



Lisette Allen
Elena's Conquest

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Elena's Conquest

Lisette Allen

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Summer, 1070 ad

1

With a rebellious little sigh, Elena put down her basket on the dusty flagstones. It was still only half-full. But the day was so hot; far too hot to be gathering herbs for old Sister Winifred's medicinal salves!

Overhead, the sun burned down from a cloudless blue summer sky, its heat trapped within the mellow stone walls of the little herb garden. Elena heard the chapel bell tolling noon, its silvery chimes hanging heavy in the still air. White doves murmured sleepily in the eaves. The dark, thick forest that surrounded the convent was silent, as if waiting for something to happen.

But nothing ever did happen here at this remote little convent of Linby, lost in the northern wilds between the hills and the sea — this place where Elena had spent nearly all her life. And their very remoteness, Sister Winifred would remind her severely, was why they were safe — why their impoverished, tiny community had survived, when all around them the king's soldiers were wreaking savage punishment for the great Saxon uprising last winter. Elena had heard murmurs of terrible happenings, rumours of harsh bloodshed, like the rustling of the leaves in the forest before a storm. She'd heard that at Thoresfield, the great Norman stronghold to the south, the king had installed the notorious Aimery le Sabrenn as commander of the garrison. At the very mention of his name, the nuns crossed themselves, as if to ward off evil.

But nothing had changed here at Linby, except that perhaps food was harder to come by than ever, and people

were more fearful, more wary of strangers. Just occasionally, they had visitors; travellers who stopped for a night or two with the old priest, Father Wulfstan; mysterious, hungry-looking men who rested and moved on quickly. Otherwise, here in the little convent, they were shut off from the world. And this, thought Elena, with a sudden pang, was to be her life, for ever.

There were some travellers staying with the priest at the moment. Elena knew, because yesterday she'd been ordered to take some of the nuns' meagre rye loaves over to the priest's little cottage. She'd not gone inside; the priest's slatternly housekeeper had taken the bread from her quickly, then given her a bundle of tallow candles that the priest wanted taking to the chapel, and bade her be gone.

Elena had turned slowly back along the path to the convent — and then, through the trees, she'd seen the man. He was coming towards her, heading purposefully for the priest's house; tall and fair-haired, holding himself proudly in spite of his shabby clothes. Elena's heart skipped a beat; Sister Winifred had told her sternly that she must never, ever talk to Father Wulfstan's visitors. But this man, who was perhaps not much older than herself, was blocking her path! Catching her breath, she dipped clumsily to one side to avoid him; the tallow candles slipped from her basket and scattered on the ground.

The man bent swiftly to gather them up, while Elena stood by helplessly, her face burning with confusion. He placed the candles carefully in her basket, and said, 'They are undamaged. I'm sorry if I startled you — you are from the convent?'

'Yes — I must take these candles to the chapel.'

He still barred her way, assessing her carefully, taking in the long white veil that had slipped askew as usual over her thick blonde hair, and the shabby grey gown that concealed her slender figure. 'So,' the tall man said, 'they've shut you up here? With only those old nuns for company? What have you done to deserve such punishment?'

Elena, startled by his direct question, couldn't bear to be disloyal to the kindly nuns. 'The sisters have been good to me! My parents died of the fever when I was but a child — I was left with nothing, so they took me in, gave me a home.'

She was uneasily aware all the time of his eyes burning into her. Vivid blue eyes, that burned with fire in his tanned, masculine face. Her heart thudded uncomfortably. How different he was to the men she was used to; the worn, kindly old priest, the haggard peasants who scraped a living from the forest clearing. Something stirred restlessly within her as she gazed helplessly up at this tall, golden-haired Saxon. She caught a glimpse of smooth, sunburned skin at the base of his throat, where his tunic lay open, and she felt her mouth go dry.

'You are too beautiful,' he was saying softly, 'to be locked away here. Yes, beautiful. Don't you realise it? Has no-one ever told you?'

'I — I know that it is wicked to be vain,' stammered Elena.

'Vain?' smiled the disturbing man. 'It is not vain to know that you are beautiful, it is God's gift!' He lifted one hand and softly touched her blushing cheek. 'You should not let them shut you away. Those nuns are like old carrion crows, preying on your youth and innocence.'

