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# Lady Blade, Lord Fighter 01

## Silver Bracers

by

**Sharon Green**

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Dedication:

For Cathy Palfy, for starting it al! and making me do it;

For Frank Adler, for helping me window-shop and ask the right questions;

And last but certainly not least-

For Bob Rosenberg, who from first to last made it all possible and understandable.

Thanks for bringing me into the computer age!

## Chapter One

The snow and ice had degenerated to slush that wasn't re-freezing even after dark, but Timper still disliked riding through it over the cobbles of the city. Oncoming spring had much more pleasant signs in the south, ones which didn't make the streets slippery and unsafe even for a sure-footed mount, and the young courier wished he was back there. Despite the heavy woolen cloak over his clothing he was cold, but the dratted cold wasn't bad enough to distract him from his problems, only bad enough to be an additional burden. His problems remained just as clear in his mind as they had been.

A part of which was having to plod up and down the streets of the northern city of Fyerlin, trying to find the one he was supposed to deliver his message to. The torches on the heavy stone buildings he passed laughed at him for his initial naivete in believing that that would be the simplest part of his commission, merely needing the time to reach the lady at her aunt's house. Since the skirmishing had already resumed, having no patience to await a proper spring and summer due to the presence of so many Sword Companies, where else would the daughter of a Duke be found but safely beside her aunt? The Countess herself had a strong, competent House Guard, well-armed and able to repel attempted incursions during that time of war and unrest, so where else would her niece be but-

With one of those Sword Companies.

Timper sighed, overwhelmingly relieved that he would not need to be the one to tell that to the Duke. After the death of the Duchess, the Duke had sent his eldest daughter to live with his sister-in-law, the Countess Illi of Fyerlin, intending to see his child raised with all the necessary graces taught her, graces the ladies of his own house seemed unable to impart to her. The child had been about eleven at the time, and the Countess was well known for her no-nonsense attitudes and iron determination. The strong-willed child would be given no recourse save to obey her and learn the womanly virtues...

This time Timper shivered into his cloak, bewildered as to what might have gone wrong. The lady, now a woman, was not to be found sitting demurely beside her aunt, a fact which Timper was prepared to swear pleased the Countess! When he had politely requested an audience with the lady, he had been settled in a chair, handed a glass of sherry, and then gently told that the lady wasn't there. If it was truly imperative that he see her, her whereabouts might be gotten from the Company clerk of the Silver Gleaming, one of the Sword Companies camped and billeted in and around Fyerlin. How she had gotten involved with one of the Blades of a Sword Company no one seemed prepared to discuss, but Timper prayed he wasn't too late. It was hardly likely that her virginity was still intact, not if she had been in the company of a Blade for longer than five minutes, but that was the Duke's concern and the concern of the lady's future husband. His was that he be spared the necessity of having to bring her home already married-or, worse yet, unmarried but pregnant. The Duke's temper was unlikely to register the fact that his courier was scarcely apt to be the one responsible...

The lady Sofaltis of the Duchy of Gensea, involved with a Blade of a Sword Company!

Timper's shudder reached through to his mount, causing the patient, steady beast to raise its head in momentary distraction. The gelding was hardly the sort of horse to grow skittish, for which Timper was profoundly grateful. He was skittish enough for the two of them, especially after being sent by the Company clerk to the barracks, and from the barracks to a house in the city itself. His demanding the whereabouts of the lady Sofaltis had gotten him no more than grinning silence, and he'd actually had to pay those oversized mercenaries for what he needed to know: where the lady was, and nothing more. The least they could have done was tell him which of the Blades she was involved with, of high rank or low, so that he would have some idea of the amount of difficulty he would face when the man found he was to lose the lady's company. Possibly he should have hired his return escort before continuing his search, but mercenaries were so unreasonably expensive, and he had no idea how long it would take the lady to have her gowns and possessions packed.

Timper sighed again as he automatically counted streets, then guided his horse right into one whose name post was conspicuously absent. It was the third or fourth he'd passed that had been rendered anonymous in just that way, the expected fruits of having carousing mercenaries rollicking through a city. Duke Rilfe would never have allowed that to happen in their city, but what else was to be expected of those of the north? Even the nobility there seemed touched with the same tainted outlook, looseness of morals, little or no sense of duty, a scandalous lack of piety-why, when he'd asked the Countess if he might have a moment or two with her house priest for the easing of his soul, she'd actually informed him that her house had only a priest of Evon, no priest of Grail! The courier was sure he'd successfully hidden his shock at that, but the Countess hadn't been equally successful at masking her unexplained amusement.

There, almost exactly mid-block on the left, was certainly the house he'd been directed to look for! Timper took in the three torches burning calmly on the front of the large, setback, freely-standing house, the modest metal spear-fence that stood invitingly open, the demurely draped windows that nevertheless showed a hint of lamplight behind them, and guided his mount through the fence and toward the high-pillared front door. He still had no idea whose house he was about to peremptorily enter, but that

made little difference to him. He was a courier, empowered to enter anywhere and everywhere to deliver his message, and that would be known to whomever resided in that house. If he hadn't been so cold he would have straightened his shoulders and raised his chin, but gestures like that would have to wait until he was indoors and warm again.

As he drew rein and began to dismount in front of the wide steps of the residence, the front door opened unexpectedly and a boy emerged, muffled to the ears and wearing a woolen cap which couldn't have offset the thinness of his threadbare coat and trousers. The boy pulled the door shut behind him, hurried recklessly down the slippery-looking steps into the torchlit night, then put a thin hand on Timper's bridle.

"I'll see to him for you, sir," the boy said in a voice that cracked more from the cold than his age, bobbing where he stood in a parody of proper bowing. "You go right on in to where it's warm, an' I'll put him in the sheds behind."

Timper nodded and surrendered his mount without demur-ral, pleasantly surprised to see that the amenities weren't entirely lost to those of the north, then climbed the steps toward the front door. Behind him the boy had hesitated very briefly before leading his horse away, just as though he had expected something more from Timper than a nod, but he couldn't imagine what that might be. Residences in the south always had a boy to see to one's horse, and they never expected more than a nod. After all, was he expected to give stabling directions for what would be a visit of no more than a few minutes at the most?

The door opened again as Timper reached it, this time wide enough to let him enter. The entrance hall was lamp lit and warm, especially when the serving man closed the door behind him, then turned to give him a far more proper bow.

"Allow me to take your cloak, sir," the man offered, already reaching for the garment in question. He was dressed in striped silk with knee hose and buckled shoes, but the scrupulously correct tailoring usually worn by servants of the upper class failed to hide his outrageously large size. One normally chose servants of lesser proportions for one's household, Timper knew, to keep one's guests from needing to look upward in so uncomfortable a manner, but he was hardly there to school those of the north in common courtesy. His commission was far more important than that, and he was anxious to get on with it.

"I shan't be staying long enough for that," Timper denied with a wave of his hand, looking around at the polished-wood paneling of the entrance hall and the closed doors that led from it to the house proper. "I am a courier of the Duke Rilfe of the House of Kienne in the Duchy of Gensea, and have been told that the lady Sofaltis of the same House might be found here. I must insist that I be taken to her at once."

"I do beg your pardon, sir, but I'm afraid that that would be a matter best discussed with my mistress," the man replied, withdrawing his hands with a small, odd smile curving his lips. "Til have someone take you to her."

"Gad, man, have you no ears?" Timper snapped, long since out of patience with the numberless obstructions he'd found in his path. "I have no wish to see your mistress, I wish to see..."

His words ended in near-outrage as the servant dared to turn his back and take up a small hammer lying in front of a set of crystal bells, and then purposefully strike one of the bells. The pure crystal tone was sweet and considerably more penetrating than Timper would have expected, and the first door to the right opened outward to show another servant like the first, properly dressed but hardly properly-sized.

"This gentleman is here in search of a particular lady," the first servant said to the second, his tone entirely uninflected. "He will, of course, need to speak to the mistress."

"Of course," the second agreed, eyeing Timper's continued possession of a cloak but refraining from commenting on the fact. "If you will be so kind as to follow me, sir?"

