

Royal Reward

By

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Chapter One

The year of our Lord 1078, Cumbria, England...

Lady Enora stood on the parapet and looked down at the knight below with obvious contempt. He calmly stared back up at her, his features hidden, apart from a pair of steely eyes visible from the narrow slit in his helmet.

He asked again, his deep voice threatening, "Well? Art thou going to open the gates or do we hath to break the door down?"

Enora balled her fists together angrily. "Thee are not welcome, Sir! Take thy knights and leave us in peace! We hath no need of thee here!"

Sir Richard de Laurent looked up at the feisty young woman denying him entrance. King William had given him this castle as a reward for aiding him through two battles. He was not going to lose it by being denied entrance from this mere slip of a girl, nay, this vixen.

"Last chance!" he shouted up at her.

* * *

Enora's guardsman looked at her. "It is no use, milady...thee will hath to allow him entrance. We cannot fight him, he commands too many men." He hesitated a moment before continuing, "Also, it would be tantamount to treason...it is the king's wishes, milady."

"Aye, I know, Guilbert. But they art not my wishes, are they?" Enora leaned over the top and glared down at the knight, who was still patiently waiting. "Wilt thou promise to be lenient with my guards? I would hath no bloodshed!"

"If thee wouldst let us enter via the gates, then there will be no bloodshed. Thou hath my word of honour."

Enora snorted loudly. "Huh! Thy word of honour...I do not even knowest thee."

* * *

Richard ground his teeth together; forsooth, this was one aggressive wench. King William had given him leave to marry this 'lady' but he was beginning to wonder if it was such a good idea. Although, if he wanted this holding and the land that came with it, the lady was part of the bargain. At thirty-one years old, he now felt the need to settle down, and he was not going to lose this opportunity the king had bequeathed him.

Trying to get his temper under control, he answered, "As I said, thou hast my word of honour! Furthermore, lest thee forget, this is by order of King William, himself."

She stared at him for a moment longer, high colour in her cheeks, then he watched as she disappeared from the parapet. Finally, the wench had come to her senses.

Richard turned to his companion and confided, "I am beginning to doubt the sanity of this liaison, Guy."

Guy smirked beneath his helmet. "Oh, I do not know, Richard...she is a feisty piece, I will admit. She would produce fine, healthy sons for thee, and the taming would be fun. Thee knowest how thee dost dislike the simpering ladies at court."

Richard nodded. "I suppose thee hath a point. She looked quite fair, did she not? I shall soon tame that temper of hers. I wouldst not hath a shrew for a wife."

If Enora could have overheard them, she would never have opened the gates. However, as it was, she really had no choice. The king himself had decreed it. So once she had sent Guilbert to order the opening of the main gates, she made herself scarce. As Lady of the Castle, she should have been there to greet any new visitor, but in her eyes, this was an intruder, and as such, did not warrant her respect. Nay, if he thought he could simply march in and take over, then he was very much mistaken.

* * *

The huge wooden gates slowly opened inwards, the portcullis was raised and the drawbridge lowered, to allow Richard, Guy and their one-hundred-strong army to gain entrance into Beaumont Castle. Enora's men at arms stood back, wary of this unwelcome intrusion into their fortress.

Richard, true to his word, made sure that no one was harmed as his men settled in the barracks and the horses were stabled. Guilbert waited patiently to introduce himself to what would soon be his new master.

Taking off his gloves, Richard removed his helmet and ran his hand through his unruly mane of dark hair, before looking around for Lady Enora. His eye caught that of Guilbert's, and marching over, he demanded, "Where is the Lady Enora?"

"She has retired for the evening, milord. She is feeling badly."

"What?" he barked.

"She hath the headache."

"She seemed fine, a few minutes ago. Where is her chamber?"

Guilbert raced after him as he marched into the main castle hall. "Truly, milord, perhaps thee should wait until morning. Today has been most distressing for Lady Enora."

Richard stopped dead in his tracks and turned to Guilbert. "If I wish thee to advise me, I will ask. Other than that, I require thy immediate compliance!" He snapped his gloves between his hands, making Guilbert jump. "Now, *where* is Lady Enora's bedchamber?"