In the distance, through the trees, Elena caught sight of Sister Winifred looking out anxiously for her. 'I must go!' she blurted out desperately.

The golden-haired man had shrugged, and watched her with narrowed, thoughtful eyes as she hurried back to the convent in confusion.

That encounter had made Elena strangely restless. Locked away here, he said. Yes, she was! And he had told her she was beautiful; but surely, he himself was beautiful, with his vibrant, masculine features, and his strong body so tautly muscled beneath his shabby clothing! Last night, she had dreamed strange, disturbing dreams that were shadowy and dark. She often had dreams, but the nuns told her that it was wrong, and she must forget them.

This time, she dreamed that she was lost, alone in the forest, and a man riding by saw her and came slowly towards her. She knew it was sinful of her; but instead of running away she found herself drawn towards him, as if under a spell. He held out his arms, and she felt her heart fill with happiness. But as she ran into his embrace and looked up into his face, expecting to see the tanned Saxon features of Father Wulfstan's nameless guest, she felt a terrible, deadly chill strike into her heart. *The man who held her was one of the king's soldiers...*

Even now, here in the familiar safety of the little walled garden, she felt a strange tightening in her stomach as she remembered the alien horseman of her dream. Her rough linen shift chafed suddenly at her breasts; her hand moved instinctively to adjust her gown, and she discovered, with a little, juddering shock, that her nipples were swollen and hard. She snatched away her fingers as if they had been

burned, aware that her breathing had become shallow and ragged.

The nuns had always instructed her that it was the work of the devil himself to even think about — let alone touch — your own flesh. Elena always tried to accept their rulings without question. But her dream had unsettled her, and she knew, without a doubt, that it would return.

Her lips felt full and slightly swollen; she moistened them and tried hard to fight down the strange yearning that filled her tender body. It was the heat, she told herself desperately, that made her feel so restless. Oh, but she was wicked. Perhaps too wicked to become a nun! She must do penance for her sinfulness, for feeling this aching dissatisfaction with her fate when all around her people were suffering so much as a result of King William's punishment of the rebels.

But even as she resolved to make her confession to Father Wulfstan, she knew, with a quiet feeling of despair, that she would never forget the dark, unknown stranger in her dream.

The familiar, everyday sound of the chapel bell broke into her anguished thoughts. Elena jumped from the stone bench and picked up her wicker-basket hastily. She would be late for the service! How quickly this last hour had gone!

Then she realised that something was wrong. The chapel bell was not tolling the hour steadily and calmly, as usual. Instead, it was being pealed in panic, almost desperation, over and over. A cracked, uneven sound. Elena froze to the spot, suddenly cold in the sunlight. In disbelief, she heard the sound of horses' hooves; of people running; people shouting; doors slamming.

‘The Normans! God help us, the Normans are upon us —’ The hoarse cry broke off, and somewhere a woman’s high-pitched voice lifted in a scream. The doves rose clamouring from beneath the eaves. Iron-shod hooves clattered on the cobbles of the courtyard; harsh foreign voices cursed aloud. Elena heard the sound of steel being drawn, and smelled the stink of burning thatch. Trapped by fire or slaughtered by Norman steel — how many others had died like this?

Her heart hammering wildly, Elena ran out of the little walled garden and stopped, transfixed by terror. There were mounted soldiers in the courtyard — rough men-at-arms in stained leather jerkins. Aimery le Sabrenn’s soldiers had found them at last! And one of them had his swordpoint at the old priest’s throat. Poor Father Wulfstan, who’d herded the terrified nuns indoors, and run out of the little chapel to face *this*...

The soldier was threatening the priest in a low, menacing voice. ‘The rebels, old priest — the Saxon rebels. We know you harbour them on their travels, give them shelter. Where have you hidden them? Tell us, or it will be the worse for you, you old fool!’

Elena listened in anguish. *The rebels*. Father Wulfstan’s mysterious visitors, who came and went with such secrecy — the tall Saxon who had spoken to her yesterday...

