted off the creatures' thick hides. Sonja grabbed her crossbow and lined up a shot at the creature nearest to us.

The creatures started howling; a dreadful piercing cry which made me want to rip off my ears and eat them. Sonja's shots found their mark, the crossbow bolts even managing to puncture the demons' skin. However, the effect was akin to shooting pins at an elephant.

"We can't defend against this!" she shouted across to Jed, her voice barely audible above the demonic shrieks all around us. "We need to take cover on the ground!"

"What?" yelled Jed. "I can't hear you!"

Suddenly, a large demon came towards us, fast and furious, its talons outstretched. I quickly grabbed Sonja and pulled her back inside the gondola. Moments later, the demon crashed into the side of the airship, sending us both flying. A snarling mouth appeared at the hatchway, then fell away into the void.

"That was too close," I said, picking myself up from the floor.

Sonja was already back at the hatchway. "We're in trouble," she said.

I looked for myself and saw what she meant. The demon's impact had destroyed the walkway between the two gondolas. We were on our own.

It was then I saw something a lot more worrying.

"Look up there," I said, pointing to the gas bag above our heads. There was a long gash in the fabric where the creature's wing tip had sliced through it. As I stared, I could feel the rush of escaping gas upon my face.

"Look out!" cried Sonja.

I turned and saw another demon heading straight for the hatchway where we stood. Sonja and I leapt out of the way as it crashed into the opening where it became wedged, its claws flailing wildly as it tried to get at us. I drew my sword and tried a few jabs, but those claws and teeth moved faster than any swordsman I had ever come across.

The demon was trying everything to free itself, its wings beating mercilessly against the gondola, tearing the rigging and the gas bag with every stroke. We held each other in horror as the airship lurched one way, then the other, as the Dragonfly was torn to pieces before our eyes.

Suddenly, there was one final jolt, then we were falling.

Everything after that was a blur; flailing limbs, the hot breath of the demon, the twisted wreckage of the gondola, Sonja in my arms, the rush of wind, the trees, the ground; then finally, the pain.

I did what any other person would have done. I blacked out.

I've been knocked unconscious before; it's an occupational hazard for a knight such as myself. This was different. Considering I was badly injured and probably close to death, I was remarkably calm. For what seemed like an age, I drifted in and out of consciousness;

looking back now I have vague memories of hearing the rustle of leaves in the wind, the flapping of torn fabric, the creak of broken timbers. I was also dimly aware that between my fainting bouts, the brightness of the sun through my closed eyelids seemed a little less harsh each time. Eventually, there came a point when lying on my back wallowing in agony was not enough to keep me interested, so I opened my eyes.

What was left of the Dragonfly had come down in a forest. Shredded remnants of the gas bag were hanging from the branches high above my head, so I guessed that the trees had broken our fall. Turning my head, I saw Sonja lying upon the ground a little way to my left. On my right was the twisted shape of a fallen demon, its neck clearly broken. At least that was one less thing to worry about.

I tried to move and was instantly crippled by a searing pain in my stomach. My right hand also appeared to be stuck. I gingerly raised my head to evaluate the situation and saw that it was not good. A piece of the airship's wooden frame was embedded in my torso. As for my right hand, that was trapped beneath the fallen demon's wing, right at the point where the talons grew. There was blood everywhere, the sight of which was not helping at all.

My left hand was free; using this, I carefully felt around the wooden stake which impaled me to the surrounding wreckage. It hadn't gone right through me, but it was attached to another spar in such a way that I would have to pull it out before I could move. Gritting my teeth, I resolutely grasped hold of the stake with my left hand and pulled.

The resulting pain was indescribable. I rode the crashing wave of nausea, rolled my head to one side and vomited. It hurt. A lot.

Once free of the wreckage, I was able to roll over and free my trapped hand. Much to my dismay, this too was impaled, by a foot-long talon on the tip of the dead demon's wing. It took a great deal of my remaining strength to lift up the black leathery limb in order to pull the bony spike free from my hand.

"That's a hell of a splinter," I muttered, my teeth gritted.

I couldn't move my fingers on that hand at all so I assumed the tendons were torn. The muscles in my forearm were also in spasm, but now that I was free to move, it was easy enough to drag my useless sword arm away from the creature's wing. Not only was I badly wounded, I was also defenceless. I just hoped none of the demon's buddies were still around.

I sat up, pulled off my tunic and tore strips from my undershirt to use to clean and bandage my wounds as best as I was able. I was losing a lot of blood from my stomach wound but there was little I could do about that at the moment. I finished as quickly as I could then went over to tend to Sonja.

She was alive, but only just. Sonja had fallen onto a jagged piece of the gondola and a long, slender spike had penetrated her back. What was more, her head had hit a rock on the ground as she fell. As I lifted her head, I could feel blood seeping from a wound in the back of her skull.

"Sonja?" I whispered. "It's me, Everard. Can you hear me?"