Guilbert decided he had tested this knight long enough. He had tried his best to persuade Lady Enora to greet her visitor—but being the stubborn girl she was—she had not heeded his advice. Now, it seemed she was going to have to greet him anyway. With a resigned sigh, Guilbert led Richard up the narrow staircase to one of the bedchambers above. Stopping at the furthest door, Richard signalled for Guilbert to leave him.

Guilbert hesitated, loathe to leave his lady in this knight's hands, but at the same time, he was aware that this foreboding looking knight had been given the king's permission to overtake their castle.

Richard was starting to get angry and ground his teeth, snapping, "I promise no harm will come to her, man, now leave."

Guilbert quickly walked away, feeling inadequate, but knowing this knight had complete power within the castle.

As she heard Richard's voice, Enora's ears pricked up within the bedchamber. For the love of God, he was outside her door! Quickly, she rushed over to the heavy, wooden door and turned the key in the lock, effectively shutting him out. How dare he think he could just walk in like that.

Richard heard the lock turn and smirked. "That paltry lock will not keep me out of thy room, milady. Now open this door or I will knock it down!"

"Go away...I-I hath the headache and need peace and quiet."

"I will count to three, and thee had better unlock the door or else. One...two...three." Still the lock did not turn. "Do not say I did not warn thee, Lady."

Putting down his helmet and gloves, he charged at the door and when his broad shoulder made contact, the lock splintered. The door, as he had predicted, crashed open.

Enora stood there, mouth agape, before coming to her senses and scrambling over to the other side of the room. "Get out...thee cannot just come in here like that! Be gone!" She stared at the hulking great man before her and wondered at her own bravery. He was massive! Shoulder length wavy brown hair framed a very handsome face with neatly trimmed beard and moustache. His hazel eyes bore into hers as he folded his arms and she gulped in alarm.

His eyes swept down her petite figure before settling once more on her face. Despite her fear, she raised her chin and challenged him, her temper rising. "Wherefore dost thou stare so, thee great oaf!" she spat angrily.

"Oaf? I take umbrage at thy words, milady, and I am staring at the so-called Lady of the Castle, who was meant to greet me at the gates. It seems thee lack manners and etiquette, milady. Did thy father not teach thee any? And I am not an oaf."

Enora's temper flared. "How dare thee talk about my father? Thou art not worthy."

Her father had died six months ago, hence the reason that this entire episode had arisen. Alone with no guardian, her holdings were vulnerable to invasion from several different enemies of the realm, any one of them a true threat to the crown. King William wanted her married to a knight of his choice, as soon as conceivably possible, thus ensuring the castle did not fall into enemy hands.

Richard's patience was wearing very thin, and he scoffed, "I will talk about whomever I like, milady. It is not for thee to give orders to me."

"Well, that is what thee say, not what is true...this is *my* home and *thou* art nothing but an intruder." Enora grabbed the nearest thing to her, which happened to be a candlestick, and threw it at him.

He ducked just in time, as the missile hit the wall behind him. "Do that again and thee will regret it!"

At the age of twenty-two, Enora was not used to taking orders, especially after overseeing her castle all by herself for the last six months. Stomping her foot angrily, she picked up her slipper and threw it straight at his head. This time, her missile hit the intended target...right on his temple, the heel making a solid thud against his skull.

"That is enough! Thee hath overstepped thyself." He rushed around to her side of the bed. Seeing his intention, Enora tried to scramble over the coverlet, but she was much too slow for a seasoned knight and, within an instant, she felt her ankle seized by one of his large hands. She kicked and struggled but to no avail, as he easily pulled her back towards him.

"Get *off* me! Thee blackguard, scoundrel...oooh...thee."

"Stay still, thee little vixen."

He sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled her straight over his knees. In moments, she found herself staring at the rushes on the floor in a grip she could not get out of, no matter how much she struggled.

Then to her horror, she felt him lifting her dress and pulling down her undergarments.

"What dost thou think thee are doing...get thy hands off me. Help! Help! Aow!"

Her bottom suddenly stung, as his powerful hand descended straight onto one cheek. Then again, and again and again. *Smack! Smack! Smack!*

"So I am an oaf, am I...a blackguard?" *Smack!* "Any other words thee wouldst like to throw at me this eve?" *Smack! Smack!*

"Aow...no...aye...thee knave...thee contemptible pig...ow!"

