

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Handmaidens

Aran Ashe

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This book is a work of fiction.
In real life, make sure you practise safe sex.

About the Book

'These women belong to Tormunil,' the female Perquisitor declared solemnly. 'In every portion of their flesh they are bespoken. I, Quislan, am here to claim them. Without discipline love is worthless, and these girls will, in time, learn to beg for chastisement.'

Tormunil can be an exceedingly harsh place for pretty young serving girls. Destined for a life of sexual slavery at the hands of merciless overlords, the chosen ones are taken to the Abbey - a place where strength is learned through obedience to those who follow the path of the Twisted Cross.

Taken into this strange world, the young and beautiful Sianon and Iroise are allowed few privileges. Tormented to the peaks of pleasure, but punished if they seek release, their only hope of escape lies with the handsome young traveller who has fallen for their charms. If he can enter the Abbey unnoticed, he may be able to rescue them. But if he is caught, he faces an inquisition beyond the realms of his darkest dreams.

This is the first book in a new series of erotic domination novels by Aran Ashe, author of the best-selling Lidir series.

About the Author

Aran Ashe is an established and popular author of erotic fiction, including: *Leah's Punishment*, *Love-Chattel of Tormunil*, *Pleasure Island*, *Slaves-Mines of Tormunil*, *The Slave of Lidir* and *The Dungeons of Lidir*, all available from Virgin's Nexus Imprint.

By the same author:

THE SLAVE OF LIDIR
THE DUNGEONS OF LIDIR
THE FOREST OF BONDAGE
PLEASURE ISLAND
CHOOSING LOVERS FOR JUSTINE

The Handmaidens

The Chronicles of Tormunil

Aran Ashe

The Twisted Cross

HE WAS AN unwary traveller in an unfamiliar land. To him, it seemed simple: they were young women in distress; they needed help. But he did not understand the rules.

Josef Stenner stood beside his horse at one end of the small wooden bridge and watched the peculiar convoy crossing. Cayu, his guide, hung back, pretending to repack his panniers but throwing furtive glances. The two companions had earlier passed the convoy on the road; Cayu had wanted to avoid this second encounter, but Stenner had overruled him. So now, the young traveller stood his ground alone as the first team of horses thundered onto the bridge. The heavy carriages looked ancient, even for this land. Their doors were emblazoned with a strange symbol in gold – resembling a cross but with its arms ascendant instead of horizontal. And the drivers, uniformly hooded and clad in charcoal grey, looked like monks.

Because the bridge was narrow, the carriages were forced to slow, and for the first time Josef could clearly see the occupants he had previously only glimpsed – young women, all of them, their faces pallid, their expressions dream-like, beautiful. Then the whips cracked, the dust rose and the pale sweet faces were gone. But that fleeting vision was fixed in Josef's mind.

A peasant was waiting to cross the bridge. Josef asked Cayu to find out what he knew. The local spoke so quickly

that the traveller could understand very little of it, but when he had finished, Cayu's face was grim. 'They are from the abbey at Servulan,' he said. 'The women are being taken there.' Then he added hesitantly, 'It is a place of training.'

His tone made Josef ask, 'But they go of their own free will?'

Cayu again began attending nervously to his panniers.

Josef took him by the shoulders and faced him, until Cayu at last shook his heavy head in sighing resignation. 'These women have been chosen, Mr Stenner. Free will does not apply. The men with them – they are Tormunites. You saw the twisted cross? That is their mark.'

The peasant muttered, 'Evil . . .'

The young man turned again to his guide. 'Cayu – is it true what he says?'

'Please – I only know this: you must stay away from them. It is not our business.'

'Not our business!'

Cayu had started to walk away.

'But those women!' Josef shouted after him. 'Did you not see them – that look on their faces!' The guide winced under the reproach but kept moving. 'What fate awaits *them* – in this evil place?' And Cayu stopped in his tracks.

