



HIS FIST CONNECTED WITH HER GUT, AND ALL THE air rushed from her lungs with a sickening grunt. Elisabeth felt herself falling and watched the ground come up to meet her, but she did not quite reach it. Rough hands grabbed her under the armpits and hauled her, with no particular gentleness, back to her feet again before she could collapse. She gasped in desperation for a breath, but another blow to the belly just beneath her ribs cheated her of the effort. She might have regretted misplacing her doublet and enjoyed the satisfaction of her tormentor's bare hand smashing against the concealed metal scales, but all her attention for the moment was focused on gasping for big gulps of sweet, lovely air, while stars danced around her eyes

Elisabeth slumped in the hands grasping her bloodied shirt. Her hands were bound behind her, and her legs threatened to collapse beneath her. Blood from an open cut above one eyebrow dripped into her eye, and when she finally managed a random, hacking breath her mind turned itself to more practical matters, like outrage over the thought she might be left with a scar. She was not given long to gather her thoughts before the back of his hand flew and landed across the corner of her jaw.

“Quim!” Caspar von Bech snarled, his Boehman spoken with a cultured and generally superior accent, wholly at odds with the vulgarity of the curse.

Elsabeth spat blood from her mouth and smiled up at him. “Oh Caspar, whatever is the matter today?” she said.

Caspar seized her roughly by the chin and wrenched her head around to face him. Eyes blue as ice bored into hers, and his lips twisted into a scowl beneath his well-manicured mustache. His hair was the color of straw, silky, and neatly groomed. She might ordinarily have found him a quite handsome man from across a tavern, but unfortunately for him she also knew him far too well already to be fooled by such appearances.

“You know ‘whatever is the matter,’” he snapped. “I want it!”

“Well if that is the way you ask for it, then ’tis no wonder every woman from here to Köln has refused your bed.”

The words were no sooner out of her mouth than his hand flew again. He delivered a powerful cuff to her temple that snapped her head around and momentarily blinded her with a flash of light across her eyes. Only the firm grip of Caspar’s men kept the impact from driving her into the dirt. Elsabeth shook her head to clear away the ringing in her ears, decided his reaction had been worth it, and grinned up at him again.

“Where is it?”

“I don’t know, maybe you should ask that idiot Vorfechter of yours,” she said.

That earned her another solid punch to the stomach, and again Elsabeth gasped for breath. Caspar seized her roughly by the hair and pulled her head back. “Take a good look around,” he hissed between his teeth. His ordinarily fair-skinned face turned bright red as his temper got the better of him.

They were in a small clearing of widely spaced trees, grass, and wildflowers. It was a beautiful autumn evening, aside from the company, with a wide and clear sky set on fire as the sun slipped down into the west, while a cool breeze wound between the trees and set their branches in motion. The area was also conspicuously absent of any sign of human life. There was no road or trail, no sound of voices or other activity, no abandoned carts, garbage, or anything else associated with people having passed this way any time recently.

“If you wished for time alone with me you could always have asked,” she said, when she managed to regain her breath. The last blow left her belly tying itself in knots, and her last meal threatened to claw back up her throat.

Caspar seized her by the throat and squeezed. Elisabeth felt the blood flowing through the veins in her neck strain against his grip, and she had difficulty drawing a breath. “You are alone, whore! The Master is no longer here to take care of you. I could crush your throat here and now and leave you for the wolves, and no one would ever find your miserable carcass.”

He released her with a violent shove. Elisabeth’s neck throbbed in protest at the manhandling, but she refused him the satisfaction of reacting to the pain.

“Tch. Ever the jealous sort, Caspar. How many times need I tell you Paulus did not share your sort of affection?”

Another crack echoed across the wood as he rounded on her again. Elisabeth spat out more blood, and ran her tongue over the gash torn in her lower lip. Caspar grabbed her by the chin and put his face in hers. The veins in his neck and temple were bulging. “Don’t you dare insult me like this!”

“Well, you always were envious of my closeness to him, and you certainly never made a move on me, though you had plenty of opportunity. Not that I ever would have accepted, of course. Even

then you were a disgusting pig, and you certainly have not improved in our years apart. But it does make one wonder.”