In a flash Elena understood it all. The soldiers from the great stronghold of Thoresfield had come here because Father Wulfstan was sheltering Saxon rebels! She let out a little cry of despair and one of the horsemen, on hearing her voice, wheeled round to face her. His horse, startled, reared up, and its great forequarters plunged down towards her.

A sudden blinding pain seared Elena's senses as a flailing hoof caught her on the side of her head. She called out in terror, and then the blackness engulfed her.

Darkness fell early in the forest that night. It was still hot and sultry, with the threat of thunder hanging in the air. The light of burning torches, held on high by the men who rode slowly on horseback, cast grotesque shadows on the wavering line of figures that tramped with bowed heads southwards along the forest track. Now and then, someone slipped or stumbled, jerking at the line of coarse rope that bound each one tautly by the wrists. Whenever this happened, the lash of a horseman's whip would hiss through the air, and everyone would tense involuntarily as they waited for the scream. Afterwards, the silence would be strangely intense.

Back at the rear of the roped line, someone missed a step, slipping on the sodden leaf mould. A mounted guard, his flaming torch held high, cursed and moved his big horse back towards the offender.

'God damn these Saxon rebels,' he muttered. 'More trouble than they're worth...' Then he saw who had fallen, and smiled slowly.

The prisoner, who was desperately scrambling up before he could reach her, was female. The flickering light from his torch danced mockingly over the tangled fair curls that tumbled to her shoulders. The plain grey gown, that clung to her slender figure, was stained with mud from her fall. She was one of the little prisoners they'd taken from the convent — the convent that sheltered those cursed Saxon rebels.

His thin lips curled suddenly, and he leaned across the high pommel of his saddle, his dark Norman face keen with sudden anticipation.

‘Pick your feet up, convent brat!’ His voice was silky and slow as he fingered the leather whip in his belt. ‘Or I’ll give you reason enough to move...’

The Saxon prisoner looked up in sharp fear as she was dragged along by the thick hemp rope. Already, he could see, her fragile wrists had been rubbed raw.

Blood of Christ, he breathed to himself, but this one was a little beauty. Her features were delicate and regular, her wide, terrified eyes a dark, sultry blue such as he’d never seen before, and her small pink mouth was full and ripe. Even the drab grey of the hideous convent gown couldn’t conceal the high swell of those rounded little breasts. He moistened his lips. A nun? A disguise, most like. Yet more evidence of the rebels’ cunning ways.

She said, in a low, broken French, ‘I pray your forgiveness, sire. There was a branch across the path.’

The Norman gave a harsh laugh. So she knew their language! An educated bitch! ‘Save your prayers, little sister,’ he jeered, his white teeth gleaming in his coarsely handsome face. ‘You’ll need all the prayers you can think of where you’re going — to the stronghold of Aimery le Sabrenn, lord of Thoresfield!’

He saw how the wench shuddered and briefly touched the crude wooden cross that hung on a thong of leather at her breasts. So, she’d heard of the Breton lord Aimery. The devil himself. She knew what she was in for.

He felt a sudden, urgent need for this fair-haired Saxon maid. His eyes narrowed as he rode alongside her, and he licked his dry mouth, feeling the familiar ache in his loins, the tightening. Damn le Sabrenn, he thought suddenly. Hadn't their fine lord started out as a Breton mercenary, no better than the rest of them? Would he miss one of these Saxon sluts that they'd picked up along with the rebels? Why, with a bit of luck, he wouldn't even know she was missing! Surreptitiously he adjusted his constricting breeches, stroking himself briefly as he did so, like a secret promise. Later, perhaps. Later, he would show this little slut what a real man was made of.

He rode back to his place at the front of the procession, his smoking torch held high. The image of the blonde wench from the convent inflamed his blood.

Elena watched him ride off with a strange, sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. She couldn't forget the way he'd looked at her, with that hungry light in his dark eyes. She swallowed down the nausea that suddenly shook her, and struggled to keep walking, though she didn't know how much longer she could go on. The rope had rubbed the skin from her wrists. Her thin leather shoes were almost worn through, and her tender feet were cut and bruised.