Enora was embarrassed beyond belief that this...this heathen had exposed her bare bottom and now was actually spanking her. No one had ever dared do such a thing to her! How could he? Once again, she struggled and kicked but he wasn't going to budge.

"So, milady, understand this—thee will never throw anything at me again."

She spoke through gritted teeth, "Not unless thou doth deserve it." *Smack!* "Ow! That hurts. Let me go!"

"With pleasure." He pushed her off his lap and she landed in an undignified heap at his feet. Rubbing her sore bottom, she looked up at him with her eyes blazing pure hatred, while he sat chuckling at her discomfort.

"Now, perhaps thee wouldst be so kind as to provide food and wine for thy guests, as a good hostess should?"

Picking herself up off the floor, Enora furiously adjusted her shift and skirts and smoothed down her hair before turning back to him.

"I shall provide it this evening, if only for the other guests...thee dost deserve naught."

He grabbed her arm as she went to walk past him, "Heed me well, milady, we will soon be living together as man and wife, whether thee doth like it or not...and I expect my wife to defer to me in every way. That will start from right now."

She gasped. "I will *not* be thy wife. *Never!* I wouldst rather marry a pig."

Shrugging out of his grasp, she left him staring after her. "Oh, thee will be my wife...sooner than thee doth think."

* * *

Enora had laid out a splendid feast for the head knights and their squires. Richard was sitting at the high board with Guy and several other leading knights, partaking of the sumptuous meal. Enora's chair, next to Richard's, was noticeably empty, and as he sat quaffing his wine, he decided to rectify the matter immediately.

"Excuse me, Guy, I hath an errand to run."

Guy raised his goblet and downed the rest of his wine, tossing a bone to one of the large Irish wolfhounds that had been sitting patiently, waiting for a titbit.

"Felix—a song, if thee please." Guy called over to their camp minstrel, who at his command, jumped up off his seat and proceeded to sing a comical song, making the hall erupt with laughter. One of the dogs started howling along to the music, amplifying the noise.

Richard exited the hall in search of Enora, when by chance he noticed the resident priest standing in a corner. Pausing mid-stride, he decided it was time to sort out the wedding arrangements.

The priest looked up from his reverie when he noticed his new lord striding over towards him. "Good evening, milord," he greeted him.

"Good evening! I would ask that thee make ready the chapel this evening...I intend to wed Lady Enora, within the hour."

The priest gasped. "Milord... 'tis too soon! Lady Enora is not ready... prithee hath patience. Thou cannot simply walk in here and change everything overnight."

"Aye, I can... and I will. Now go and make ready."

The priest was prepared to argue further, but one look at Richard's face told him all he needed to know. This knight would brook no disobedience from anyone. Richard stared at him, his intense hazel eyes boring into the priest's very soul, daring him to disobey his command. Nodding his head in obedience, the priest walked off to find Enora.

* * *

"He *what*?"

"Milady, he asks that thee join him in the chapel in forty minutes, so thee can take thy wedding vows." Her priest bowed his head slightly. "I am truly sorry, milady, but thee hast little choice. I will leave thee now and make preparations for the blessing."

Enora was seething as she watched the priest leave the room, before erupting in a show of anger.

"Wedding vows. I will never be his wife." She paced up and down her bedchamber, whilst her maid looked on, twisting her apron in her hands. She had seen Lady Enora in a full-blown rage before and all the signs were there for it to happen any moment.

"Wedding vows... how dare he? He comes into my... aye, *my* castle and starts ordering *my* servants around. How dare he do such a thing? Overbearing knave!"

"Milady, he is here under the king's command."

"King, be damned! They can all go to hell, as far as I am concerned." Stopping her pacing, she turned to the maid, and instructed, "Go down to the stables and tell Wilfred to ready my horse. I will not stay here a moment longer; I shall to go my cousin's in Whitehaven until this oaf decides to leave. Without me... he cannot own Beaumont."

"Art thou certain?"

"Aye... now leave." As soon as the maid left her chamber, Enora opened her trunk and took out a heavy cloak to keep out the chill of the evening. Whitehaven was only an hour's ride away but she would be safe there. Making haste, she left the bedchamber and cautiously tiptoed down the stairs. The noise from the hall was almost deafening as Richard's knights indulged themselves in drink and made merry. Pursing her lips, she drew her hood over her head so no one would recognise her. Making her way silently through the kitchens, she hurried over to the stables where, with any luck, her horse would be ready for her.