The traveller squinted down the dirt road; the procession was already a receding speck. 'Must we stand by and do nothing?' But the accusation in his tone was wavering. 'There must be something, Cayu . . .?'

The old guide turned back slowly, staring at him, shaking his head, then finally putting his hand on Josef's arm. His thick, soft voice was unsteady as he spoke: 'It is not in our power to interfere – you must believe me. Those people are dangerous. Even by standing on the bridge, you took a risk.'

'The abbey – how far is it?'

'Mr Stenner – I beg you to heed this – it is not on our route.'

Two days later, continuing east, they were about to descend into a valley in order to reach the village at its head when they met a solitary horseman coming the opposite way on a black mare. From the cut of his clothing, he might have been judged an official. There was an aloofness about him, and when Josef shouted a greeting, the man stared back coldly, then finally raised his hat without replying. It was then that Josef saw the twisted cross motif upon his sleeve. Cayu threw a warning glance.

‘You saw it?’ Josef asked excitedly as soon as the rider was out of earshot.

‘Yes,’ Cayu answered through his teeth.

Josef watched the horseman turn off into the driveway of a large black and white, half-timbered hall. Then he tried again. ‘And did you see his eyes – the way he looked at me because I spoke?’ But the guide refused to be drawn and relapsed into his moody silence of the last two days.

It was early afternoon when they reached the inn. No one was about. There were sleepy dogs chained in the shadow of the wall. Cayu left Josef in the yard and went inside. Eventually, he emerged with a thickset man in an apron and they began talking in subdued tones. The man appeared to be the landlord, although there seemed to be none of the usual welcome forthcoming. Then Cayu walked over to Josef, took the reins of his horse and confided, ‘It is wiser that we leave. Look . . .’ Josef glanced behind. There, on a hillock behind the village, stood a large bronze Tormunite cross.

Before Cayu had finished speaking, a young woman dressed like a serving maid hurried out of the inn and across the yard in front of them. Josef saw that she was crying. As she passed him, she looked up at him pleadingly. He had never seen a face more beautiful and he had never seen eyes so sad.

‘Cayu,’ he whispered firmly, ‘we stay the night. Arrange it.’

The Postulant

SIANON HAD GLIMPSED the darkly clad stranger in the courtyard of the hall. She saw him dismount from his horse, ascend the steps, then enter without knocking, as the master might have done. His confidence made her uneasy. She returned to the milking, but could not keep her attention on her work. After a few minutes, the message came – the mistress wished to see her. Sianon, pale now, nervous, almost shaking, put aside her apron and fastened back her auburn hair.

The stranger's mare was still tethered in the yard; her bridle was ornate and her coat glossy black. Skirting a wide circle round her, Sianon hurried into the house and up the stairs. The stranger was waiting with the mistress in the parlour.

'Commissioner Fevrin –' began the mistress, but the stranger dismissively waved his hand.

'“Warden”,' he corrected. 'That is the style we now prefer – a truer reflection of our duties.' He gazed at Sianon. 'Put her at her ease,' he said, moving away and placing his broad grey hat upon a chair. And there he waited, watching Sianon with patient interest.

'Sianon – you know that we love you, your master and I?' Sianon's wide brown eyes turned to her mistress, sitting stiffly forwards, her hands clasped tightly, her thin voice labouring faintly against the frailty wrought by pain. 'We

love you, Sianon . . . but we cannot keep you – you are special.'

As Sianon watched her mistress's earnest face, and listened to those words repeated, then looked again at the stranger dressed in dark brown leathers, she felt the butterfly break free inside her breast. Though she was surrounded by the love of which her mistress spoke, still she felt the wing-beats of the butterfly tapping nervously at her heart.

'Sianon – do not be frightened. I have told our new . . . our new Warden . . . I have told him about you, and all that he has heard has pleased him. He has made this journey to see you and to speak to you, Sianon, and I know that, whatever he decides for you, you will be strong.'