Very briefly Timper toyed with the idea of refusing while demanding again to be taken to the lady, and had the servants been of more usual proportions he might very well have done so. After a moment, however, it came to him that these were, after all, no more than ignorant servants, and the wisest course of action might well be allowing them to lead him to their mistress. With that in view he strode through the door being held open for him voicing no more than a short sound of impatience, waited until the servant closed the door again and moved ahead, then followed wordlessly after.

Moving through the doorway had put him in a hall both narrower and longer than the entrance hall, but one whose floor was richly carpeted and whose paneled walls were hung with paintings of obviously great worth. It seemed to Timper as he walked along that the house was the residence of someone of substantial affluence, but it wasn't quite as silent as a residence of that sort should be. Somewhere, a distance off, was what seemed like the sound of roistering voices, but perhaps it wasn't coming from that house. Perhaps those who lived in the house were forced to endure coarse and common but monied neighbors, and if that were so...

"This way, sir, if you please," the servant interrupted his thoughts, stopping in front of a door to the right perhaps halfway down the hall. A brief knock and then the servant entered, halting just inside to bow to someone Timper was unable to make out beyond the man's bulk. "Your pardon, madam, but this gentleman informs us that he has come in search of a specific lady. Will you see him?"

"Of course I will," came one of the sweetest, softest voices Timper had ever heard, immediately making him wish he might see the face that went with it. "Do show him in, Rinson."

"Sir," the servant Rinson said, stepping aside with another bow, one Timper was barely aware of. The servant's movement had brought to view sight of his mistress, and if anything the look of her was superior to the sound of her voice. The young courier had never imagined that any woman so clearly older than himself might touch him so quickly and strongly, and if he hadn't been in the midst of a commission he would likely have stood there frozen dumb. Night-black hair and shining black eyes, skin the color of faintly blushing cream, full red lips with a devastating smile, all above a richly gowned body of slim elegance and grace. She was seated behind a delicate desk of lace-like carving, obviously a woman of responsibility as well as beauty, and he realized he'd stepped well into the room only when he heard the sound of the door closing somewhere behind him.

"And how may I help you, sir?" the vision asked, smiling at him encouragingly as she straightened in her chair. "Would you care to describe the sort of lady you seek, or would you prefer looking about before voicing your thoughts? Do you seek someone of your own age, or might it possibly be someone more-experienced-that you search for? It would be my greatest pleasure to-assist you in any manner possible."

Her lovely voice had softened and she had leaned forward, her red lips glistening in a way that had Timper completely convinced regarding her sincerity. His gaze had somehow become riveted to her full, heaving bosom, a bosom less well-covered than perhaps she realized, and it was with the greatest difficulty that he brought his eyes to her face again.

"Madam, I-" he began, then paused to bring his voice down from the higher ranges where it had embarrassingly strayed. "Madam, I thank you for your offer of-assistance, and shall most willingly accept it," he said on his second attempt, striving to project a maturity of his own. "I am the courier of Duke Rilfe of Gensea, and have come seeking the lady Sofaltis of Gensea, daughter of the Duke, for whom I have a most urgent communication. I've been told I would find her here in this house, and although I have never

seen her, she was described to me as being perhaps a year my junior, delicately pretty with unusually lovely gray eyes, brown-haired and lithe..."

"Wait just a minute here!" the woman interrupted in sudden annoyance, no longer appearing quite as winsome as she had a moment earlier. "Are you saying you're here looking for someone, an actual, real someone? You have a message to deliver?"

"Hardly so simple a thing as a message," Timper responded, stung by the change in the beautiful woman's attitude. "A ducal courier is not a mere message bearer, the responsibilities of the position are a good deal more complex than..."

"But you don't deny you're here looking to talk to someone," the woman insisted, nearly in accusation. "And not for the usual reason. Well, I'm afraid I can't help you. I've never heard of this-lady, and doubt that she's ever been here. I wish you a pleasant evening-elsewhere."

The lovely woman had risen to her feet behind the desk, her expression now closed and cold, and Timper found himself almost completely at a loss. Not only had he no desire to leave, he could not leave before learning for certain that the lady Sofaltis wasn't there. Firm insistence had often gotten him what information and assistance he required, and just then he knew he needed to try something of the same again.

"Madam, I must beg your indulgence for a few moments more," he said at once with more desperation than assertive-ness, not precisely the attitude he'd been attempting but one that would have to do. "I've been informed that the lady Sofaltis is here, in company with members of the Silver

Gleaming, whose presence, if fact, could scarcely be missed. Their purpose in coming here was kept from me, in a deliberate attempt at vindictiveness, I believe, yet was I specifically told..."

"The Silver Gleaming?" the woman interrupted, a faint, very attractive frown suddenly shadowing her face, "Of course there are members of the Silver Gleaming here. We happen to be very popular with the Blades because of the balanced variety our house offers, just as we're popular with the other Sword Companies. I happened to see a few Fists arriving, but there were no-ladies-with them."

The woman pronounced the word "ladies" as though it were nearly off-color and entirely loathsome, an attitude Timper couldn't quite understand. Not that he was able to understand most of the rest of what he'd been told. The north, it seemed, was far more different from the south than he'd imagined.

"What are Fists?" he asked almost warily, wondering if he would next be able to ask about the "balanced variety" the woman had also mentioned. He wasn't quite sure, but somehow he had the distinct impression the concept of variety was one he ought to be familiar with.

"Fists are special units of Sword Companies," the vision answered, staring at him in an odd manner as she reseated herself. "The units consist of five Blades, usually the best Blades the Company has, and in battle they carry out initial or crucial thrusts. Where did you say you come from?"

"A gentleman scarcely has the time to investigate every unimportant facet of such things as Sword Companies." Timper returned stiffly, this time stung into trying to defend himself. He could also feel the flush in his cheeks, and nearly began shifting in place like an ignorant child caught by his tutor. "Are you absolutely certain there were no women with those-Fists?"

"I said there were no ladies with the Fists," the woman corrected, her face smooth and serene despite the twinkle of amusement in her eyes, her hands holding lightly to the arms of her chair. "Ladies do badly as members of a Fist, but female Blades are another story entirely. Most Companies have their share of

females, and although the majority of Fists are all male, one or two have..."

Her voice trailed off as she stared at Timper again, but this time he could see she stared thoughtfully. Something had obviously occurred to her, and her next words proved the point.

"Brown-haired and gray-eyed, lithe and young," the woman murmured, as though hearing the description for the very first time. "And named Sofaltis! It's just barely possible, I suppose, stranger things have happened- If it is true, I'd love to be there..."

The woman's eyes lost their distracted look as they sharpened on Timper again with renewed amusement, and then she grew somewhat more brisk.

"It's possible one of the Blades of the Silver Gleaming will be able to-direct you to this lady of yours," she said, reaching for a small, delicate bell which stood at the corner of the desk to her right. "I'll have someone take you to them, but I warn you now; if you cause any sort of ruckus among any of the guests, the mistress' rules will see you put out of the house at once, whether or not you've managed to question anyone. Have I made myself clear?"

"But - I thought you were the mistress of this house," Timper blurted, now entirely at a loss. "Those servants- they said-and they brought me here to this room-"

"They thought you were looking for special attention from someone with standing," the woman answered as she rang the bell, this time unable to keep the smile from her face. "There are three of us who spare the mistress that sort of-wearying interview, four when business gets unusually brisk. You would be surprised how many nobles and upper class merchants insist on dealing with no one but- Ah, Rinson."

The servant who had led Timper to that room appeared even before the crystal voice of the bell died away, giving the young courier no further opportunity for asking questions. Timper felt bewildered and because of that was extremely annoyed, but the presence of the very large servant helped him keep firmly in mind the tenet that no true gentleman was ever rude to a woman.

"Rinson, please show this gentleman to the area of the house where the Blades of the Silver Gleaming are taking their ease," the woman directed, her tone entirely neutral. "Specifically, I would say, the Fist of Soft and Gentle. Are you acquainted with the Blades of that Fist?"