Was it worth going on? Shouldn't she just refuse, and lie there? If she did, they would cut her free of the rope, and then they'd flog her. Already on this nightmare journey she'd seen strong men quail at the floggings. Yet could it be worse than where they were going? To the vile stronghold of the Breton lord Aimery le Sabrenn, William the Conqueror's notorious commander.

Even at their remote little convent, she'd heard of him. The nuns whispered of unspeakable happenings, of some

strange, dark evil that Elena could only guess at. They said that he had personal reason to hate all Saxons with a hard, relentless fury.

The twisted black branches of the forest reached out to grip her, like fingers tearing at her face. An owl cried and swooped low in front of her. Elena whimpered softly in her fear.

Her head still throbbed dully from where the plunging horse's hoof had struck her. When she had at last recovered consciousness, she had found herself lying in a cart, on filthy, soiled straw, along with other prisoners who were too weak to walk. The jogging motion of the cart along the rutted forest track had made her feel sick; the stench of the other prisoners, all sick or badly wounded, made her senses swim. When the man who was guarding them sloped off into the bushes to relieve himself, she had slipped from the back of the cart and tried to run.

She hadn't got far. Sneeringly, they had told her that if she was well enough to run, she was well enough to walk. Roped into line with the rest of the prisoners, she began her long walk into captivity, south to the stronghold of Thoresfield. They told her that she was a serf now, the property of Aimery le Sabrenn, great lord and friend of the king, persecutor of Saxons. This surely was her punishment for her rebellious, restless thoughts. 'Oh, sweet Mary, blessed Mother of God,' Elena muttered in despair. 'Help me in my hour of need...' Asob broke in her throat. 'Help me. *Please...*'

It was almost midnight when at last the commander of the guards ordered them to halt in a small, grassy clearing near a half-ruined hovel. As soon as the ropes were untied a man

tried to run off into the trees. The other captives watched in despairing apathy as a guard on horseback quickly pursued him and dealt him such a vicious blow with the heel of his whip that he slumped unconscious to the ground. He lay where he fell in the darkness beyond the circle of torchlight, because nobody dared to go and help him. Elena watched it all in horror, her tender heart torn with pity for the poor man.

After that, the guards moved round on foot, tossing out hunks of coarse dry bread and passing round leather skins of brackish water.

The water went quickly, because the night was still oppressively hot; and by the time the waterskin reached Elena, it was almost empty. She took a small sip to wash the dust from her throat, and then, looking round quickly to make sure no-one was looking, she hid it beneath the folds of her grey dress. Then she moved silently towards the edge of the clearing, searching in the darkness of the overhanging trees for the fallen man.

She found him. He was conscious now, but his face was almost grey in the shadows, and a trickle of blood ran from his forehead, darkening his long fair hair. With a gasp of horror, Elena recognised him as the man who had spoken to her only yesterday as she hurried back from the priest's house. One of Father Wulfstan's guests — one of the rebels! She swallowed down her sudden, sharp distress at seeing him here, like this.

He looked up, dazed, at the slim, beautiful girl in the grey dress who knelt beside him. 'It's you... the girl from the convent...'

'Here is some water,' Elena whispered. 'Please drink it.'

The Saxon managed to raise himself carefully on one elbow, though he grimaced with the pain. She held the waterskin to his parched lips and he swallowed feebly. Then he lay back on the ground.

‘I have brought this upon you,’ he muttered. ‘And now you’re going to the devil’s lair. God help you, sweet maid.’

Again, Elena felt that tight constriction round her heart at the mention of Aimery le Sabrenn. The devil’s lair? ‘W...what do you mean?’ she faltered.

The man’s head twisted round in alarm. ‘Hush! Be silent —’ Too late, Elena heard the crunching of boots through the undergrowth behind her. As she whirled round, a cry on her lips, a rough hand caught at her shoulder.

The Saxon man struggled to raise himself from the ground. ‘Let her go, damn you! Vile Norman scum—’

The guard silenced him with a swift blow to the stomach that had him doubled up. Then he turned to the girl; and Elena realised, with a shudder of fear, that he was the mounted guard who’d spoken to her earlier and watched her in such a disturbing way.

‘Well, well,’ he said softly. ‘The little convent brat. Like to explain what you were doing here, would you? With *him*?’