The Warden moved to the bow-window. He was tall and straight, not crooked like the mistress. His age was hard to judge – he had the quickness of youth but his face was thin and his skin had a pallor. His sandy hair was straight and reached his collar.

Suddenly he turned, putting himself against the light. 'Do not seek to study too closely.' The warning, though whispered, seemed to echo round Sianon. She glanced at him, against the light, unsure that he had even spoken. She looked at her mistress, whose weak, pained expression had not changed. Then, on the floor in front of him, she saw the hassock. The whisper came again: 'Come over here,' and she felt the wing-beats of the butterfly fighting up into her throat.

Head bowed, Sianon moved in slow, uncertain steps towards the hassock, until she was standing in the full light from the window. The Warden waited. Sianon knelt unsteadily upon the thick, firm cushion. Her long hair lay in clear brown drifts against the pure white of her blouse. 'Lift your head,' he said. 'Let us look at you, Sianon.' Her anxious eyes met his, then slid away. She was bare beneath her

blouse; its criss-cross lacing stretched between her swelling breasts. She did not whisper or resist.

He spoke gently to her as he unknotted the lacing. Her hands hung limply, but not calmly, by her sides, her shoulders and her arms were shaking.

‘You know why I am here?’ He tilted back Sianon’s chin. She felt her breasts expand against the tightness of the lacing, each pull drumming through the stretched material, her nipples responding, filling quickly, pushing through her taut breast-skin.

‘Yes, sir . . .’ she whispered.

‘You may call me “Master”, Sianon, for that is what I shall certainly be to you until your future is arranged. Let your head fall back – there – I should not have to keep directing. You should understand my simple wishes in these things.’

She could not suppress her murmur as the lacing broke away. Before the front of her blouse was fully open, her breasts burst through the gap. ‘So full, so young, so strong . . . Exquisite. Let them spill,’ he whispered. And Sianon gasped gently, holding back while he drew the remains of the lacing free and spread her blouse asunder.

‘Master . . .’ Her breasts were fully out, their nipples large and firm and he would see what had been done there. But he pushed her arms away, warning her:

‘This reluctance is becoming tiresome.’ Trembling, understanding fully now, Sianon closed her eyes, thrust her shoulders tightly back and arched her body up. She felt the weight of her breasts slide out, then swing; she heard him murmur: ‘Oh . . .’ And he had seen it.

‘Master, please,’ she blurted out, ‘I love my mistress and I do not wish to go.’

‘Sianon . . .’ Her mistress had forced herself onto her feet. The Warden threw a glance at her and she was silenced. But Sianon’s blouse was already open to the midriff and its lace was on the floor. And there was no denying what had been done to her.

He pushed the blouse back from her shoulders and over her arms, trapping them. And for the first time, she felt his open hand against her naked skin. 'Madam - her breasts - you use a whip?'

'I use a rope.'

Sianon shivered.

He lifted them up and touched the short, curved lengths of darkness that crowded the skin on the undersides, then the newer, raised pink narrow welts that grazed the bulging nipples.

'And during this purging - for I take it to be so - you restrain her?'

Sianon's mistress drew herself up; she was shaking. 'It is neither purge nor punishment - ask her.' Her stiff, angular fingers reached out and tried to smooth Sianon's hair but succeeded only in disheveling it, the long shiny strands catching on her twisted nails and cracked dry skin.

'And what of her excitement? You assist her in such things?'

Her mistress chose to move away and turn to the window rather than reply. The Warden simply lifted up Sianon's face and read the answers in her eyes.

But with her eyes, she tried to tell him this: that she would never betray her mistress by any word she uttered, neither would she betray her master, and she would never betray the one to the other.

The Warden had stepped back, and it made Sianon feel good inside, knowing that she had faced him.