"Of course, Madam," the servant said, his bow tinged more with curiosity than propriety. "If you will follow me, sir?"

Timper had very little choice concerning the following, but his annoyance was growing in leaps and bounds, and he was beginning to regret not having surrendered his cloak when he might have. Not only had the house grown extremely warm, but the output of anger was adding itself to the discomfort of wool. What in Home's name might the Fist of Soft and Gentle be? Hardly the general name of something called a Fist, but just as unlikely a sobriquet for a Blade of a Fist. The young man stomped out of the room at the servant's gesture, deliberately refraining from bowing to the woman whose company he departed. Lovely she might be, but her loveliness had diminished quickly with the increase of her amusement.

This time the servant led the way to the very end of the narrow hall, and the door there gave access to an even smaller and narrower backstairs area that was rather dim. As soon as they had entered the dimness, however, the sound of voices that Timper had noticed earlier became a good deal more imposing on the former quiet. He followed the servant through the dimness to the left, wondering what could possibly be causing such a row, and then another door was opened that answered his question as soon as he had

stepped through it into the room beyond.

"Holy Emissaries intercede for my soul!" Timper prayed silently but fervently as he fought to keep the shock off his face, his eyes seeking something innocuous to rest on. The only trouble was, there was nothing innocuous to look at, at least not in that well-lit room. Men dressed in the off-duty leathers of Blades lolled everywhere on the thick carpeting, many of them leaning elbows on cushions as they drank from goblets or shouted in encouragement and high amusement. The many-females-with them either had hands on them or were being themselves explored, their scantily clad bodies proving easily accessible, and in the midst of all that there was a-a-dance of sorts being performed. The pretty young thing standing alone in the middle of the floor was still clad in a proper gown, but even as Timper watched she acceded to the shouting around her with a sob, and began slowly removing the gown. Tears ran down her blushing cheeks as sight of her delicate underclothing was brutally forced from proper privacy into the public domain, but all she received in the way of compassion from those who watched was an increase in their laughter. Had Timper not been certain the girl was a slave he would have interfered no matter the consequences, but a man would be foolish to concern himself with the distress of a newly-made chain child, mostly especially in what he now knew that place to be. He had never before visited one himself, but he had heard stories of such places; oh, my, he certainly had.

"This way, sir," the servant Rinson said to a hopefully unobtrusively appalled Timper, and the courier was quick to follow across the floor behind the stiffly moving, softly sobbing girl. He made every effort to keep his eyes on the servant rather than looking again at the slave, and strove to move as rapidly as possible without giving the appearance of hurrying. A true gentleman never looked at the unclad body of any female, not even his wife, unless he received special dispensation from the Holy Emissaries in acknowledgment of his proven piety. He was then permitted to look upon the woman he took to wife, but certainly not any other. When he admitted to his Holy Council in Strict Truth that he had abrogated a privilege which wasn't his, there would, without the least doubt, be absolute hell to pay.

An arch gave access to another room like the first, only this one had a small, dark beauty in transparent veils moving sensuously to the sound of a pipe. Her wide, beautiful eyes moved from one watching, grinning Blade to the next, the smile visible on her full, pouting lips beneath her face-veil an almost-shouted invitation, and Timper found it best to remove his cloak as he passed her, something that helped to keep her from his sight. Everyone knew that Blades of a Sword Company were eternally damned anyway and therefore often indulged in things that made a sensible man tremble and turn away, but possibly no one had told the Blades they were lost. For people who were inescapably heading for eternal damnation, Timper thought they appeared unexpectedly satisfied and unworried.

The courier had his cloak thrown over his left arm by the time he moved through the next arch, which happily gave him something to clutch when he abruptly understood what he was seeing. Blades still lounged in their leathers on the carpeting, but most of these Blades were female and the ones attending them in oiled tights were male. If a woman was of the nobility a man certainly did well to bow low in her presence, but to kneel in front of a common rag, nearly naked and obscenely exposed despite a supposed covering-! Timper had never felt so outraged in his entire life, even if the men were nothing but slaves! Good taste demanded restraint in some quarter, and for a man to be made to exhibit himself like that, slave or no, was absolutely unacceptable. Why, he had half a mind to-

"I believe the Fists of the Silver Gleaming are to be found in the next area, sir," the servant Rinson interrupted Timper's silent expostulation, at the same time reminding him of the warning he had been given. If he were going to execute his commission he needed to restrain his perfectly proper indignation, at least for a short while. After he had gotten what answers were to be had, he would certainly speak his mind and then dare them to do their worst. He strode after the servant without looking again on depravity, knowing without doubt that one who was Saved had nothing to fear from those who were

damned.

Which high-minded attitude took him through the arch and into the next room, but not beyond the first two steps. Once again the majority of Blades were male and their attendants female, but three female Blades sat among them, no two of the women together, half a dozen male attendants also rather visible. Laughter came from many of the Blades, squealing arising from one of the attending females being held down out of sight by four of the men, but none of that was what struck Timper speechless. The sight that froze him was of three of the male attendants, all lined up and posturing in front of one of the female Blades, arms flexing muscle, chests inflated and hips rolling suggestively-

But the rag wasn't even watching! Men were trying to catch the attention of a female, and she wasn't even paying attention!

Timper closed his eyes for a moment and fought to contain his outrage, memory of his commission alone making it possible for him to do so. Females forcing males to grovel and demean themselves was bad enough, but for the female to then turn around and ignore them-! Such arrogance was intolerable, and completely unacceptable to a gentleman of Timper's station; he would ask his questions and then resoundingly denounce the rag, and yes, the men with her as well. If she had never been taught better, they certainly should have been. The servant Rinson was moving forward, toward the very group Timper meant to confront, and once he had followed and gotten near enough, their words separated from the background din.

"... could have had our backsides sliced if we hadn't withdrawn when we did," one of the men was saying to another, the speaker a big man with black hair and light eyes who sat to the right of the female Blade. "If Seepar thinks he'll be riding back for us again, he's suffering from the effects of too long a time substituting other things for girls."

"I heard he did the same to one of the Fists of the Crimson Rush just before first snow," the female Blade remarked, the disgust in her voice evident even in the midst of the surrounding noise. "If the Opened Throats Company wants his so-called Fist, they're more than welcome to it, but we'll have to insist on saying our good-byes now-to the Blades he'll supposedly be supporting."

"He's really that bad then," the man who had been spoken to said, sighing where he sat at the first man's right. He was also large with longish, dark hair, but his eyes were dark rather than light. "After the losses we took just before first snow, I was hoping to recruit some seasoned fighters for the Opened Throats rather than the green lads we've been attracting, but I'll take green over yellow any day."

"Yellow might not be the proper color for Seepar and his four," the woman said, then turned her head to the man who sat between her and the second man. "Rullin, old sage, what's the color of incompetence?"

"Red," the man replied with a grin, reaching over to tousle the girl's brown hair. "For all the blood they'll be losing one of these days, hopefully their own. And the next time you refer to me as old, you female infant, I'll turn you over my knee and see to it that you'll need to walk to battle for the next day or three. Instead of needling your unit leader, why don't you pay some attention to those three over there?"

"They're half killing themselves trying to get you to choose one of them for tonight, and you ought to be flattered."

"Flattered isn't what I'm in the mood to be," the girl answered, leaning back on one elbow while continuing to stare at the man called Rullin. "Pleased is what I'm in the mood to be, but my unit leader has suddenly grown too old and infirm to manage that. Someone not a Blade might think he was afraid of a mere female infant."

The girl's insolence shocked Timper and caused the Fist leader Rullin to begin straightening in anger where he sat, but the servant Rinson interrupted before anything more might be said.

"I do beg your pardon, sirs and madam," he said, bowing to those who reluctantly took their attention from other things. "The house dislikes disturbing guests during their relaxation, but this gentleman was quite insistent about speaking to members of the Silver Gleaming, and one of our staff suggested your Fist. There is someone he is in search of."

The servant looked toward Timper then, and all the eyes of those he'd been addressing followed suit, momentarily disconcerting the young courier. One is looked at many times in one's life, but not often by so large a number of Blades. Their eyes were-different, somehow, harder, perhaps, with gazes unwavering and sharp. Timper found the need to clear his throat, then straightened where he stood.