Elena struggled to free herself, but his strong hands dug into her shoulders. He was big and muscular, with a dark, floridly handsome face, and she could smell the wine he’d been drinking.

‘I brought him water!’ she retorted defiantly, hoping he wouldn’t notice how her voice shook in secret fear. ‘Poor man — he was injured! I couldn’t just leave him there!’

His calloused thumbs were fondling her shoulders through the thin material of her gown. He seemed to be breathing strangely, and something in his hot, dark gaze really frightened her. 'A soft little heart, eh?' he said, grinning slowly. 'By Christ, but I've heard all about you convent brats. Desperate for it, are you, sweetheart? Well, I've got good news for you — no need to make do with a filthy Saxon rebel —'

'I don't know what you're talking about! Let me go, please, you're hurting me...' But before she could even scream, the soldier's eager mouth had come down thickly on hers, his hot, rasping tongue capturing the inner tenderness of her lips. In desperation she struggled to push him off, but her anguished efforts seemed to excite him all the more. He clutched her helpless body hard against his; she whimpered beneath his fierce kiss and struggled again, but his hands pinioned her already sore wrists with iron strength.

'Here's one juicy little prize our fine lord Aimery won't get to first!' the soldier muttered thickly. Then he reached for the neck of her dress, and ripped at the coarse grey wool; it parted easily, as did her white linen shift beneath it. He went very still then, and his grip slackened involuntarily as he gazed with hungry avid eyes at Elena's small white breasts.

With a cry of alarm, Elena tried to turn and run, but he caught her and threw her roughly to the ground, pinning her down with the weight of his heavily-muscled body even as she kicked and struggled wildly beneath him.

'Oh, my little beauty,' he muttered as he gazed at her soft nakedness. 'My little dove...' And he moistened his thin,

curling lips as he kneeled in homage over her prostrate form.

He bent low over her, to kiss her again; she jerked her head to one side in an effort to escape, but he'd got her pinned down, his hands holding her wrists against the ground on either side of her head, while his leather-clad thighs straddled hers. He gazed with lascivious eyes at the blue-veined whiteness of her innocent breasts; then, with a sudden groan, he plunged his head down and started to lick at her tender nipples with his hot, wet mouth.

Elena felt her body arch in spasm. She was fighting him wildly, wrenching herself from side to side beneath him. 'Get off me! You brute —'

'You can stop pretending now, wench,' the soldier chuckled. 'The women back at the camp beg me for this, just as you would if I stopped now! Such lovely little breasts; so perfect, so white, my sweetheart...'

Still Elena fought on, though she was all but overpowered by the maleness of him, by the harsh threat of his powerfully muscled shoulders, his demanding mouth. Sweet heaven...'

She tried to kick him. With a harsh oath, the man swiftly pushed both her hands together on the ground behind her head, so that he had one hand free. As Elena felt her strength failing, she watched with wide, horror stricken eyes as he fumbled with his leather tunic, pulling it up somehow and reaching under it. He seemed to be stroking and rubbing feverishly at himself, while his eyes began to glaze over with satisfaction.

'Ah, my little Saxon,' he sighed, 'I've been longing for this since first I laid eyes on you.'

Elena squeezed her eyes shut tightly and prayed for this nightmare to end. It must be a nightmare, mustn't it? With this hateful man, muttering and trembling above her.

She opened her eyes again to make one last, desperate plea. 'You must let me go. You must!'

The words died on her lips. Because what met her eyes was a rigid, swollen shaft of flesh. The soldier gripped it in his hand, seeming to stroke it in some private ecstasy as he gazed adoringly at her naked breasts. Seeing how her eyes opened in horror, he went very still, watching her, letting her get the full impact of his swollen penis. 'Not seen one of these before, my little nun?' he whispered softly, cajolingly. 'There's many a fine lady like yourself begged me for a sight of this, I can tell you, so take a good look...' He rubbed his hand slowly, luxuriantly, along the rigid shaft and a drop of clear moisture gleamed and dropped, glistening, on to her tender breast. He bent, adoringly, to lick it off her skin.