When she looked at him again, she saw in his fingers a small piece of parchment that he was shaping into a trough. He opened a phial and began tapping its contents into the trough. Then he came towards her. 'Open.' Sianon was afraid, but she knew this was a test she must not question. The powder stuck to her tongue; its dust caught against the back of her throat. Then it melted: like a hammer-blow, it struck Sianon breathless. It was as though her body was

propelled on a giant invisible hand, out through the window and up into the air and she could see everything – the farm, the hall, the black mare in the yard – and she could feel behind it all a presence that, in this soaring, she shared, a presence that was both terrible and sweet. The vision lasted but a second then she was back in the room, gasping, and he was supporting her as she swooned. When she opened her eyes, the room looked brighter and the aftermath of the sweetness was a dizziness in her blood. The butterflies inside her breast were teeming; between her legs was the first gentle throb of warm peculiar feelings. Then she saw the wrist-tether draped across his arm.

He drew her blouse over her head, touching her breasts while they were shaking. He made her stand up and drop her skirt; she wore no knickers, because the master of the house had decreed that it was better she went bare. Then the Warden made her take off her boots and walk nude across the room. He put the tether round her left wrist, stood her with her back to the wall and fastened her hand to the lamp bracket a few inches above her head. Her balance was upset, her right arm dangling loosely down, her left breast lifted. The cheeks of her buttocks brushed against the heavy paper on the wall. She could see her reflection in the mirror opposite. Her body looked long, her hips exaggeratedly angular because of her stance, and her belly projected palely in the light. She saw that the figure in the mirror stood with one knee slightly open; that the man was approaching – then the breathless feeling struck again and Sianon closed her eyes.

It was as if she were floating just below the smoky brown panelled ceiling and looking down – upon the rich red-carpeted floor; the mistress on her chair again; the man in leather poised before the naked figure fastened to the wall. A figure whose legs were slightly open with arousal, whose quickened breathing was the only movement in the room, scratched breasts swiftly lifting then descending, breasts

that were full, were aching. She saw the man reach, she felt him test her pulse through the leather restraint. Then her eyes were fully open again and she was there against the wall.

The Warden placed a stool next to her. Then he lifted her right foot on to it. Sianon felt the warmth of her aroused sex against the coolness of his hand. 'The potion is working - she's running,' he whispered. She could feel it down her leg - the warmth, the tickle. The stool creaked gently. 'Let it flow,' he murmured, and Sianon's open belly gently pushed, her foot arched on its toes, her soft sex glugged on his fingers.

Her mistress suggested the use of the breast-robe. 'She must use her hand,' the Warden said. The mistress protested that this was forbidden, that Sianon was a good girl, that she would not understand. He listened patiently before replying: 'But the denial can never bite unless the pleasure has been tasted.' Then he studied Sianon's eyes. 'And the spark is there - I see it. The powder can but free what is already within.'

On the table he placed a short, polished horn. It was stout enough to balance upright; the thick end was encased in a leather grip, studded round the rim, the tip was smooth and waxy yellow. 'In time, all pleasures shall be experienced, all avenues explored . . . But now, your hand, Sianon - use it gently.' Her left hand remained tethered; her right hand hung down. 'Go on,' he whispered.

When she saw the longing in his eyes, the excitement came, and her fingers gently reached between her legs and moved. She shuddered when she touched herself, because the feeling came so strongly, with him watching. She looked down - at the wetted hairs, the muscles tightening in her leg, her toes upon the stool, her fingers circling, pulling away, squeezing, teasing, slipping up inside her, causing trembles in her knees.

‘Gently . . .’ Sianon heard him whisper. He was polishing the horn in a soft cloth. Then he put the cloth against her ankle on the stool. Her breathing caught. ‘Do not stop – never stop – just keep it gently at bay.’ He made her hold her pubic lips apart. ‘Touch the knob. Rub it.’

Gasping softly, Sianon stroked it with a single slippery finger. When her breasts began to shake and her head moved back against the wall, he took away the stool and cloth and stood her upright. Her inner lips were swollen. He lifted her under the arms to keep her body stretched, to keep the pressure there, between her legs, which dangled, pressed together, gently squeezing out her wet.