"I am the courier of Duke Rilfe of Gensea, and have been told that I might learn the whereabouts of the Duke's eldest daughter from this Company," he said in more of a rush than he had expected to, oddly eager to have the words spoken so that he might depart. "I would greatly appreciate being directed to her correct location."

"You expect Blades to be entrusted with the location of a lady?" the man who, from the device on the medallion about his neck, was a member of the Opened Throats Company, asked with a snort of ridicule. He had been the second man in the discussion just past, and seemed greatly amused. "Do your people also believe in having wolves guard their hen houses, boy?"

"It was not I who arranged the matter so," Timper replied with stiffly affronted dignity; "boy" indeed! "Had I had a say in it, I assure you it would have been done differently. If none of you has the information I seek, I will now take my leave."

"Calm your rush, boy," the Fist leader Rullin suggested in a drawl as Timper was about to turn away, the easy words very much a command. "One who walks about unarmed in company such as this would be wise to polish his good manners. For what reason are you looking for this Duke's daughter?"

Timper was taken aback by everything the man had said, perhaps most forcefully by the suggestion that a Duke's courier was not considered untouchable by the men he spoke with. He realized then how barbaric those of the north really were and that he was trapped in the midst of them, but there was little he could do just then to alter the situation. The man Rulfin, he thought, had deliberately called him "boy," most likely to stress his place among Blades; despite the talk of age, the Fist leader had seen, at most, a decade more of life than Timper. Very briefly the young courier considered refusing an answer to the question which had been put to him; the patient and not-so-patient gazes resting on him, however, caused him to reconsider the idea.

"I seek the lady Sofaltis so that I may deliver the extremely urgent communication entrusted to me," Timper admitted, suddenly and unhappily aware of exactly how long he would retain the Duke's letter if these ruffians should attempt taking it from him. "A family tragedy has occurred, and the Duke wishes the lady to be informed of it."

Timper had spoken the truth without thinking, but it suddenly came to him that that very same truth should cool their interest. No gold being sent and no secret messages, nothing but news of a tragedy, and what man would find interest in the tragedies of others? Already the eyes of Rullin had lost their look of amusement, but the girl beside him had abruptly straightened to sitting, as though disturbed over something. The Blade leader Rullin noticed the movement as well, and quickly turned his head to her.

"It's your turn to be calm, Soft and Gentle," he said to the female, making no effort to put an arm about her to ease her sudden upset as a gentleman might. "We'll have this straightened out in another minute or

so." Then he looked up again at

Timper and added, "How were you supposed to identify the lady Sofaltis?"

"Why-I've been given her description," Timper replied in confusion, in the midst of registering the name the girl had been called by.- Women were, for the most part, soft and gentle, but by the look of her and the words she had spoken, there was a misnomer if ever he'd heard one. "Perhaps a year my junior, brown-haired and gray-eyed, tall and lithe..."

Timper's words trailed off as the girl rose gracefully to her feet before him, her faintly pretty face expressionless. Her black off-duty leathers fit like the skin they were, her black boots appeared sturdy but well broken in, the sword hung at her side was plain-hilled and no longer new, and the silver medallion of her Company gleamed in the lamplight. It startled Timper to realize that he needed to look up, for the girl was taller than he even though she seemed somewhat younger- and then he began registering certain additional items. Her form was lithe, her face pretty, her hair brown, her eyes gray...

"I am the lady Sofaltis," the female said in a voice much like that which the Blade Rullin had used, putting a hand out toward Timper. "Give me my father's letter."

At another time, Timper would have been quick to argue or obey; at that time, however, he was too deeply in shock to do either thing. He had thought the lady Sofaltis indiscreetly involved with a Blade of a Sword Company, but that wasn't so. Far, far worse, she was a Blade of a Sword Company!

The young idiot just stood there staring at me, his long face pale enough to rival flour. Someone had dressed him in the tights, tunic and short boots no one but very young pages wore in the north, and if I hadn't been so upset I would have felt sorry for him. It wasn't really his fault he looked like a pompous ass, or that I have very little patience with pompous asses.

"I said, give me my father's letter," I repeated, having no idea what could have happened, but anxious to find out. "How long ago were you dispatched?"

"Why-why-five weeks and some days ago," he answered, finally snapping out of it enough to begin fumbling at his tunic. "The roads were terrible and the accommodations worse, but-but-how do I know you're the lady Sofaltis? I must insist upon seeing your signet ring."

"My aunt Illi has my signet ring, and you know damned well who I am," I countered, snapping my fingers in impatience as he winced at what he undoubtedly considered dreadful language. "You couldn't have found me if my aunt hadn't set you going in the right direction, and that direction led here. Stop quibbling and give me the letter."

"Take it slow, Soft and Gentle," Rullin said as he got to his feet, Foist, Jakkar and Hammis rising with him. "I doubt if the boy's used to our sort, and he needs some time to adjust. She is who she says she is, boy, so you'd better give her that letter. If you make her take it from you, you'll be responsible for our needing to find another house to pass the night in. This house has rules against staining the carpeting with blood."

Rull was being his usual light-heartedly mediating self, but the boy my father had sent wasn't finding much comfort in the attempt to put him at ease with joking. His wide, dark eyes moved from one member of my Fist to the next, noticing how every one of them was larger even than I, and then the heavy paper of a sealed envelope was being thrust into my hand. I automatically checked the seal before breaking it, withdrew the letter and read it quickly, then turned back to where I'd left my cup of wine.

"How bad is it?" Rull asked quietly from behind me, concern in his voice. "From your expression it can't

be good, but how bad is bad?"

I took a minute to swallow some wine before turning back, then looked directly at him.

"My brother Rymar is dead," I got out with more difficulty than I'd expected to have, feeling as though saying the words aloud was what made them true. "After our oldest brother's accident Rymar was named Father's heir, but Rymar always considered that a responsibility rather than a privileged right. Now he's dead too, but not because of any accident. They tried to make it look like one, but only a fool would have believed that, and my father's no fool. Rymar was deliberately killed."

"Who's 'they'?" Jakkar asked in his rumble of a voice, his big left hand unconsciously stroking his sword hilt. "And why would they want to kill a Ducal heir and not go after the Duke himself first?"

"I don't know," I admitted, annoyed at the lack of logic to the thing. "It's clear they want my father's heir dead, but not him. And as for who 'they' are, I don't know that either. I have a feeling my father knows, but I don't."

"If he doesn't know yet, I'm willing to bet he's working on it," Rull commented, having heard of my father even before I'd joined the Fist. "Was Rymar your father's last living son?"

"He just might have been," I said, swallowing again at my wine. "My other brothers, one older than me and one younger, haven't been heard from for years, which probably means they're both dead. There's no other reason for them not to have let Father know where they are. Except for my two little sisters, all that leaves is me."

"Who will be doing what?" RuH asked, a question Foist, Jakkar and Hammis were also interested in having answered. Fists are closer than most families, closer even than marriage, and what affects one of its Blades affects the other four as well. "Will you need to go home for a while to pay your respects, or was your father simply sending you a warning?"

"My father wants me home, but not to pay my respects," I said with the reluctance firmly back in place, not exactly avoiding the four pairs of eyes on me, but not quite meeting them either. "I don't know what he has in mind, but he definitely and specifically wants me home. And besides that, he wouldn't be sending me the sort of warning you mean. He doesn't know I'm a Blade."

I used the relative resulting silence to look up-relative in relation to the carousing still going on in the rest of the room-and found that I would have been better off continuing to avoid the stares of my Fistmates. They weren't exactly furious, or at least Foist, Jak and Ham weren't.

"That's not quite what you said when you joined the Company," Rull pointed out with a growl after a moment, his light eyes filled with dagger points. "Of course my family knows all about this, you said. Of course I have their permission, you said. They know all about what I'm doing and they approve, you said."