Her eyelids fluttered and then she was looking at me. There was sorrow in her eyes.

"It shouldn't end like this," she murmured. "It can't."

"This is not the end," I told her. My heart knew otherwise.

"Liar, liar, pants on fire..." she whispered, then smiled. "I love you."

"I love you, too," I said. It was the first time I had ever said this and meant it. "I will never forget you."

She smiled again. "Really?"

"Really. I will love you to the end of time."

"Then release me," she said, weakly. "Return my soul to the deep."

As I held her, I realised those final words had taken away all the life she had left.

I'm not sure how long I stayed there, crouched upon the ground, hugging Sonja's head to my chest. It was long after she had breathed her last when the pain of my own injuries forced me back to reality.

Sonja's chain-mail tunic and leggings were steeped in blood and it slowly dawned on me that most of it was mine. The wound in my stomach had soaked everything in sight a dreadful shade of scarlet. I knew I needed help fast if I wasn't to join Sonja on the final journey to the next world.

First, I had Sonja's dying wish to honour.

Scooping her body into my arms, which is far from easy when your right arm is worse than useless, I struggled to my feet. All this time I had been aware of the sound of running water; looking down the hill, I spied the glint of sunlight upon what looked like a stream. Sonja's people were seafarers, fishermen and traders. Traditionally, all their burials were done at sea, hence her dying wish. We were a good day's ride away from the coast so I hoped this stream would suffice.

The stream turned out to be more of a river. Now feeling very faint, I slowly waded into the waters until the river was up to my waist. A stream of red swirled away from where I stood, taking my life essence with it.

I lowered Sonja's body into the river and held it there. Her arms floated upon the water, her plaited hair unravelled and streamed in the current and for a moment she seemed alive once more.

"Oh, Gods..." I began, then my words were lost as I started coughing up blood. I started again. "Oh, Gods of the deep," I intoned, "Receive this spirit of the earth back into your domain and treat her with the honours she deserves."

I let go of Sonja's body.

"I release her soul unto you," I said. I had fulfilled my duties.

Sonja's body was quickly taken by the current. As I watched her go, I don't mind admitting that I cried. Not the odd tear which a man can brush away with quick sweep of a hand; no, these were real tears. Sonja had touched me in a way no other ever had and probably never would again.

Sonja's body passed out of sight. The crimson pool around my own torso was becoming more vivid and I was becoming very light-headed. Turning back towards the river

bank, I tried to take a step but suddenly I was too weak to move. I fell to my knees and felt the cold waters rush upon my chest. I had no energy left to panic.

My weariness was complete. The strength of the river was too much. I caught one last glimpse of the ragged reflection of my face, then the waters closed over my head.

## Chapter Two

I opened my eyes and was instantly blinded by a fuzzy orange light. Although bright, it was in no way as intense as the waves of pain pounding my brain. I quickly shifted my gaze away from the light source, which eased my vision but did nothing for the terrible ache in the back of my head.

The fuzziness slowly cleared and I began to make out my surroundings. I was lying on some sort of bed, which in turn was in the centre of a room seemingly hewn out of solid rock. The flickering orange light gave few clues and it was far from clear whether I was in some sort of building or an underground cavern, one which seemed to have an ornate candelabra hanging from the ceiling and a large brick fireplace. It was all very strange.

The candelabra was unlit, but there was a small lantern to my right, on a table next to the bed, which held a burning candle. It was this which had almost blinded me when I first awoke, though its light was barely enough to illuminate the room. The bed itself was wrought from iron and looked very old. It was draped with animal skins and surprisingly comfortable.

It was then I remembered the river. Sonja. Someone must have brought me to this place and I had no idea if they were friend or foe.

Do not worry. You are safe.

I froze, startled. A voice had sounded in my head, answering my unspoken question. Hesitantly, I looked around the cave-like room, but saw no one.

"Who's there?" I asked, not a little nervously. My voice came out high and weak.

There was no answer. Cautiously, I leaned over, picked up the lantern and held it aloft in an attempt to dispel the shadows from distant corners. The room was clearly empty. I returned the lamp to the small table beside the bed, then froze again.

*My hand.*

Without thinking, I had picked up the lantern with my right hand. The very same hand which I now remembered had been crippled in the crash.

I held out both my hands in front of my face to be sure. Sure enough, they were both present and correct, though the strange light in the room did make them look somehow smaller than I remembered. The scar which I had worn down the back of my left hand since a duelling incident seven years ago had also miraculously disappeared.

I pulled aside the covering from the bed to check my other wounds. The exertion of doing even this sent rivulets of pain throughout my body, so I was clearly not completely healed. In the dim orange lamplight, I could see I was wearing a fresh cotton tunic which

came down to my thighs, leaving my legs uncovered. Underneath this, my torso was heavily bandaged from just below my shoulders down to my hips. Gingerly, I touched my stomach and encountered no pain. My fingers followed the contours of my flesh through the bandages and the thin fabric of the tunic and felt no evidence of the wound which had drained my blood away into the river. My body also seemed leaner, more lithe than before. I couldn't imagine how I'd lost so much weight in such a short period of time.