"Wilfred, is she ready?" Enora whispered to the stable boy. As he started to answer, a dark figure stepped out of the shadows to stand directly in front of her.

"*Nay!* He is not ready, milady!"

Enora gave out a startled scream and stepped back in shock, as Richard made himself known.

Holding a hand to her chest, she cried, "How didst thee... I mean... what dost thou do here?"

"Didst thee truly think me that addle-brained, milady? Didst thee not thinketh that I wouldst know thee would try to flee?"

He stepped closer to her. She screamed and started to run in the opposite direction. But she was no match for him; he simply scooped her up with one arm and threw her over his broad

shoulder. She beat him with her fists, kicked and struggled, but it was no use. He just strode towards the chapel with her hanging on for dear life.

"Put me down, let me go!"

Enora was so mad by now that if she had had a knife, she would have thrust it in him. As it was, she was powerless to resist. When he finally put her down, it was to position her next to him, at the front of the aisle in the small church. Her priest looked concerned at the way this wedding was going, but as was the way of the world, the man had all the rights. Richard kept a firm grip on her upper arm so she could not run away.

"Proceed!" Richard glared at the priest, challenging him to oppose his command. The priest cleared his throat and began to speak,

"We are gathered here today..."

As the man droned on, Enora silently seethed, grinding her teeth as she tried to think of ways to escape this sham of a marriage.

"Enora of Beaumont, wilt thou hath this man to be thy wedded husband, wilt thou obey him, and serve him, love, honour and keep him, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye both shall live?"

Enora gave Richard a disdainful look and pursed her lips, not saying a word.

"She will!"

"What...thee cannot answer for me, milord!" Enora cried, looking at her priest for reassurance.

The priest shook his head, "Milord, the Lady herself must answer!"

Enora looked smug and said nothing. The priest turned to her. "Prithee, milady, thee must answer...yea or nay?" he implored her.

Richard glowered down upon her. "Need I remind thee, Lady, that this marriage is by royal decree?"

She stood impotently, looking from one to the other. It was a hopeless situation. She had to marry to keep her holdings safe, she knew that, but she'd wanted to marry someone of her own choice...not this...knave! Admittedly, he was a good-looking knave, but nevertheless, not the man of her choice.

"Milady..." the priest implored.

Enora sighed and dropped her shoulders, coming to the realisation that she had little choice in the matter, before finally mumbling, "I will."

The priest breathed a sigh of relief and carried on with the ceremony.

She might not be able to stop the wedding, but she was certainly not going to make it easy for him! Quickly twisting out of his grip, she elbowed Richard straight in the side, before turning to flee, once again. Giving a sigh of exasperation, he simply put his booted foot out, causing her to trip straight over it and land on the floor, sprawled out on her front.

Before she could move, he pulled her up and stood her in front of him, this time, firmly gripping both her shoulders so she could not stray.

"Carry on, priest! Lady Enora is now ready to continue." In her ear, he whispered, "Remember what happened to thee earlier in thy bedchamber? Well...if thou dost carry on with this performance, thee will receive the same, right here, and in front of everyone gathered."

Enora gulped. She knew she could not bear that sort of humiliation. Feeling her shoulders slump slightly, Richard grinned to himself. Aye, perhaps there was hope for her after all!

* * *

After the wedding, Richard steered Enora past all the well-wishers and back into the main hall. Picking up a metal tankard on one of the side tables, he smashed it down several times to get everyone's attention. The noise gradually subsided, until all eyes were on the newly married couple.

"I hath an announcement, we are now married. Prithee, raise thy glasses to the new overlord of Beaumont Castle and his wife...the Lady Enora!"

Richard's men erupted with cheering and clapping, rejoicing at his good fortune. Enora's people, however, remained impassive, not sure how to take this quick turn of events. Their Lady did not look too happy to be married to this knight and only time would tell if it was a good match. For now, all they could do was wait and see.

Richard was heartily clapped on the back, and Enora did her best to accept the good wishes of those around her. All the while, she was busily plotting another escape plan. If he thought he was sharing her bed tonight, just because he had forced her to become his wife, then he was going to be sorely disappointed!