"My aunt Illi knew and approved," I countered, wishing Rull would stop looking at me like that. "I wasn't trying to make trouble for the Company, but if I'd asked my father he probably would have refused permission, and I wasn't of age yet. Was I supposed to go home and sit quietly while waiting for the years to go by? I wasn't lying, I simply didn't tell all of the truth."

"Oh, is that all you did?", Rull said, folding his arms across his chest while the others sighed or shook their heads or rubbed their eyes. "The fact that your father's a Duke is completely beside the point, is it? If he'd found out and had gone foaming at the idea, he couldn't have done more than asked the King to have our Company disbanded and outlawed, now could he? Of course he couldn't, so why would we be

upset? You didn't do anything more serious than jeopardize the lives of everyone in the Company. Talk about Seepar. The only lives he endangers are the five of the Fist he's supposed to be backing."

There was no amusement of any sort in Rullin, not in his eyes or his face or his voice, and it suddenly came to me that there was no longer any extraneous noise in the room. Everyone was listening, every Blade there had heard what he'd said, and it didn't matter that Rullin was right about what I'd done. Fistmates don't say things like that to one another, not when they want to continue being Fistmates, but that, of course, was the whole point. He'd been trying to tell me that not only was I about to leave, I also needn't bother coming back. I'd been wondering why he'd been avoiding me the last couple of weeks and had been trying to tease him out of whatever his problem was, but it looked like the problem went too deep for teasing. He'd taken the very first opportunity to invite "me out of the Fist, and although it hurt more than I'd ever be able to explain to an outsider, I wasn't someone who believed in staying where I wasn't wanted. I held his gaze for a long moment after he'd fallen silent, then simply turned and got out of there.

I had to push my way through onlookers and a sudden babble of disturbed conversation, but size and determination count for quite a lot in a situation like that. I felt as though

I'd just lost four of the five fingers of my sword hand, but that, of course, is what it's all about. A fist is a hand closed and ready to fight, the same thing a Fist is, especially the closed part. When a Fist is forced open it's never done without pain, and I've always preferred licking my wounds in private.

I strode through the areas until I reached the door leading to the front hall, threw it open then left it for one of the servants to close behind me, and didn't realize I was being followed until the door was closed and most of the revel-noise was cut off. Hurrying footsteps sounded behind me, and then came the voice of someone I'd forgotten about entirely.

"My lady, I really must insist that you wait for me," that ass of a courier complained, obviously having trouble keeping up. "I am, after all, the one your father sent to escort you home."

Which shows how hard my father was trying to protect my virtue, I thought rather than said, gesturing to the door servant to find my cloak. Those of the south placed a much higher value on virginity than northerners did, which also showed how vastly more intelligent northerners were.

"I shall hire an escort for us first thing tomorrow," the ass babbled on, making no effort to take back the letter I discovered I still held. "Should you be able to tell me how quickly you expect your maids at the Countess' house to pack your clothing and possessions, I'll know when to tell the escort to..."

"There won't be an escort," I said, staring at the letter I held as the idea came to me. "I'll be leaving for home tonight, after I make a few necessary stops, and if you intend coming with me you'd better be prepared to move fast and ride hard. I want to be home as soon as humanly possible."

"But-but-my lady!" he protested, back to being shocked. "You mean to ride the entire distance alone? With the protection of no one but myself?"

"Oh, I'm sure you won't have any trouble supplying me with all the protection I need," I murmured, turning away from his wide-eyed and stunned disbelief. I'd stop at my barracks to pick up my gear, at the Company clerk's to hand in my resignation, and at my aunt Illi's to thank her for all she'd done for me. Right after that I'd start for home, and once I got there my father would know his troubles were over.

My brother Rymar had been one of those people everyone liked, the sort whose every word and gesture told you he would never hurt you, the sort who never caused harm to anyone or anything. It was one of the furiously unfair parts of life that people like Rymar usually ended up being hurt, swept out of the way

like dust before those who never minded hurting everyone they could reach. As my father's heir he'd been a prime and easy target, but our enemies would not find it the same with the one who would next be heir.

The only one left to be heir.

Me.

With no Fist to go back to, with no brothers to claim the Duchy, what other course of action made as much sense? My father needed an heir and I needed something to do with my life, and even if my father hadn't already thought of it on his own, he would certainly welcome the suggestion. We hadn't seen each other for five years, and he'd be pleased and proud at what I'd learned and done. As I took my cloak from the servant I tucked the letter into my swordbelt, more anxious than ever to be home again and started with my new life.

Sofaltis stared at Rullin with a look that made him feel as though he'd savaged something small and helpless, and then she turned and forced her way through the gathered crowd to disappear from sight. His first urge was to go after her and tell her he hadn't really meant what he'd said, but Rullin had spent most of his life training himself to ignore first impulses. By the time he knew he should have done it anyway the miserable female infant was not only out of sight, but probably gone from the house as well. He unfolded- his arms, muttering curses at himself under his breath, then turned to find the eyes of the rest of his Fist on him.

"Nice going, Rull," Foist said with a judicious nod, folding his arms as his very pale eyes pinned Rullin where he stood. "I've never been able to draw blood like that without using my sword. You should run a Company practice in the technique."

"Why in hell did you just let her walk away like that?" Hammis demanded, fists on hips and dark eyes blazing. "Why didn't you stop her?"

"Maybe he forgot how long it took us to find a fifth for our Fist who actually suited all of us," Jakkar rumbled, another pair of dark, accusing eyes. "Maybe he was afraid she was starting to get ideas about him, and he wanted to get rid of her before she did."

"Are you all happy now?" Rullin growled back, sending his glare to each of them in turn. "Since I couldn't tell on my own what a stupid thing I'd done, you three had to do the telling for me. Do you have it out of your systems now, or is there something else you'd like to add?"

"I still want to know why you didn't stop her," Hammis persisted, too angry himself to care about Rullin's anger. "It wasn't as if she tried to hurt the Company on purpose, and there are more than a few of us still walking around who wouldn't be if she hadn't joined up. Is Jak right? Did you think she was after you, so you either had to run yourself or make her do it?"

"Don't be stupider than you look, Ham," Rullin said in disgust, wishing he could get back to his drink but knowing he had to first settle things in his Fist. "Soft and Gentle wasn't after me or she would have said so. She was just in the mood for my brand of wrestling, and laughed when I told her she had to learn to ask nice. She tried to play stubborn, so I did too, which is what probably started it all. She knows I like spreading myself around too much to ever settle down, so which one of you thinks she's dim enough to get a taste for me anyway? I didn't stop her because I'd really put my foot in it, and if I'd tried to force her to listen to an apology, she, probably would have drawn on me. Tomorrow morning she'll be easier to talk to, and more likely to listen to what's being said. Especially if you three are right there behind me. Are you three going to be right there behind me?"

"We're trying to decide if it would be better or worse with our points in your back," Foist said, running a hand through his long blond hair. "I don't like the idea of Soft and Gentle feeling hurt like that, even for just one night. What if she goes out and gets into a fight? She's all alone, so how would we know about it?"

"Alone she isn't," Jakkar told him, just in time to keep Hammis from exploding again. "That little twerp in the tights went trotting off after her, and if anything happens even he'll be smart enough to come back and get us. As long as he's first of all smart enough not to get in her way."

"Maybe you're right about waiting until tomorrow," Foist grudgingly told Rullin, turning aside to reach down for his wine cup. "If we've got to send her home for a while, a proper send off'll make her feel better - and bring her back faster."

"And meanwhile we get to fight one Blade short," Hammis muttered, going after his own cup. "Which is better than adding a temporary fifth we don't know and can't count on. Fighters should have to give up their families when they become Blades."

"We're all jealous of her family. Ham, but she's not going back there to stay," Foist said with a small laugh, clapping the other big man on the back. "Before we know it she'll be here again, right where she belongs. You get borm into a family, but a Fist goes a lot deeper than that."