Then again, I didn't know how long I'd actually been here. Wherever 'here' was.

I pulled myself up a little and pain shot through my head once more. An exploratory hand revealed that my skull was swathed in a bandage. My beard was also gone. By the feel of my chin, it seemed that my escape from death by drowning was but the first of many close shaves. I hadn't had skin that smooth since I was a small boy.

It was then I noticed the tray of food next to the lantern. A chunk of bread, some cuts of meat and a small stone jug, which upon inspection turned out to contain fresh milk. I could have sworn it had not been there before.

Eat and rest. Your strength has not yet returned.

"What?" I didn't like strange voices interrupting my thoughts like that, benign though they seemed. My own voice was sounding very strange itself so I couldn't really argue. "Who are you? What are you doing in my head?"

*Eat and rest.*

"I will, I will," I protested. "But it would be nice to know who my benefactor was."

I am a guardian of the deep, of the waters of the Earth. You summoned me to take the soul of your friend. I helped you live and now you must eat and rest.

"Do you have a name?" I asked.

Sabrina. Long ago, I was called Sabrina.

The voice left me with more questions than before. I had to admit, however, that I was hungry, not to mention tired. Just when the conversation was getting interesting, too.

"Here's to you, Sabrina," I said, lifting the jug to my lips. "Cheers!"

My appetite satisfied, I soon succumbed to weariness once more. This time, it was not the cold waters of the river into which I sank, but the welcoming comfort of a bed.

I slept. Sonja was with me in my dreams.

When I awoke for the second time, the pain in my head was much reduced and this time when I tried to sit up properly, I found I could, albeit with still a few aches and pains here and there. One particular annoying twinge was right in the centre of my back, though the thick bandages wrapped around my body prevented my fingers from checking to see if there was any serious damage.

I wondered if I should try getting out of bed. I was eager to see daylight again.

You may rise if you wish. You are almost healed.

"Oh, you're still here, are you?" I muttered, noticing that as I did that a good night's sleep hadn't restored my voice to a more familiar rumbling tone. "Any chance of breakfast?"

A fresh tray was beside the bed even as I spoke, seemingly out of thin air. This was room service to die for. This led me to a worrying thought.

"I am actually still alive, am I not?" I asked, "Or is this some sort of afterlife?"

There was no answer. Served me right for asking a stupid question, I suppose.

Breakfast was again bread, cold cuts and a jug of milk. I was feeling much more alive and ready to face the world again. I had been reflecting upon recent events and was wondering if Munro, Jed and Cara had survived the destruction of the Dragonfly. I thought it unlikely. I had only made it this far by the luck of the gods.

Thoughts came back to me, not of Sonja's death, but of those last precious moments we had spent together, lying in the bunk. A warm feeling filled my body and a hand instinctively travelled down under the covers towards my bandaged-wrapped groin.

Startled, I sat bolt upright in bed.

"What's happened to my dick?" I cried. My hand scrabbled beneath the bandages and into the space between my legs but found nothing. Or at least, nothing a man should have. There was something there which had never been there before, something moist and somehow familiar to the touch. "What have you done with Everard's ever-hard?"

Without waiting for an answer, I scrambled out of bed and pulled off my tunic. Even in the dim light of the lantern I could see I had curves where I never had curves before; my hips and amazingly flat stomach were very feminine but very alien to me. I yanked at the bandages wound around my torso and threw them to the floor. My once hirsute body was now virtually hairless, but that wasn't what was grabbing my attention.

*I had breasts.*

"Give me a mirror," I demanded. I glanced around the room and sure enough, a large mirror on a stand was now waiting for me at the foot of the bed.

The glass was covered by a large satin cloth. I stood before it, then in one deft movement I whipped the cloth away.

"Oh my god," I breathed. "It can't be."

Sonja. Standing in the mirror before me in all her naked glory. I moved my hand to my face and touched the gentle contours of my face; my cheeks, my lips; and the image in the mirror did the same. My gaze still fixed upon the mirror, I reached for the bandage around my head and slowly unwound it. After a few turns, it fell away, leaving Sonja's long raven tresses free to tumble into place down my back.

I stared at Sonja's face in the mirror. "What have you done?"

When I found you, within you a spark of life still lived. I could have saved your own flesh, but it was taken beyond my reach just as I held your spirit safe. I saw no reason to let you die for want of a body.

"I don't understand. Is this me? Or... her?"

Flesh is but a frame for the soul.

"Very cryptic," I mused.

Your friend no longer needs nor wants her body to carry her spirit. She has passed to the other side. You helped her pass.