Small escaped droplets clung to her shiny brown pubic hairs. He lowered her again, her hand still fastened, and made her open out her legs. He made her try to sit upon the stool, which he placed away from the wall so that only the backs of her thighs were supported. Her legs stayed open and her swollen sex pushed down into the gap. She hung from that one hand, from that broad wrist-tether. She wanted to be touched between the legs while she hung in that position, her bulging, sweetly aching sex exposed between her legs.

‘Look down,’ he whispered. Wet drops darkened the carpet beneath her. She had never had it come like this. ‘Squeeze it with your fingers. Make it drip.’ She was gasping in arousal, hanging by her arm; the sweet throb of congestion was down below her belly, so deep the pleasure hurt her. ‘Gently . . .’ The lips between her legs felt large and wet and hot and slippery. A falling droplet caught upon her little finger. ‘Drink it.’ Sianon sucked her finger, then her hand. While she sucked, he took her legs and held them wide apart and rubbed her small knob with the polished horn then held her belly steady while she whimpered. He made her pull her nipples while he twisted the waxy yellow tip against her knob. When she shuddered, he took the stool away again and made her stand.

He turned her round, so her left arm wrapped across her face and her knees and nipples rubbed the stiff, ridged paper on the wall. Then he asked her to continue very slowly with her hand. He said this slowness was important. She heard again the sound of the cloth being rubbed against the horn. She felt each gentle squeeze between her legs intensely; her fingertips were running wet. The feeling of wanting to come was overpowering. Each time her legs went stiff, he made her take away her hand and stretch it out in the same place, palm against the wall. The wetted paper had softened round the imprint of her first two fingers and thumb, which could not stay at rest but gently rubbed away the paper. Her round, tight buttocks stood out from the wall, moving slowly and separately because her legs had bowed apart.

Again he was beside her. 'Hold it open.' She thought he meant her sex. 'Your bottom,' he said gently and the fingers of that one hand, slickly wetted, attempted to comply. 'Hold it still.' Sianon moaned. 'Do not fight it; never grip. Let it slide and it shall take it to the studs. Shh . . . oh, yes . . . shhh . . . Now let me lift you up. I shall support you. Use your hand where it is needed . . . use your fingers. Rub it. There . . . so sweetly, can you feel it?' Her buttocks pushed into his hands; her feet were off the floor, her sex was weeping.

When he put her down, she could hardly stand. Her wetness was running like tears of pleasure down the insides of her legs. But again, he made her stretch the soft lips open and rub the burning tip. Then he took her by the buttocks again and lifted her, with the horn still in her bottom, until her breasts and belly touched the wall. The forbidden, drowning feeling started coming to Sianon. He drew her back and asked her to keep still. She tried. The feeling ebbed. Her legs hung limply open in the air. 'Play with it,' he whispered.

He kept her that way and made her do it. Her sex shed its tears of pleasure through her fingers. The tightness of her bottom came in waves against the horn. Easing her down, he twisted the horn very slowly; he said he wanted no tightness in her bottom, that all the movement must be free. When her toes cramped up he lifted her body gently to the wall. Her breasts and belly rubbed against the paper as she breathed. Then he made her play with herself again. Twice more he made her suffer this – the playing, the drawing away, the slow twisting of the horn inside her, then the gentle renewal of the pressure of her breasts against the wall. And that was where it happened – through her nipples. This time the feeling would not stop. It tumbled. It came right through her nipples as they brushed against the wall, then it surged between her legs and up between her buttocks, then burst deep inside her, below the belly of the horn. Sianon shuddered and cried out; her tongue pushed out and licked the stiff ridged paper and her bottom pulsed about the wax-smooth horn.

When she had finished and he had put her down and turned her, with her hand still tethered, and he had taken out the horn and begun polishing it, the Warden said to Sianon's mistress: 'Now show me the rope – how it is applied – since we shall need to understand her present usage.'