Elena screamed, but the sound was choked in her dry throat as the man lunged forwards and covered her mouth with a hot, devouring kiss. Darkness engulfed her. And then, in the stifling stillness of that forest clearing, there was a sudden, alien sound — a harsh, whistling crack — and the man above her let out a sharp cry of pain.

For a second, he arched rigid above Elena. Then he slumped to the ground, moaning and whimpering, while Elena hugged her arms round her bruised body, numb with shame and despair. Dear God, what was happening now?

Then she saw. In the shadows was a group of men, and the one at the front carried a whip. Even as she watched, he raised his hand in a cold, calculating gesture, and the whip cracked out again, cutting with deadly accuracy into the

man at her side. The soldier let out a thin sob and doubled up.

The man with the whip stroked the lash softly, as if it were a friend. Elena, dragging herself to her feet, gazed at her rescuer in helpless fascination. Tall and wide-shouldered, he wore a leather gambeson, with soft deerskin boots encasing his strong legs, and a grey woollen cloak slung across his shoulders. As she watched, he turned and spoke to the men in the shadows.

‘Take him back to the camp. Tie him up, and wait there for me.’

The men did his bidding silently, dragging the whimpering guard away towards the fires of the soldiers’ camp. Elena was alone with the man who stroked the whip.

2

Her heart thudding sickly, her dark blue eyes wide with despairing defiance, Elena gazed silently up at this new threat. Then, she almost stopped breathing.

Something happened to her when she met this man's scrutiny — she felt a shock of recognition, as if she knew him already. Yet how could she? Certainly, she would never have forgotten him — no one could. His eyes were a pale silver-grey, like ice. Cold, and yet they burned into her. With a little gasp, she felt his face imprint itself for ever on her mind; the thick, tawny hair, so unlike the severely-cropped cuts of his fellow soldiers; the high bridged, arrogant nose; the harsh jutting cheekbones. And down one lean cheek ran a terrible scar. White and ridged, it drew up the corner of his thin mouth and gave him a perpetual, menacing smile. The most chilling smile she had ever seen. Elena shivered, and bit into her soft lower lip to stop herself from crying out when she saw it.

He studied her with cold scorn. 'I thought,' he said, in a low cool voice that sent tremors through her exhausted body, 'that you Saxon vermin would be too weary tonight for such entertainments. Obviously I was wrong. You must be truly desperate to degrade yourself with a common soldier like Mauger there.'

Elena pulled her torn gown across her breasts, and lifted her small head proudly.

'You think,' she breathed in quiet defiance, 'that I *wanted* him to do what he did? My lord, I would rather he had killed

me!’

The scarred man’s eyes narrowed. Why, Elena wondered desperately, had she called him ‘my lord’? The words had slipped out by mistake; yet there was something about this man that commanded obedience and respect, even from her. She suddenly realised that he was staring at the little wooden crucifix on its leather thong, a pathetic reminder of her former status.

Abruptly, he reached out with the handle of his whip and touched the cross, playing with it. ‘Such sweet defiance,’ he mocked silkily, ‘from a Saxon rebel. No wonder poor Mauger was inflamed. You tried to tell him you were in holy orders, did you, wench? I hope he considers you worth it.’

Elena almost cried out at the injustice of his words. ‘He knew!’ she choked out. ‘He knew that I was from the convent!’

‘The convent that was a nest of rebels?’

‘I am no rebel!’ Elena’s voice broke. ‘Though if this is the kind of treatment I can expect, then I wish I had fought along with them! I would rather be killed than treated like this!’

She gazed up at him, quivering with anguish. His eyes were as cold as the harsh steel of the sword he wore thrust in his belt. His face was hard and impassive. With an idle gesture, he moved the handle of his whip away from the crucifix, and jerked it at the torn material of her gown. It fell apart, exposing her breasts. He flicked lightly at one nipple; it stiffened involuntarily, tugging at the soft flesh of her breast, and Elena caught her breath, her hands helpless at her sides at this fresh humiliation.

‘So you are still claiming to be a nun?’ He sounded almost bored. Elena felt the blood rise in her cheeks as he made light, circling motions on her tender skin with his whip.

‘A novice, sire,’ she faltered out. ‘I was destined to take my vows next month.’

‘And how old are you, little novice?’