I looked into the mirror again. It was Sonja's face, but the eyes? There was something within them, a spark of soul, which I recognised as my own. A little more emotionally scarred perhaps, but yes, this was me. Just in a new wrapper.

"How in the world...?" I murmured, not really expecting an answer. I realised now that my new voice was a harsher version of Sonja's, her familiar silken tones tainted by my aggression.

Your mind is but a pattern of thoughts within the flesh. The bond is strong, but can be broken by death, by madness. By me.

"Hmm." I'm not sure I liked that answer. After all, I was hearing voices in my head. In some lands, they would tie you to a tree and set fire to you if you admitted to something like that. I was finding it very difficult to accept what I saw reflected before me, especially when it stared back at me in a rather sultry, tempestuous manner. "What of my own body?"

It was taken from the water by a power unseen. Life is life. I do what I can to preserve it. To do what could not be done for me.

This time I detected the very human note of sadness in the voice. "A radical approach, definitely," I mused. "Ethical? I'll have to reserve judgement." I was starting to warm to my new look. There were certain things I would miss, of course. It was also very disconcerting to see a familiar face, yet not the one



I had grown used to, in the mirror.

I suddenly felt very self-conscious about my new form. Retrieving the silk cover from the mirror, I wound it around my body. If anything, it emphasised my curves even more.

“Well, Sonja,” I mused, “I did say I would never forget you. This is certainly a novel way of keeping your memory alive.”

I sat down on the edge of the bed, my mind in a whirl.

Somehow I was alive, yet in Sonja’s body. I was now a woman. Like most men, I had always thought I knew how to handle the opposite sex, but now I was acutely aware at how little I actually knew about the female of the species. It felt like I’d been dropped in a foreign country without an interpreter or even a basic phrase book. This was not going to be easy.

I also needed to pee, but even the thought of doing that scared me.

I ended up pacing around the room, trying to work out what to do next. I felt healthy enough to move on; the wounds in my back and head, or Sonja’s back and head, were virtually healed and my stomach was still pleasingly full from breakfast.

After exploring the room properly, I found there was a doorway hidden in a recess in one of the corners. The door was not locked and a quick peek revealed a passage beyond, but at the moment I was reluctant to venture any further. I needed a plan.

Eventually, I couldn’t hold back my bladder any longer, so I prepared to tackle that most basic of human needs. There was a suitable pot under the bed and after a bit of experimentation, I rolled up my robe, adopted a squatting pose and discharged my duties.

After, as I sat on the edge of the bed, I decided it was time to move on.

“I wish to leave,” I declared.

As you wish.

There was something I needed to know before I left.

“My body,” I said. “Everard’s hairy old thing, I mean. You say it was taken beyond your reach, but if it could be brought to you...?” I paused, unable to bring myself to finish. “Not that you haven’t already done enough for me, Sabrina,” I quickly added, not wanting to antagonise my host. After all, she was a god. Or something of the sort.

I could return you to your original flesh, yes. But time is of the essence. Devoid of life, worms will feast, bones will turn to dust. Does your new form displease you?

“No, no, not at all!” I quickly interjected. “I’m a creature of habit, that’s all.”

I understand. But there is no more I can do for you now.

“Well, there is just one more thing. Any chance of some clothes?”

I turned and saw a familiar-looking outfit of chain-mail tunic, undershirt and leggings on the bed beside me.

“Wow,” I murmured, recognising the clothes as Sonja’s own. They were spotlessly clean, undamaged and by all accounts as good as new. “Who does your laundry?”

I quickly got changed and instantly felt a lot more confident in this familiar garb. It was only when I fastened the belt around my now trim waist that the reality of the situation hit me. I was no longer Everard, beefy swordsman of the Queen's Guard; but neither was I Sonja; despite appearances. I could never take her place.

There were some boots besides the bed. After slipping these on, I went and stood in front of the mirror, as before. It's amazing how body shape affects the way clothes hang. Those breasts, that waist, those killer hips, the hair tumbling down around my shoulders. It occurred to me that I had never seen Sonja with her hair loose, but I kind of liked it that way.

I smiled. I was getting used to the way I looked.

"Sabrina, guardian of the deep, I salute you," I said. "May your greatness continue."

May your future be fruitful, warrior.

I couldn't think of an answer to that, so without further ado I walked over to the door and stepped back into the world of men. As a woman.

Beyond the door lay a short passageway, hewn out of solid rock, which led to a flight of stone steps leading downwards. As I descended, the chamber became filled with the sound of rushing water. The walls glistened with an odd luminescence, lighting the way.

The steps ended at a small stone platform which jutted out into the waters of a fast-flowing underground river. The roof of the rocky cavern through which the river ran was also studded with tiny glittering crystals, while below it the river sparkled in the sunlight spilling through a natural archway a short way downstream. Seeing daylight, my spirits rose.