This time when his hand flew, it was not the back of his hand to the side of her face or a fist to the gut. Instead, he balled his hand and delivered a vicious hook to her temple, and once again Elisabeth saw stars. Such was the force of the blow that the men holding her lost their grip, and she spun face-first into the dirt.

Her ears rang, her vision swirled about her, and Elisabeth was only vaguely aware of the hands seizing her and dragging her to her knees while Caspar stepped around in front of her. Had she the mind, she might have considered delivering a solid head-butt to his groin, for which she found herself at the convenient height. But, dazed as she was, Elisabeth could not even remain upright, much less formulate any particular strategy to avenge the battering. So instead, she just hung suspended from the men gripping her arms, spat the blood out of her mouth and fought back the rising urge to vomit while the world spun about her.

Caspar crouched in front of her, seized a fistful of her hair, and wrenched her head around, forcing her to look at him once more. There were now two of him spinning in circles about each other, and the idle thought of *two* Caspars in the world made her suddenly desperate for him to go on and kill her, even if it did mean his countenances would likely be the last thing she would see.

“I tell you one last time: Return it, now!”

Elisabeth winced against the strain the awkward turn of her head put on her neck. “And I am telling you one last time I have no idea where it is!”

He released her with a rough shove and nodded to the men behind her. They yanked her back to her feet and dragged her towards a large oak tree with several branches of convenient height. She made an effort to break free, but her captors were too many, too strong, and with her hands bound she was left with only

her feet as weapons. Elisabeth kicked at whatever shin, knee or groin presented itself as a target, and tried to smash the back of her head against anyone standing behind her. But her struggling quickly proved futile, and any fight she had left in her was ended by yet another solid blow to her belly that drove the air from her lungs and left her gasping for breath and on the verge of vomiting.

A length of rope was thrown over one of the branches perhaps twice her height above the ground, and one end was knotted into a noose. Elisabeth fought down the surge of panic as the full realization of Caspar's intent settled over her. "Oh, really, Caspar?" she said when she managed to draw enough breath again to talk. She made her best effort to keep her voice level and her anxiety out of it. "Is this really supposed to convince me to tell you something I have already told you I know nothing about?"

"You had your chance, bitch," he snarled. "You are a thief and a liar, and 'tis long past time someone treated you as such."

Perhaps I am, but damned if I die like this.

"And I tell you I dispute your charge," she said. "Give me a sword and let us argue the point like civilized folk, so I can cut your head off rather than listen to your slander any longer."

He glowered at her. "Do you take me for a fool? I know what will happen if I put a sword in your hands, and I shan't let you slip away again."

"Oh, so you are still a coward, then. You would not dare fight me as a student, and you daren't fight me now. It defies belief the Brotherhood ever made you Master in Soest."

He snapped his fingers, and the noose was unceremoniously lowered over her head and tightened. Three of Caspar's men took hold of the other end and tested it and the branch, and Elisabeth felt the rope tug against her throat. Desperation to delay what was to come so she might find a means of escape overrode her revulsion of what she now considered.

Elsabeth made a pout and gave him a quick bat of her eyelashes.

“Come now, Caspar, I am sure there must be something you and I could work out together ...”

She trailed off suggestively, but grimaced inwardly. *I think I may be ill...*

However, Caspar just gave her a vicious and humorless smile. “Oh no, you don’t cry, kiss, or fuck your way out this time. Your charms are wasted on me. Hang her!”

The next thing Elsabeth felt was the rope pulling taut, and she was hauled roughly off her feet by the neck. Her body thrashed and kicked in a desperate attempt to find some sort of purchase to lift the pressure off her throat as the noose tightened around it, but the effort was in vain. She gasped in anguish, and her blood surged against the rope cutting off the flow to her head. Pressure built in her head and face, and her tongue swelled and tried its best to force its way out of her mouth. Her last conscious thought as darkness intruded on her vision was how grey and lifeless everything around her now seemed.

Then all she knew was black.