And when this was done and the marks upon her breasts were rendered fresh and livid, and by this means – an approved means, this time – the tiny bulb between her legs was restored to hardness, the visitor said, 'You are a worthy teacher, madam. I had not anticipated that her breasts would prove so responsive to the tether. You may take comfort from the fact that we shall put them to good use.' And he requested that Sianon be kept that way – erect in nipples and clitoris – as a preparation. Then he made her kneel while he fitted round her neck a soft black leather choker with a blue cabochon in the centre. He said that this

choker should be worn henceforth, whenever she was used for sex, whenever she was naked, and that, whenever she was on the verge of climax, the choker should be touched in some way, the skin beside it should be kissed or licked, or a finger should be slipped beneath the choker and the choker lightly held. Then he took his leave with these words: 'Bring her to the village tomorrow and leave her at the inn.'

Throughout that final night, her mistress remained with Sianon, attending to her preparation, and when the master of the house returned next day, Sianon was already taken.

First Night at the Inn

AFTER SUPPER CAYU went to check the horses and Josef retired upstairs, on the pretext of attending to his journal, but in truth his mind was on the girl. He could not forget the sadness in her eyes.

When he took hold of the bellcord, his grip, normally firm, was suddenly unsteady. His fingers slipped and he became convinced that the pull had never registered, and soon he tried again. When the knock came at his door, he was acutely aware of the waver in his voice, but he could not tell whether she had sensed any of his agitation. He knew only that he found her guileless.

‘I need wood for my fire,’ he managed.

She glanced across. ‘Of course, sir.’ Then she curtsied and waited. She had hair that fell in soft blonde ringlets round her cheeks. She didn’t move but waited, her arms naked below her elbows, her beautiful, sad blue eyes upon him, sending shivers to his soul. ‘Will that be all, sir?’ And the tone in which she whispered made him wonder even then. Her gaze slid away in shyness, but her lips, so full and soft, stayed open, invitingly it seemed to him, making him want to reach out and touch them.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door; a gruff voice sounded and the girl fell to her knees in front of Josef. Before he could gather his wits the landlord strode in. ‘I

heard the bell,' he declared, staring at the girl, who trembled as his surly voice growled across the room.

'Oh . . . yes. I rang twice . . . an error.' Yet Josef found himself drawing himself up to confront the stare of suspicion moving round to him. The landlord stood, arms akimbo, his thick hands on his apron.

'Iroise -' he nodded his head abruptly towards the girl, 'she is to your satisfaction?' Josef must have hesitated - thinking of her name, perhaps, which he had not previously known, and thinking how it suited - because the landlord said more loudly, 'There is no problem with her?'

'No,' though taken aback by the uncouthness, Josef answered quickly, 'None. I simply . . .' Then he decided it was better to say nothing about the dearth of wood. 'No - none.' But he could tell from the landlord's square-set, jutting jaw that the man did not believe him. He stared at Josef then marched over to Iroise. She cowered as he raised his hand. Josef jerked forwards to intercept it, then stopped himself in time. All that the landlord did was to take hold of her ringlets on one side and draw them back from her cheek - but repeatedly, sliding his thick fingers through the silky curls while her head slowly tilted up and away, exposing the delicate tracery of her ear and the smooth paleness of her neck. 'If there are any complaints, Mr Stenner, you have only to call . . .' He turned her face towards him. She swallowed and her lips stayed open. 'And she will be dealt with.' Then his heavy hands released her gentle face; he moved back, looked once round the room and left.

Iroise remained kneeling on the floor in front of Josef and now he knew not what to do or say. He needed ink - the stand on the desk was dry - but he did not dare ask for that now, lest its omission be taken by the landlord as some further failing on her part. 'Please - you must get up,' he whispered, extending his arms as if to help her, then letting them drop ineffectually to his sides. Her eyes looked up at

him again and seemed to smile through the sadness. She clambered to her feet. 'I will bring it -'

'No!'