Jakkar added something to that that made Hammis snort out a laugh, but Rullin wasn't listening any longer. He sat down to retrieve his wine cup and emptied it in a swallow, then gestured to one of the servants to refill it. If the other three thought they were wild over what had happened, they should feel it from his point of view. Maybe it was the thought of Softy's going home that had pushed him so far out of line, or maybe it was the way he'd been feeling for the last couple of weeks. Rullin didn't know what he wanted or how he felt about all that, but one thing he did know: there wasn't a girl in the house who suited him as well as Soft and Gentle did, which meant the night ahead was going to be a very long one.

## **Chapter Two**

The inn was probably the best in the east, large and sprawling and well-staffed, usually worth the high prices charged. From mid-spring to late summer travelers on the highway streamed in and out of it, but that early in the season there were only a few, risking an unexpected return to winter simply because they had to. The man who stood looking out of one of the windows of his suite was one such, but the smile on his lips as he stared down into the courtyard below said the risk was unimportant in the face of what daring it brought. The smile was one of pride and very deep affection, and if there had been anyone in his rooms to see the expression, it would have pleased him even more.

Below in the courtyard were a number of young men, some sitting about drinking, some laughingly enjoying the shy but eager attention of the wenches who had brought the drink, others paying heed only to what was occurring in the middle of the yard. Two of the young men were stripped to the waist despite the coolness in the air, and each of them held a wooden practice sword. Both were clearly fighting men, well made and in excellent condition, but one of the two stood taller and broader than the other, the wooden sword he held fitting his palm like living steel. His hair was a very pale brown, so pale it almost seemed an unwashed yellow, and the color of his light, laughing eyes appeared to change now and again, possibly with his mood. The two had done with circling and now struck at each other, without shields to catch the blows, without mail to deflect the strokes, speed alone combined with skill to keep the young fighters from reaching one another.

The exchange had gone on only a handful of minutes before the man watching from his window knew the smaller of the two fighters had underestimated the larger. The majority of really big men depended on

strength and size to win their set-tos for them, a combination which was usually susceptible to the superior one of speed and skill. The big man below, however, had clearly developed speed and skill of his own, and had simply combined them with size and strength. His heavy wooden sword moved so fast it might have been made of parchment instead, but when it struck the frantically defending second fighter, the man knew there was nothing of parchment about it. His cry of pain reached the watcher above as his left hand flew to his ribs, and then he was seated rocking on the flagstones, and the match was done.

"Damned fine swordsmanship, damned fine," the watcher muttered to himself, pride swelling his chest and straightening him where he stood. Below, the victorious fighter had his hands full, this time needing to defend himself from the adoring excitement and congratulations of the serving wenches. When the fighter laughingly proved himself incapable of successful defense against an attack of that sort the watcher chuckled, silently advising him to collect what kisses and caresses he might as quickly as possible. Another watcher now approached the young man, also grinning, and the message he meant to deliver would take the young man from the midst of pleasant diversion.

The watcher had left the window and was pouring two cups of wine when the rap came at the door, but he made no effort to go and open it. The opening of the door from without was fully expected, and when he turned he saw the young fighter being urged inside with tunic and swordbelt filling his hands. He smiled his greeting as he moved forward, and the young man answered with surprised pleasure as the door was closed behind him.

"Father, you came yourself!" he exclaimed, throwing aside both tunic and swordbelt to stride forward with arms outstretched. "I was expecting your agent."

"The problem is too important, Kylin," the older man said as he and his son embraced with muscle-cracking strength and backslapping which would have felt lesser men. The older was nearly the size of the younger, and despite the dis-parity in their ages it was clear to any with eyes that the older was an even more seasoned fighter than the younger.

"There's trouble at home?" the fighter Kylin asked with a frown, standing at arm's length from his father. "Is that the reason you sent for me? Are any of my brothers hurt?"

"The trouble isn't in our own duchy," the older man said with a shake of his head, gesturing his son into returning with him to where the wine stood. "Your brothers, thanks to the skill they've developed from their war training, have crushed enough underhanded attacks to send those scheming cowards looking elsewhere for easier prey. Unfortunately for our kingdom, they found easy pickings in the Duchy of Gensea."

"Duke Rilfe is beset?" Kylin asked, accepting a cup but not drinking from it. "I would have expected him to be one of the last attacked, what with the size of his levy, the high quality of their training and arming, and the unswerving loyalty they all feel for him. Is it Prince Traffis' troops?"

"Prince Traffis is still too well occupied in the northern duchy to spare the men and attention," the older man answered with another shake of his head, his annoyance causing him to swallow his wine rather than sip at it. "When he first marched across the northern border with his foreign army, claiming to be the rightful heir to the throne his older brother sat on, we all expected the King's army to make short work of him. And then Zeran attacked from the northwest into our own western duchy of Arthil, and even with our levy we needed most of the King's troops to keep them out. I've always regretted the lack of a mountain range in Arthil; prime farmlands and grazing tracts are too hard to defend in a climate like ours."

"From the word going around, you haven't done badly," Kylin said with a grin, amused to hear his father's favorite complaint again. "Zeran lost so many troops before first snow last year, that there's silver backing

the theory you'll be facing more Zeranese females than males this spring. It's said they haven't enough men to service so many women, so they're putting the prettier ones in mail and sending them out ahead of the regulars. That's to force the regulars out of their hidey-holes, of course, and let them know there's nothing left at home worth deserting for. If it turns out to be true, it'll make this year's campaign a lot more interesting than last year's."

"So you did show up for some of the fighting," the Duke Trame of Arthil said, looking at his son over the rim of his raised cup. "I thought we agreed you would stay in the north, leading that contingent of the King's Knights? The fighting there grow too tame for you, did it?"

"As a matter of fact, it slacked off sooner than we expected it to," Kylin answered with pure, wide-eyed innocence, gesturing with his cup to underscore that innocence. "My men were tired but I hadn't been fighting as hard as they had, so while they rested I rode home to see how your own war was going. I didn't intend doing more than stopping for a day or so before heading back, but somehow I ended up in the middle of a skirmish, and your men had just lost their commander, and the Zeranese outnumbered them, and I was in so deep so fast I couldn't simply ride away again."

"All right, all right, enough," his father surrendered, shaking his head at the young fighter's immediate grin. "I should have known better than to try pinning you down, especially when you knew two of your younger brothers were also in the north. If you hadn't been there we would have lost every man of that command, but you weren't supposed to spread yourself so thin, especially not by shifting back and forth between wars. What would have happened if you'd been killed?"

"With three older brothers and four younger, all in excellent health and as skilled with a sword as their father?" Kylin asked with a laugh of amusement and an uncaring movement of his massive shoulders. "I like to think there would have been a few tears at my final send off, and not only from my mother and father and brothers, but aside from that? The loss of a Duke's fourth son is hardly likely to shatter the kingdom."

"In this instance, that's not entirely true," the Duke said, all traces of amusement gone from him. "You know Duke Rilfe and I are old friends, closer even than some brothers. What you don't know about is the agreement we came to, some two years ago at the King's coronation. In those days I thought I was the only one capable of seeing the undercurrents in the wind, but my old friend had noticed what I had, and had seen how he might be caught up in them to strangling. Once he spoke to me of it we formulated a plan and hoped it would never be needed, but word was recently sent me that all hope is gone. Sit down, Kylin, and I'll begin the tale from its proper starting point."

Each man settled himself in one of the deep leather armchairs standing in front of the polite fire in the hearth, and Kylin took a swallow of his wine, glad now that the fire was there. The air outside was mild compared to what he had left in the north, but the sitting room felt as though the new-coming season hadn't yet caught up to the winter. Without the fire he would have needed his tunic, and that despite the light sheen of sweat that hadn't yet dried on him.

"More than two years ago, well before the King's coronation, a new High Priest was anointed among those who serve Grail the All-Seeing," the Duke began slowly, searching what wine remained in his cup for the proper words of description. "The previous High Priest of the god had not been a young man for the last two or three decades, so his being called Home came as a surprise to no one. What did come as a surprise, however, was the identity of the man chosen as successor to the old High Priest. The man was a good deal younger than was usual, not yet into his under-fourth decade, and not even of the Purist faction that had been the source of the last two dozen High Priests at the very least. The man had been Brother Nimram before the anointing, and afterward chose to call himself His Holiness Nimram I.