‘They tell me I was born in the sixth year of King Edward’s reign — oh!’

He was thoughtfully feathering her nipple with the tip of his whip. She gasped, and felt a hot, churning sensation in her stomach. Her rosy flesh jutted out with a strange yearning and she felt weak and dizzy. What refined game was this? What was wrong with her? Her breasts swelled and throbbed as he toyed with them so casually. The blood rushed to her face. She wanted to feel his hand there. She wanted him to hold her. *His hands looked strong and firm, and cool...*

She shuddered, and he dropped the whip, bored. She clutched the material high to her throat, and tried desperately to regain control of her body.

The man was speaking to her, saying, ‘Then you are two and twenty, and according to your account, which I take leave to doubt, a complete innocent. That man Mauger — did he violate you?’

Elena’s face flamed. ‘His very touch was violation, my lord!’

His face twisted mockingly. ‘I can see I shall have to be more precise. Are you still the virgin you claim to be?’

'I am! How dare you doubt it?'

His mouth twisted cynically. 'Well, we shall see. And in the meantime, Mauger will get a flogging he won't forget.'

Elena's head jerked up at that. A man — a Norman — was being punished because he'd dared to assault her, a Saxon prisoner?

Seeing her surprise, the man went on silkily, 'You misunderstand, little Saxon. He is not being punished out of deference to your feelings but because he dared to defile my personal property.' He paused; a sudden shaft of moonlight through the trees caught at his strong, hard profile and glinted on the tawny streaks in his thick dark hair. 'You see, I am Aimery le Sabrenn, lord of Thoresfield, the man who owns you. Ah, I see from your face that you are acquainted with my name. Learn the rules well, little nun, many don't get a second chance. No-one tampers with my personal property. No-one.'

Elena gazed up at him with despairing eyes. She'd known. Somehow, she'd known as she set eyes on him who he was. It was as if the last of her breath had been knocked from her body.

Meanwhile, the Breton's hypnotic silver eyes narrowed almost to blackness as he inspected his young captive's anguished face. It was a face of delicate, almost breathtaking fragility. Her skin was so pure and pale that it looked as if it would bruise at the lightest touch. Her deep blue eyes, fringed by thick, soft lashes, gazed helplessly up at him, still wide with despairing defiance. Her long blonde curls, totally disordered in her struggle with the arrogant fool Mauger, shimmered like a silver halo in the moonlight.

He remembered her small, perfect breasts, and how she'd trembled as his whip brushed their rosy, nubile tips.

This Saxon maid was beautiful, and spirited. Isobel would like her.

At the thought of this new acquisition in Isobel's power, some distant, half-forgotten emotion stirred within him, as he considered how Isobel would make her suffer. His face hardened, and he pushed the thought away without any difficulty. She was a Saxon — a rebel, in spite of her denials. She deserved what she was about to get. They all did. And if she was determined to keep up this pretence of innocence, then she would serve the lady Isobel's purpose very well.

He smiled and Elena, on seeing that chilling smile, felt her greatest fear yet.

Aimery le Sabrenn took the Saxon girl by the wrist. She felt fragile, like some helpless bird. She didn't struggle. It was almost as if she'd given up as she followed helplessly in his shadow, back towards the firelit circle where his men were gathered. He'd unpinned his grey cloak and given it to her, to hide her shame; he didn't want any more trouble from his men tonight. She'd kept her eyes lowered as he fastened it around her. She looked dazed with weariness and despair; yet there was still defiance there, he knew, even in her silence.

Aimery wondered briefly to himself what would have happened if he hadn't been with his men that night. No doubt the girl would have suffered badly at the hands of Mauger and his friends. He knew, because he'd seen it happen before. She was Saxon, she deserved her fate. Nevertheless, he was angry with his men for attacking the tiny convent, even if it had been harbouring rebels. And,

strangely, he was glad he'd been in time to save the Saxon girl from Mauger's crude attentions.