She stared at him strangely. 'The wood, sir, that you wanted for the fire?'

Josef bit his lip and nodded. She curtsied and retreated quietly. And when she was gone, he sank down into the chair and closed his eyes.

He thought again about the scene that they had witnessed in the stable when they had arrived - the two grooms and a girl. Whether she belonged to the inn or to the village, he could not say, but it was certain that there was no shame on her part at the interruption, just that look, the same guileless, guiltless look that he had seen in Iroise's eyes. That incident was the spark that had set his emotions smouldering. But before supper, something had taken place on the stairs and it had inflamed his passions to burning: he had heard scoldings above him - the landlord, he soon discovered - and soft pleadings, then smacking. Venturing a step or two higher and looking up, he had seen Iroise spread-eagled against the wall, and the landlord's broad hand smacking across her naked thighs. To witness a young woman used in such a way was terrible enough, but looking on - evidently overseeing her punishment - was the very same official they had met on the road above the village. He was back here at the inn. He had stood with arms folded and not a glimmer of emotion on his face.

Perhaps Josef should have interceded. If it had happened now, he knew he would have. But at that stage, all he had was the single pleading glance she had offered him in the yard. He knew not what was done with her thereafter; she was still being spanked when he crept away. Yet when she had come to his room just now he had seen nothing of the incident in her eyes - until the fear when the landlord arrived.

Fancying that he heard something, Josef got up and looked out of the window. Everywhere was dark, but he remained there and, while he listened, he looked about his room. It was well-furnished for these parts and much in excess of his needs, for he always travelled light, finding it simpler to purchase what was needed as it was required and to dispose of it when it became a burden. Chattels meant little to him; he had left all that behind at home. Besides, it was safer to restrict the accoutrements to the essentials, to shun the unusual, and not to draw attention. But his main problem was gold – pretending he had little and keeping it secure. Without it he would be lost: there were no banks or agents here. He knew no one but Cayu in this land. Hiding gold was the traveller's main preoccupation. Josef had three caches in this room. His purse, containing the smallest, was kept in the cabinet nearest the bed. The others were well hidden.

Moving over to the desk, Josef took out his journal and stared at the calfskin cover, new but already battered from their travels. He opened it at the inscription on the flyleaf: *To Josef – God speed you on your journey – Elisabeth.* And he thought again of those who had not wanted him to go. Then he unwrapped his pens and knife and the small ink-bottle that he so jealously guarded. But he left it unopened and went back to the window. He was concerned about the girl – this girl he had not met before this afternoon and had spoken but a handful of words to. Her effect upon him was a drug. His journal stood open on the table with its pages staring in blank emptiness up to the ceiling.

Seeing no sign of anyone, Josef turned from the window. Then he heard a crash in the passageway below, between the two wings of the inn. Immediately, a curtain opened opposite: someone else's attention had been attracted by the noise. Josef moved back from the light and snuffed the nearer candle.

Because the other room was at a slightly lower level, he had a clear view inside. What he beheld there made him gasp. There was a girl with flame-red hair, naked in a deep armchair. He knew her: she was Kynne – a serving maid. There was a man behind her, fully dressed and holding her arms up, holding her wrists together. But she was looking forwards, at someone who was out of view. Josef heard this someone shout an order, and Kynne's leg lifted. She was wearing something there, between her legs. Her ankle came to rest on the arm of the chair. But it seemed this display was insufficient; the muffled shout came again and her foot began moving back along the arm until she was straining, lifting, pushing forward, with her heel almost touching her belly. Josef could not make out exactly what was between her legs. Then the man behind her bent down, bared his arm, slid it under her breasts and lifted them. Josef saw her belly bulge, saw her small mount lift – there was something fastened there – then the speaker moved across and blocked his view. And again it was the same man, the one who had overseen Iroise's punishment.