There was a small boat moored to the platform and I wasted no time in getting underway. After a few strokes with the oars, it was enough to let the flow of the river do all the hard work. Moments later, the river emerged from the mountainside and suddenly the daylight was all around me.

The summer sun felt good upon my arms and my face. I shipped the oars and sat with my back against the transom, letting my hands trail in the water. I didn't know where the hell I was and I didn't care. At the moment it just felt good to be alive.

The river which carried me out of the mountain turned out to be a tributary of another and soon I was drifting down the main waterway, through miles and miles of unfamiliar landscape. This was densely-wooded country and so far I had seen no signs at all of human occupation. Eventually the woodland began to give way to meadow. I passed a field of grazing cattle and that meant only one thing: civilisation.

Sure enough, as the river rounded the next bend, I spied a small farmstead some way from the edge of the river, to my left. I dropped the oars back into the locks and started rowing towards the shore. Hopefully, someone at the farm could provide me with supplies and an idea of where I actually was.

Near the farm was a small jetty with a sturdy-looking, weather-beaten sailing barge moored alongside. I pulled my small craft in behind, secured the mooring rope to a convenient post, then jumped ashore.

The farmhouse, a ramshackle affair which obviously hadn't seen a lick of paint in decades, was deserted. The sound of someone chopping logs led me to the back of the shack, where I found a short, stumpy figure hacking away at a pile of firewood. He looked as unkempt as the farmhouse itself, with the added smell of stale sweat.

Nevertheless, he was the first human I had seen in a while.

"Hey buddy," I called, "I'm a little lost and in need of some food. Can you help?"

The words were mine, but they didn't sound right with a feminine tone. It was enough to attract Stumpy's attention, however. It took just one glance in my direction for him to drop his axe. It bounced off his toe, but he didn't seem to mind.

"Why, hello, my dear," he drawled. His hand slicked back what was left of his grey, straggly hair in a failed attempt to make himself a little more presentable. "What's a pretty little thing like you doing this far from home, eh?"

"Looking for directions?" I suggested, momentarily flattered by the idea I could be called pretty, never mind little. "And food, if at all possible." I didn't like the way he was looking at me at all.

"But of course," he said, coming closer. "And what can you offer in return?"

"Deodorant?" I mused, wrinkling my nose. Then it struck me that I had no coins to pay for supplies.

The man was now standing right before me, his attention captivated by my breasts. His hand strayed to his crotch and he started absent-mindedly rubbing away, oblivious to the incredulous look I was giving him. "I could give you some bread, cheese, cut of beef maybe," he said at last. "Ain't too good at giving directions, though. Depends where you wanna be."

"That would be most kind," I replied, trying to ignore what he was doing with his hand. "I need to get to the nearest town and report to the Queen's Guard."

"The Queen's Guard, eh? Soon be rid of those busybodies, mark my words..." The man paused, then stared at me. "Who are you?" he asked, suspiciously. "What's your name?"

"Everard," I said, without thinking.

"Mighty funny name for a girl."

I thought quickly. "Everyone calls me Eve, for short."

"Eve," the man repeated. He gave me a lecherous grin, then shoved his face so close to mine I could smell what he had for lunch. "Well darling, I'm Adam. Wanna ride the ark with me? Two by two, eh?"

It wasn't the poor standard of his religious education which startled me. It was the knife he produced from nowhere and placed at my throat. I suddenly realised how vulnerable I was.

His other hand was still massaging his nether regions. I had an inspiration.

"Let me help you with that," I said coolly, grabbing his crotch.

His face lit up like a child's on Christmas morning. Against my better judgement, I shoved my other hand down the front of his trousers and took hold of his manhood. Be-

fore he had time to react, I began to massage his penis. His face quickly took on a stunned look of intense delight, his eyes widening with every rhythmic pump of my hand.

The knife slipped from his hand and clattered to the floor.

“More, more!” he moaned. His face had gone bright red and his eyes looked ready to burst from their sockets. Much as I loathed the man, I was taking perverse pleasure from this. This was real power. He was rock hard by now and I could feel the ridges of the veins on his penis as I rubbed my hand up and down, faster and faster. His moans were becoming louder and louder and most ungentlemanly. I’m sure I never used to make this much noise.

Suddenly, he climaxed, coming with a voracity which suggested the pressure had been building up for quite some time. I quickly extracted my hand from the now wet and sticky confines of his trousers and casually wiped my digits on his shirt. He had a curious, far-away expression upon his face.

“Food?” I reminded him. As he trotted back towards the farmhouse, seemingly lost in a world of his own, I sighed. “The things a girl has to do to get fed around here,” I mused.

With my newly-obtained provisions of bread, cheese, cold cuts and even a small flagon of wine stowed safely in my boat, I took to the river once more. The experience with Stumpy had been unsettling and not a little illuminating. It had told me that I needed to be far more cautious when dealing with strangers, especially men, now that I was Eve. The Everard of old would never have had any trouble from the likes of him.