He glanced down at the girl's white face. Her pretence of being a nun was quite disarming. Whatever her story, he knew, from cold experience, that she would be sweet when he finally took her, sweet and tantalising, with that slender figure and beguiling though feigned innocence. Also, if Aimery's judgement was not at fault, her responses would be more than satisfactory once he and Isobel had trained her properly. There was no denying how her dark blue eyes had flown open, and her soft lips parted in a gasp, as he teased her tender little breasts with his whip. She had a lot to learn but he would teach her with care, and then would wait patiently, even indifferently, until she was ready.

His men-at-arms, lolling around the fire with their wineskins, jumped to their feet when he suddenly appeared at the edge of the clearing with the Saxon girl stumbling at his heels. Aimery le Sabrenn smiled to himself, feeling the taut scar pulling at his cheek. They were afraid of him. Good. That was how it should be.

One solitary figure moved slowly out of the shadows towards him. A man not quite as tall as Aimery, but burlier and more thickset, with a face and arms as dark as night, and a gleaming, curved sword at his belt. Elena stifled a little sob of fear as Aimery thrust her towards the man; he saw how she trembled but still held herself straight and proud. He was pleased to see this fresh evidence of her courage; she would need it.

'I want this girl put in chains, away from the rest of the serfs, Hamet,' Aimery said softly to the Saracen, his servant. 'For her own safekeeping. I will see to the punishment of the guard, Mauger. Keep the men away from her.'

The big Saracen looked at the trembling Elena keenly. 'She is beautiful, lord,' he said, in a foreign, sing-song voice. 'She is for you?'

'For the lady Isobel,' said Aimery. A wintry smile twisted his mouth. 'Do you think she will like her present?'

Hamet's black eyes gleamed. 'Oh, yes, lord,' he said softly. 'The girl is a Saxon — and untried?'

'So she claims. Whatever the case, we will soon teach her — Isobel especially.'

The black servant nodded, his eyes devouring Aimery's captive. He swallowed hard. Aimery saw it, and laughed shortly. 'You will have your turn, Hamet. But remember, Isobel as ever, is the tutor.'

Hamet nodded eagerly and went for the chains. When he came back with them, the girl cried out in protest but Aimery just nodded to his servant, who began to fasten the cold shackles around her wrists and ankles with powerful yet strangely gentle fingers. As he fastened her arms, the borrowed grey cloak slipped by accident from her shoulders, revealing her small, creamy breasts. The Saracen froze in his task, and Elena gave a low moan of protest as his hungry black eyes fastened on her vulnerable flesh. His big hand jerked slowly towards her tempting breasts, but his master's voice stopped him like a sword in the back.

'Lay one finger on her before I give the word,' said Aimery, watching impassively with folded arms, 'and, friend though you are, you will die. Very slowly, I assure you. Now, fasten the cloak around her, and get on with your task.'

As Hamet worked on her chains, the thunderstorm that had threatened for so long rolled down from the hills.

Lightning played on the horizon; low rumbles of distant thunder menaced the still air. Heavy drops of rain were already pattering on the thick canopy of leaves overhead as Hamet fastened the last of Elena's shackles. Then he swung her easily up in his strong arms and, at his lord's command, carried her to the shelter of the half-ruined woodcutter's cottage that lay at the edge of the clearing, where he had already placed his master's things for the night. Aimery followed, and indicated that Hamet should take the girl into a small thatched outhouse that leaned against the main building. As Hamet lowered her to her feet inside the crude hovel, Elena struggled to hold herself upright, with a last burst of desperate defiance.

'I beg you, sire, if you have any justice in you at all, then you will let me go! I was not one of the rebels, I swear. What possible use can I be to you? Let me go back to the convent where I belong!'

The Breton watched her oddly, his hands on his hips. His harsh face, twisted by the scar, was suddenly lit up by a gleam of lightning. She shivered at the look in his cold, glittering eyes.

'The convent is no more,' he said softly. Elena cried out in anguish. He went on quickly, 'The nuns were spared, they will find refuge elsewhere. But you are no nun, Elena, and contrary to your own belief, you will learn to be a good deal of use to me, I think. You see, at my stronghold of Thoresfield you will have a new mistress — the lady Isobel. She will train you in your new tasks and Hamet, my faithful servant, will help you to learn. There is much you need to know.'

Elena's face jerked wildly from one to the other. They were smiling at each other as if they shared some dark