"We who heard of it were surprised-and some few shocked-to learn that a whole man had been seated as High Priest, but there was no true law, either secular or clerical, against it, and our preferences and opinions had not been invited. A number of the older counts and barons, more than shocked, sent a delegation to the old King asking that he instruct the priests to see to it that their new High Priest be immediately neutered like his predecessors. In their opinion it was not only tradition, you see, but far safer with so powerful an organization as the far-flung Servants of Grail, but the delegation arrived to find themselves too late. King Klieant IV had, in his senility, gone hunting against the advice of his physicians, and had fallen so seriously ill from the outing that he lay closer to death than to life."

"It sounds to me like the luck of Grail was on the side of his High Priest," Kylin said with a chuckle, sipping now at the wine that was far better than he'd expected it to be.

"Even a man who has no intentions of using his equipment prefers having it left intact to allow him the option of changing his mind."

"Some of us found the thing as amusing as you do now," the Duke said, staring soberly at his son. "Nimram's timing was a stroke of luck for his manhood, and became even more than that. The delegation turned then to the Crown Prince, but Prince Lillint was too ill over his father's impending death to listen to them or even to see them, and then the Prince was abruptly done with listening or seeing of any sort. The middle-aged but very delicate Crown Prince went out for a bit of fresh air in his carriage, his Guard alert all around him, and there was a terrible accident. Somehow a starving tree cat dropped into his open carriage from the overhead branches of the forest trail, and by the time his Guard reached him the Crown Prince wasn't screaming any longer."

"I remember hearing about that," Kylin said with more introspection, holding his cup now with both hands. "I was here in the east then, outlaw-hunting with some friends of mine who are King's Fighters from this district, and the first word brought by the crier-gallopers was that Prince Lillint was dead before his father. We all expected Prince Traffis to be confirmed as heir in his place, and then we heard that Prince Imfar had returned out of the blue from wherever he'd been, and as elder to Traffis had been named heir in his place. I heard later it was a near thing: three more days and Traffis would have been confirmed Crown Prince and Imfar, elder or not, would have been out of luck."

"Yes, luck," Duke Trame mused, this time relishing the word. "As luck would have it Imfar did return in time, and only a few days after Traffis had sent the delegation packing, their ears still ringing with Traffis' denunciation of their 'sacrilegious' intentions. The new Holy Father was not to be commented about or criticized by any group of men as 'lustfully vulgar' as the members of the delegation and the rest of the nobility they represented, and Traffis was outraged that they'd dared to approach him with such a shameful and appalling demand."

"Evon's Steel protect us," Kylin sighed, shaking his head. "King Klieant, you've always said, gave courtesy and respect to Grail for the sake of the people of his kingdom, but it doesn't sound as though Traffis followed his father's inclination to honor Evon above all other gods. He can't be much of a fighter if his steel hasn't been dedicated to Evon, Bfesser of Blades."

"He isn't much of a fighter, and never was," the Duke agreed, swallowing a grimace along with his wine. "He was livid when Imfar appeared, of course, but there was nothing he could do to get rid of him again, Imfar had spent the years he'd been gone making a name for himself as a fighter, and he'd been only a couple of weeks over the border from Zeran when he heard of Lillint's death. He'd stayed away that long because he'd never been able to consider Lillint as King without getting sick to his stomach, but Lillint was the elder of them and Imfar refused to dishonor his father by disputing Lillint's claim. When he showed up the Council was delighted, and confirmed him so fast it made people's heads spin."

"Meaning they didn't like Traffis any more than anyone else," Kylin said, this time nodding. "I've heard he's the sort who's never happy unless he's making sacrifices of one kind or another-or making other people's lives miserable. Since he wasn't likely to become King no one cared - until Lillint died. There were a lot of people sweating then, I can tell you."

"For more reasons than you know," Duke Trame said, rising to get the wine pitcher and bring it back with him. "After Imfar was declared heir the delegation concerned about Nimram returned to the capital city, but they still didn't get the answer they were looking for. Imfar heard them out courteously, then explained his position. As a fighting man and follower of Evon, he had never gotten involved with Grail beyond knowing what his father's feelings about the religion were. His father had honored Grail for the sake of those people in the kingdom who worshiped the god, and other than that left the Servants entirely alone. Klieant IV had been acknowledged a great king even by his enemies, and when Imfar became Klieant V, he intended trying to emulate his father in every way possible. If circumstances changed, or the delegation could find proof that the situation was harmful to the kingdom he would reconsider his decision, but until then Imfar had to refuse to do as the delegation asked."

"That sounds like the reasonable man everyone now knows the King to be," Kylin said, watching his father closely.

"Why do I get the feeling you would have been happier with an unreasonable decision?"

"There are some things a man can't afford to be reasonable about," the Duke said, gesturing vaguely with his wine cup. "Imfar is making a good king, but how are we supposed to find hard evidence to support observations, deductions and suspicions? It took a lot of months before the old king died, and by the time of the coronation Rilfe and I had noticed enough oddities to come to the same conclusions.

"To begin with, Nimram wasn't the old High Priest's choice as a successor. Rilfe and I had both made discreet inquiries, and our individual efforts had turned up nothing more about that than the fact that three of those who would have had strong Purist backing for High Priest had met with serious-and fatal-accidents just before the old High Priest took a turn for the worse. Because of that the Purists were divided and unsure, which let Nimram's followers walk in and take over. His people were the younger priests, the ones who went out preaching and teaching, ones who hadn't yet decided to give up their manhood in order to join the Purists and gain advancement. Until then the Purists had been the hierarchy of the religion, but the unexpected coup knocked them out of power.

"After learning that, Rilfe and I had again done the same thing-which was investigating what the Servants of Grail had been teaching over the past years. What they taught when I was a boy - and for generations before that - was either helpful or innocuous. They taught the offspring of nobility their letters and sums, art and literature, history and science and, with the permission of the nobility, schooled promising peasants in simple reading and counting. They also preached their religion to the peasants, of course, and to the ladies of noble houses who could not join their husbands and fathers in paying homage to Evon. Some of the Servants were also physicians, and these usually established themselves in villages.

"It took a lot of effort and roundabout inquiry, but I, and Rilfe on his own, discovered that the teaching and preaching had changed over recent years. The people were being told that because of the influence of Evon on their lords, they were being forced into lives of sin that would never let them go Home after their final send offs. New rules of conduct have been brought up and insisted on, and after years of being lectured and preached at, the people are beginning to believe in them. They've also been told, over the last five years or so, that no king who didn't bow solely to Grail could possibly have his people's best interests at heart."

"Wait a minute," Kylin said with a frown, leaning forward in his chair. "Over the last five years? But that

means they started their preaching three years before the old King reached his deathbed. Lillint was Crown Prince then, and wasn't he primarily a follower of Millis?"

"Millis the Overindulgent and Squeamish?" Duke Trame asked with a snort of scorn. "Yes, Lillint found Millis an excellent patron god, and visited his temple on a regular basis. I've heard it said the temple priests spray perfume instead of burning incense."

"But that doesn't make any sense," Kylin insisted, his expression showing his annoyance. "Why would the Servants preach what they did, when the only prince who followed Grail was--"

"Traffis," the Duke finished for him, nodding slowly. "A Traffis who never announced his feelings about Grail until after his brother Lillint was dead. You see now how the picture was drawn for Rilfe and myself."

"Fatal accidents happen, and Nimram becomes High Priest," Kylin said, settling back heavily. "The King ends up very sick but not dead, just the way the old High Priest was, and then an accident takes the Crown Prince. If Imfar hadn't turned up without warning, Traffis would have been King. I'm surprised Imfar didn't meet with any accidents."

"He almost did," the Duke said grimly, drawing a sharp look from his son. "A horse going suddenly and unexpectedly wild under him, an arrow flying wrong on the Palace Guards' practice field, one or two other incidents everyone knows about, and Evon alone knows how many unmentioned. If Imfar hadn't been as good as he was, he would have been as dead as Lillint. And before you ask, no, he won't believe any of it was done on purpose. Any fighting man knows how likely accidents are, that's why we try being prepared for them, and Imfar is a fighting man. End of story, end of suspicions."