As to where I was, the farmer had been a little clueless but did mention that there was a town further downstream where he took his produce to market. By rights it was my duty to report back to the Queen’s Guard, but how could I explain Sonja’s death, when it was Sonja who was apparently standing before them and Everard who was missing, presumed killed in action? I did toy with the idea of pretending to be Sonja with amnesia, but I knew I wouldn’t be able to keep that up for long. Besides, I was warming to the idea of being Eve. Of creating someone new.

Two thoughts were foremost in my mind. Firstly, I had find Everard’s body. Secondly, Lord Damon had to pay for the death of my friends.

Drifting on the current, I reached the town about an hour later. It was not as big as Stumpy had led me to believe, but big enough to warrant a garrison. However, the farmer’s unfinished remark about the Queen’s Guard told me I needed to be careful. It would just be my luck to end up in a province at war with the crown.

The main bulk of the town was on the left bank and there were at least a dozen boats moored up alongside the main quay. I found a space between two of the largest and secured my own diminutive craft. Leaving my provisions in the boat, I clambered ashore. Then I had second thoughts and decided to take my hard-earned food with me. There was no telling what sort of low-life there may be in a place like this.

Having said that, it was a fairly innocuous backwater town. The main store in the high street was called The Riverton Emporium, but Riverton was hardly an unusual name for a town on a waterway so I was none the wiser as to where this town actually was. I decided to look for the garrison anyway, then decide whether to make myself known.

I strode down the high street, my bag of provisions slung over my shoulder. Judging by the strange looks and odd reactions I received from the local townsfolk as I walked, it was evident that my presence was causing a bit of a stir. Some of the women of the town, those who dared to glance up whilst scuttling in their husband's wake, looked positively horrified when I passed. Many of the men were shaking their heads in disbelief. I'd visited many strange places in my time but had never met a response like this before.

At the end of the street, I spied the familiar fortified walls of the Queen's Guard garrison. The main gates were open and as I drew closer, I could see the figure of a young guard standing there. Clean-shaven, tall, dark-haired and not a bad-looking chap by all accounts. He wore the standard guard's uniform which was far more ornate than anything I usually wore. As I approached, I saw that he was watching me with a huge grin upon his face.

"Yea gods," he said, before I had chance to open my mouth. "I have never seen a woman move like you before."

I halted before him, puzzled. "What?"

"You walk like a man. Has no one ever told you that? Tall for a woman, too. Is that sort of thing normal where you come from?" he asked, giving me a quizzical look.

"Being tall?" I asked, a little taken aback. I'd never thought of Sonja as being particularly statuesque, but that had been when I was in Everard's shoes. The way the local women scuttled around with their heads bowed made the difference seem greater still. "And what do you mean about me walking like a man?"

The guard laughed. "Tell me your name, first. I hate talking to strangers."

I smiled. "Eve," I told him.

He held out his hand. "Augustus. Gus for short. Please accept my apologies. I meant nothing by my remark. You just come across different from other women. More confident, perhaps."

"Fair enough," I said. "Gus, I'm lost. Can you help?"

He laughed again. It was a nice laugh; friendly, not at all like the laughter of the maniacs I usually encountered during a normal day's work. I felt I could trust this man.

Besides, you know what they say about men in uniform.

I had no idea where that last thought came from.

Since my transformation, my head had been buzzing with all sorts of confusing thoughts. I had never looked at or even thought about another man in that way before, but now I could clearly distinguish between those who made you want to retch and those who were, well... different. Gus definitely fell into the latter category.

"Are you okay?" Gus asked. He looked genuinely concerned.

"Fine," I told him. "The last few days have been very eventful, that's all."

"Well, you won't get much excitement in Riverton. A picturesque market town in the wonderful province of Mercia," he added, to answer my earlier question. The sarcasm in his voice was obvious but came with a smile. "Does that help?"

Blackfoot Castle was in Mercia. I may not have travelled that far after all.

"Ever heard of a Lord Blackfoot?" I asked, cautiously.

His smile faded and was replaced by a suspicious stare. "Why do you ask?"

I shrugged. "I heard he has a castle in these parts. I'm just trying to get my bearings."

Gus didn't look convinced. "Lord Blackfoot's castle is barely ten miles from here," he told me. "Or should I say, the ex-Lord Blackfoot. He was executed during a raid by the Queen's knights, but I fear it was all in vain."

"Really?" Now he had my full attention.

Gus nodded. "His castle has been taken back by rebels and re-fortified. Blackfoot Castle is now under the control of Lord Damon of Dethridge. I fear the worse is yet to come."

### Chapter Three

The Riverton Garrison was small, manned by just eight knights. As it turned out, Gus was more or less alone; two night-watch guards were asleep in their quarters, while the rest of the company were on a scouting mission, coincidentally to try and locate the wreckage of the Dragonfly. I was fortunate that although Gus knew of our team's reputation, he had never met me before; and by that I mean neither Everard or Sonja. He seemed more than willing to talk, yet there was little he could tell me of what had transpired since the attack by Damon's demons. In the end I politely bid him goodbye, but only after promising to drop by and see him later. I couldn't help feeling that he was rather cute.