At that moment, Josef was seized by jealous hatred of him. There was no sign that any harm might come to Kynne, but the feeling of detestation was overpowering. Suddenly, it was as if this very thought had taken flight as a cry, because the man turned and stared at Josef – across the gap and through two windows. How could he have seen him, from a lighted room? Josef retreated, shaken.

When he ventured another look, the curtain was already closed. He opened his window and listened: all he could hear were the street noises and the waves of laughter from the alerooms at the front, and the thumping of his heartbeat in his ears. But still the scene and sounds behind that curtain unfolded in his mind. Two men; Kynne belly-naked, something there between her open legs; and pleasure being taken even through the constraint. He had seen it in the way she offered herself, in the way she had responded when

her breasts were gathered on the man's bared forearm. He thought of her taking pleasure with the man in leather and he thought of that same man giving such pleasures to Iroise – Iroise, whom Josef could have no demands upon. Logic told him this, but the waves of jealous arousal struck again, just as they had struck him on the stairs. They kept coming, and he could not stop them. He thought of Iroise, smacked and naked, moist with her arousal, in another's arms.

Josef remained over long at that window; he was still there when the door-latch lifted, startling him. It was Iroise returning, laden with the wood. The desire in him was undiminished, but the jealousy was replaced by guilt. He closed the window quickly. Pretending the candle had blown out, he relit it with a taper from the fire. It was when he put the candle on the desk that he saw she had been crying. She tried to hide the fact, kneeling and keeping her head down and mending the fire. His emotions were in tatters – so many feelings coming quickly – what was he to do?

Crouching beside her, he said as gently as he could; 'Please – do not be upset. Are you hurt?' She didn't say anything and the tears kept welling. Josef tried again. 'If I can help in any way, pray tell me.'

She bit her lip. 'No. It is nothing . . . a cold in my eye – the night air – nothing more. I am quite well sir, thank you kindly.' She poked the iron into the old wood, making the sparks billow upwards. Embarrassed now to have intruded, Josef retreated to his desk. Shyness in the face of women's unhappiness is a bad gift in a man. But he sat and made out that he was intent upon his work, whilst he watched her from the corner of his eye.

When she had done with the fire, she turned down the bed, then began tidying round the room. Whenever she drew close by him, he bent across his writing. Then all went quiet. At last he turned – and she was standing there, her hands crossed on her belly, just watching him. She seemed so peaceful and so beautiful. There was no sign of the tears

now, but her cheeks were flushed. He moved his hand away from the page. 'Here – you may read it if you like,' he whispered, offering the book. Her eyes grew wide and her mouth opened, her lips hesitating before she answered, 'I cannot read.'

'Oh . . . It is just my record of the journey.'

She took it, turning the pages slowly back then stopping at the flyleaf. 'What does it say? This part here?' She looked at him. She had picked out the inscription. Josef read it out loud, just as it was written. Then he felt compelled to add, 'Elisabeth is my sister.'

Iroise said nothing for a while, but stared at the page, then said, 'Josef . . .' softly, not to him, but to the page, then: 'They say you come from over the mountains.'

'Who says it?' His heart was soaring.

'My master.'

Josef nodded. 'He seems very harsh with you – your master.' When she didn't respond, he stoppered the ink bottle quietly and carefully and put his pen away.

Her face had turned away, towards the fire and he could see again her fine pale eyelashes and the fullness of her lips in profile. They were still trembling. Her arms, bare below the elbows, were very lightly freckled. Then she spoke. 'You mean – on the stairs?' She looked at him, and now she made him ashamed by saying, 'I saw you. I thought that you were with Warden Fevrun, and were waiting.' It was like a hammer-blow.

'With him?' he croaked, 'No.' And though the denial was now superfluous, she nodded softly. Then her gaze dropped.

'He is expecting others.' Again she waited. 'He has me . . . he has me spanked first.' She was looking at him again but her eyes had taken on a strange and distant expression.

'First?' His heart was pounding in his ears; his throat was dry, so tight. The scene through the window crowded his mind.