* * *

"Milady, surely not, tell me thou art not serious?"

"Do I look as though I jest? Just do as I say, will thee?"

The maid sighed. This was another of Lady Enora's schemes, but she had no choice but to obey. Quickly, the maid packed a small bag with a few of her mistress's clothes and other items she would need for the journey, whilst Enora dressed in a thick, woollen dress to keep out the night air, along with her heavy cloak.

Enora took the bag, and glancing around the room to make sure she had not forgotten anything, she hugged her maid. "Now remember, thou are not to tell a soul about this...thou knowest naught...remember that." Her maid nodded acquiescence.

Going to the fireplace, Enora pulled down an innocuous looking stone figure and, suddenly, part of the wall opened, to reveal a small passageway. Taking her candlestick, she gave a nervous smile to her maid and stepped into the dark corridor. Once inside, she pressed a lever on the wall and the makeshift door closed, leaving her alone in the eerie passage.

Now that she was on her own, she was not so sure it was such a good idea. Her father had shown her this passageway when she was little. He had told her that if ever there was a siege on the castle and she needed to escape, this was the tunnel to use. If she remembered correctly, the other end opened onto a rocky outcrop, about a hundred yards from the entrance to the castle. It was extremely well hidden and no enemy, thus far, had ever discovered it.

Creeping forward, she gradually started making her way to what she hoped would be the exit.

* * *

Richard was feeling extremely pleased with himself. He had accomplished, in one day, what he had waited all his life for...his own holdings! And what a holding it was...complete with a pretty wife. A feisty one, perchance, but still a wife...who was now, this very minute, being prepared to accept him in their bedchamber. Aye, life could not get better than this! He

gulped down a large mouthful of wine and slammed his silver goblet down on the table. It was time to turn Lady Enora into his wife, in more than name only!

Guy laughed slyly at Richard. "Leaving so early, Richard?"

Richard grinned back. "Well, Guy. A certain lady awaits the pleasure of my company and what sort of man would I be, to keep a lady waiting?"

Guy slapped him on the back and raised his goblet. "Here's to the first night of many, eh, Richard!"

Richard laughed and left his friend to enjoy the night's festivities. Taking the stairs two at a time, he made his way to Enora's bedchamber, now their bedchamber. All seemed very quiet. Without knocking, he tried the handle and, to his surprise, it opened. He had fully expected the door to be locked and he would have to break it down again. The unfortunate locksmith had already fixed it once today.

As he walked in, he immediately sensed something amiss. The bed had not been turned down and there was no obedient wife waiting for him. Where the devil had the wench gone now? He searched the room from top to bottom, lest she was hiding, but nowhere was she to be found. Turning on his heel, he left the chamber and quickly called for his manservant.

"Aaron, hast thou seen Lady Enora? Or her maid?"

"No, Sir Richard, I hath not seen Lady Enora since the marriage ceremony. Her maid is in the kitchens, as far as I know...dost thou want me to go fetch her?"

"Aye, and tell her to come immediately. It is a matter of utmost urgency."

He strode back into the bedroom and sat down on the bed with his head in his hands. The only answer was that she had run away again. Was the thought of living with him truly that bad? Did he repulse her that much? Many women had extolled his virtues in the past, in and out of the bedchamber, and he knew himself to be not plain, so why her reluctance?

His thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of her maid. She looked extremely nervous and her eyes kept darting round the room.

"Thee wanted me, milord?"

"Aye! Hast thou seen Lady Enora?"

"N-no, Sir, I hath not," she stammered. "I prepared her for bed and, as far as I knew...she was ready for thee, milord!"

He narrowed his eyes; she was hiding something. "Thou dost realise that if I find out thee doth speak false, then thee will be dismissed forthwith?"

The maid looked horrified at this remark. She needed this position; her family would starve if she didn't bring in money to the house. Suddenly, she threw her apron up to cover her face and started crying into it. "I am sorry, milord...truly I am...I tried to stop her, but she just wouldst not listen!"

Jumping up, he grabbed her by the shoulders. "Where did she go, damn thee, where?"

Reluctantly, the little maid walked over to the fireplace and pulled down the secret lever. The door swung open to reveal the dark interior of its passageway. Without hesitation, Richard grabbed a candlestick and entered into the darkened corridor to search for his rebellious wife.