Gus's earliest comments about me walking like a man had stung. I didn't want to do Sonja's memory injustice. I was also acutely aware of how dowdy and shapeless my chain-mail and leggings looked compared to what other woman in Riverton were wearing. With this in mind, I decided to go shopping.

Lack of money was still a bit of a problem, however. By rights I could have drawn an allowance from the garrison treasury, but that would have meant too many questions. In the end, I opted to sell the little boat, for which a local fisherman gave me the princely sum of two gold coins. I hoped Sabrina wouldn't mind.

Armed with my new-found wealth, I headed straight for the Riverton Emporium.

The store was rather old-fashioned, but large and stocked to the roof with everything anyone could ever need. The clothing section was at the back of the shop; although the selection wasn't great, the prices were very reasonable. Two gold coins could have bought me one of everything and still left me with enough to get drunk down at the dockside inn.

"Behave!" I told myself. "Eve doesn't get drunk with dockers."

"What was that?" asked a nearby shop assistant.

"Oh, nothing," I said, startled. "Just browsing."

What I didn't expect, as I leafed through the rows of dresses, skirts, undergarments and other items of women's apparel I didn't even recognise, was to get embarrassed. After all,

to all intents and purposes, I was just another woman shopping for clothes. The problem was that inside I was still Everard and right now I was finding it difficult to blot from my mind the mental picture of a beefy swordsman clumsily flicking through rows of ladies underwear whilst trying to work out what size would fit. Besides, I had never been good at shopping. Up until now I had tended to wear whatever had been given to me. As a child, I had been dressed by my mother; as a man, by the Ordnance Officer of the Queen's Guard. Somewhat bewildered, I started scrutinising the other female patrons of the store to see what was in fashion around these parts.

There was one woman near the window who caught my eye. She was wearing a long skirt made of some sort of crinkly material which reached to the floor. It was in pale blue and embossed with an intricate pattern woven in silver thread. The upper part of her body was encased in a matching tight-fitting bodice, laced up the back and cut to show plenty of cleavage. The bodice had no sleeves, but her arms were covered by a gauze scarf draped over her shoulders. Her hair was fastened into a bun and topped by a jaunty little hat. I didn't like the colour and I wasn't sure about the headgear, but I knew this was the look for Eve.

The shop assistant was still watching me. I gave her a winning smile.

"Can I help you, ma'am?" she asked.

"Have you got anything like that?" I asked, pointing to the woman, "In red?"

An hour later, I staggered out of the Riverton Emporium, laden with bags and boxes. I had never imagined how much goes into creating just one outfit. Apart from the skirt and bodice, in a fantastic shade of scarlet I may add, I had ended up buying underwear, stockings, shoes, some delightful bits of costume jewellery, even some silk handkerchiefs, not to mention the scarf and a hat. I still wasn't sure about the hat. The assistant had also sold me a little handbag, in matching scarlet of course. By this time I was losing track of what I had bought so I couldn't remember what the 'few little useful items' were that she had slipped inside. I could tell that the shop assistant was far from impressed with my choice of colour, but she took my money anyway. After all, she wasn't the one who was going to parade around town in this lot.

I was eager to try on my purchases, so I hurriedly made my way to the barracks, hoping Gus could find me a room to use. He greeted me at the gates with a huge grin.

"Eve! You're back!" he exclaimed, "And you've brought half the Emporium with you, I see."

My arms were aching like crazy so I dropped my purchases onto the ground in a most unladylike fashion. This seemed to amuse Gus no end.

"I decided I needed a change of image," I told him.

"Had enough of the combat look? I wish we looked as good when we're out hacking the opposition to bits!" Gus suddenly looked thoughtful as he realised the implication of what he had just said. "We've never had a woman stationed here," he mused. "This may seem an odd thing to ask, but are you in the Queen's Guard?"

I'd been dreading this question and I quickly racked my brains for an answer.

"A dear friend of mine was in the Guard," I told him. "These clothes were lent to me."

Well, the first bit certainly wasn't a lie. It just had no connection with the second part of what I had said. However, Gus seemed satisfied. At least for now.

"You'll have to tell me about your friend one day," he said. "Perhaps over supper?"

"I'll think about it," I replied coyly. "Anyway, I need a favour. Do you have anywhere for me to get changed?"

Gus's face lit up. It wasn't everyday a strange woman asked to get undressed at his barracks. "Oh. Gosh. Umm... yes, of course," he floundered. "You can use my quarters. It should be private enough for you in there. Have you nowhere of your own?"

It hadn't occurred to me until now that I may need to stay overnight in Riverton.

"Ah," I said. "Now you come to mention it, no."

"Err, well... I suppose you could find lodgings in town."

"That is an option," I agreed. I still had some change left over from my shopping spree.

"Or, err... well, you could, um..." Gus mumbled shyly, "...Stay here?"

"Could I? That would be most kind."

"If you want, of course," said Gus, quite taken aback that I had accepted his offer so readily. He was blushing. "No pressure."

I don't know why, but I suddenly had the urge to lean forward and peck him gently on the cheek. It had the effect of making him blush more than ever. "You're so sweet," I told him. I picked up my bags of shopping. "Your quarters?"

"Huh?"

I think the kiss had addled his brain. "So I can get changed?"

"Oh, yes. Follow me!"

Gus led me through the gates and into the compound. I don't know if I was imagining it, but I could have sworn there was now a definite spring in his step.

His quarters were sparsely furnished, yet looked comfortable enough. As he showed me around, I took in the bed, couch, washstand, the small wardrobe and the even smaller dressing table which the guard appeared to use as a writing desk; all simple wooden furniture. Exactly like my own quarters back home, in fact. If I still had a home, that is. They may have found Everard's body by now and allocated my palace quarters to someone else.

Gus, bless him, would have gladly have stayed and helped me change, but being the shy retiring girl that I now was, I insisted upon my privacy. I didn't want him to see me fumbling around with my new purchases like a complete amateur. I'd seen all the different clasps and hooks on the undergarments and I knew this wasn't going to be easy.

I drew the curtains just in case Gus decided to take a sneaky peek, not that I would have held that against him. There was a small oil lantern and a box of matches on the dressing table, which I soon put to good use. Out of curiosity, I opened the wardrobe and found Gus's spare dress uniform and a few more plain-looking outfits. However, right at the end of the rail, partly hidden by a sheet tacked across the inside of the wardrobe, was something a little less expected. It was a woman's dress, not unlike that worn by the majority of the town's women, in a subdued shade of green.

“Odd,” I murmured. Perhaps Gus was not so unaccustomed to female company after all. It seemed strange to hide it behind a sheet, though.

I closed the wardrobe. The washstand drew my attention next, as I had become acutely aware of just how much dirt and grime I had accumulated on my travels. Once cleansed, I started unpacking my shopping, placing each item carefully on the bed as I did so. Only then did I strip off Sonja’s chain-mail, undershirt and leggings, leaving me naked and ready for my transformation.

The sight of Sonja’s body again brought my current predicament flooding back to me. My brain was telling me I was still Everard and yet my eyes clearly told me something else. It wasn’t just flesh and blood which had changed; I was literally seeing the world around me with fresh senses and finding everything looked, smelled and felt different. The way I perceived men was definitely very different now; I wondered whether on some level I had inherited Sonja’s basic instincts, the animalistic part of being human which drives our physical desires and passions. Everard would certainly have never looked at another man in that way. I was thoroughly enjoying being Eve, but I did miss Everard. I felt it was my duty to find his body and bring him back to life, if I could.

Above all else, I missed Sonja. Being her, physically, was a painful reminder of that.

My nakedness was not helping. I hadn’t worn underwear for years, but I found myself reaching for the black lace knickers lying upon the bed. The shop assistant had assured me that this was what all the elegant ladies were wearing now. I must admit, they did feel good against the skin as I pulled them up over my thighs.

Next came the matching lace camisole, slightly stretchy and shaped to fit all my new curves. It was extremely flimsy and I fretted about putting a clumsy finger through it as I slipped it over my head and shoulders. The shop had also stocked the more substantial boned corset-type affairs, but I had been assured that ‘a lady of my youth and bearing’ had no need for such heavyweight support garments. I was getting to like compliments.

The stockings came next. These were more tricky. It was only now I realised that Sonja used to shave her legs, something I never previously considered. I could see myself having to borrow Gus’s shaving kit by the end of the week. For the time being, my problem was how to pull the finely-woven silk hose up over my legs without getting them snagged every two seconds. Eventually I figured out how to gather the stockings up over my toes, then carefully unfold the dark, diaphanous material around my feet, my ankles, calves, knees and finally my thighs. The brush of silk against skin filled my body with a pleasant tingling sensation. I fitted the garters, then brushed my hand down my newly stockinged legs, ostensibly to smooth out any wrinkles. They felt wonderful to the touch.

I tried a few steps, just to see how it all felt.

“Wow,” I breathed. It seemed the appropriate comment to make.

Next, I reached for the bodice top. This had hook-and-eye fasteners down the front and lacing at the back to alter the fit. I slipped my arms through the holes and pulled the top close around my chest. Doing up the fasteners was not so easy and trying to manoeuvre the tiny catches into place mostly by touch took me a while. Fortunately, I no longer had Everard’s big, stubby digits to hamper me and I was feeling quite pleased with myself by the time my nimble little fingers clicked the last fastener into place.