"And once he was crowned King, he was safe," Kylin said after swallowing at his wine. "He may not have produced any legitimate issue as yet, but the number of sons he left scattered over this continent alone guarantees that Traffis can never be considered his heir. The Council has been known to recognize a bastard over a brother before this, just to make sure younger brothers of kings don't get any ideas. Isn't it too bad Nimram's plans didn't work out."

"Nimram's first plans didn't work out," Duke Trame corrected, showing none of the pleased relief his son did. "Traffis disappeared right after the coronation--only to show up again with an army and a claim for the throne. It's too bad you never met Traffis, or you'd know how unlikely it is that he thought of the claim and the effort on his own. And that's not all that's been happening."

Kylin nodded as he reached for the wine pitcher, knowing his father was finally getting to the nub of things. He still didn't know what part he was supposed to play in all that, but he didn't doubt for a minute that he did have a part.

"Duke Rilfe came to the coronation out of duty, not because of any desire to celebrate," the Duke of the west said, his words heavy with commiseration. "He had just lost his eldest son to a legitimate accident, but the incident had started him thinking. His second son had become his heir, but although the boy was well-liked and noble in spirit as well as by birth, he was too trusting and not as skilled as he should have been with a blade. With Rilfe's third and fourth sons gone off to see the world and no word of them having come back for years, it occurred to him to wonder what would happen if his last male heir met with a fatality. We knew nothing of the impending war then, you understand, but Rilfe's investigations into Nimram's doings had made him suspicious.

"We talked the problem over together, and decided that what had served Nimram so well in the past would likely serve him well again. Under the proper circumstances, having his own people declared heir to one or more of the reigning Dukes would, after those Dukes were put out of the way, give Nimram

control of a significant portion of the kingdom through his pawn or pawns. We agreed to be on the lookout for that, and also agreed on a plan of action if it turned out we were anticipating rather than worrying needlessly. Four weeks ago, I received word that Rymar, Rilfe's son and heir, had met with an 'accident.'"

"I don't think I'm following this," Kylin said with a small head shake and a frown. "I can see that Nimram is behind Traffis' warring even though he publicly made an appeal to the "misguided" to stop fighting and go back where they came from, but what good would it do him to have Duke Rilfe's heir killed? Unless he has one of the Duke's missing sons as tightly as he has Traffis, how would he gain control of the duchy?"

"He may or may not have one of Rilfe's sons," the Duke answered with a shrug. "What Rilfe has, though, is three daughters, one of whom is of more than marriageable age. She's been living with an aunt for years now, and would have been properly married off long ago if her aunt hadn't advised Rilfe against it. The girl wasn't ready, the woman kept insisting, but now she has to be ready. The only way Rilfe can have a suitable heir is to marry the girl to the man of his choice. Before she ends up in Nimram's clutches, and married to someone of the High Priest's choosing."

"Something the High Priest would probably have no trouble arranging," Kylin said in disgust. "Delicate little things that just aren't ready for marriage usually spend all their time praying and doing just what their priest tells them to do. This, I take it, is why you were unhappy about my-multiple activities before first snow. I'm the one you've chosen to marry Duke Rilfe's daughter."

"The choice wasn't mine alone," his father said with a smile, traces of pride coming through again. "Rilfe saw you fight in the masked competition last year at the King's birthday celebration, and was very impressed when I told him you were my son. That was when the decision was made as to which of my sons would marry his daughter, and I can't say I blame him. I've been given reason to be very proud of all of your brothers, but you, more than any of them, remind me of me when I was young. Are you willing to accept the choosing?"

"After a buildup like that, how can I refuse?" the young Fighter asked with a laugh, causing his father to join him, then he shook his head. "All joking aside, I find myself very flattered, Father. I won't say I'll try to be worthy of your confidence and Duke Rilfe's, but only because I think you know I will. I hadn't been thinking in terms of settling down, but if I'm willing to give my life for the kingdom, how can I refuse to give the service of body parts? I know it doesn't matter, but what does the girl look like?"

"That I can tell you from personal observation," the Duke said, grinning as he chuckled to himself- "I met the young lady about five years ago, having come visiting myself when she paid a visit home. She was about sixteen then, taller than you would expect and pretty, with bright gray eyes. She hardly said a word during the visit, almost as though she were afraid of saying the wrong thing, so you don't have to worry about endless chatter. I can also remember how uncomfortable she seemed in her gowns, as though she was used to wearing less finery in her aunt's house, which was also a good sign. She won't be forever pestering you for additions to her wardrobe."

"Quiet, shy, and hardly a spectacular beauty," Kylin said with a sigh, twirling his wine thoughtfully in its cup. "I was hoping for a different sort of woman, but I suppose that's why night houses are in business. If she cries on our wedding night, remembering the houses should keep me from crying with her."

"As long as you're discreet," his father said with a laugh, pleased with how his son had so far taken the plans. "A man owes his wife consideration if nothing else, and rubbing her nose in his affairs is stupid as well as boorish. But there's one other thing you have to know before you take the road to Gensea."

Kylin raised his brows in confusion, wondering why his father was suddenly looking both uncomfortable and covertly amused. If it was true that he was that much like his father, the sight of amusement worried him more than the sight of sobriety would.

"Kylin, you have to understand it's a virtual certainty that Rilfe and I, at the very least, are being watched," the Duke said, rubbing at his face with two of his fingers. "That's one of the reasons I arranged to meet you here, where it isn't likely I'll be known, and at a time when no one knows I've slipped away. Being seen talking with my son would hardly appear suspicious to a watcher, but Kylin - most people don't know you as my son. I'm told you use the Band name of Kylin Difres when you fight, for our home city of Difresent, and when you fight at a celebration where you might be recognized, you fight masked."

"Being a Duke's son among King's Fighters can be more than awkward. Father," the young man said quietly, making no more than a statement, nothing of an excuse. "I had no reason to believe I'd ever be more than an unimportant fourth son, and I wasn't about to trade the chance of true, close friendships for the privilege of being called 'my lord.'"

"As I said, you continually remind me of me," the older man remarked with something of a smile. "The point I was trying to make was a point, not a criticism. People know I have a son Kylin and also what he looks like, but they don't know that he and Kylin Difres are one and the same person. Duke Rilfe and I think it would be best if they didn't find it out until after the wedding."

"I'm beginning to think this wine is more potent than I was expecting," the Fighter said, glancing in confusion at the cup he held. "What's the difference between before and after, and why would anyone care?"

"You don't think Nimram would care if he learned that Rilfe's girl was about to be married to a well known King's Fighter?" Duke Trame asked with a snort. "Are you under the impression he's forgotten what happened when he tried his tricks against your brothers? Setting up an accident against watchfulness and skill doesn't work well, and he won't be eager to face the necessity again. If he thinks you're likely to be troublesome to him, I doubt if he'll hesitate over killing the girl, and then waiting until her next younger sister reaches marrying age."

"That spawn of diseased privates!" the Fighter fumed, his light eyes blazing even in the dim firelight. "The craven are always eager to take on the helpless! But Father, won't he do that anyway as soon as he learns the girl is about to be married to someone who isn't his? He can't afford to let that happen."

"He can afford to let it happen if he believes he can change the situation any time he cares to," his father countered with satisfied secretiveness, that covert amusement sneaking back again. "If he comes to the conclusion that the lady's new husband will be easy prey as soon as he has an acceptable substitute available, the High Priest will allow the marriage to take place. And don't forget - his favorite way of handling that sort of situation is the way he did it with the King. First he let everyone think Lillint was heir, then he arranged for the King to fall ill - which we're convinced he did do - and then he did away with Lillint, leaving his pawn in a position to take over when the King died. He'll do the same in Gensea, with someone all ready to marry your widow once Rufe is too ill to object - but only if he believes it won't be hard to do."

"So my best bet will be to pretend I don't know one end of a sword from the other," Kylin pounced, suddenly seeing the point. "Being quiet and overly mannerly also ought to help, in fact I'm sure it will. That's what you were trying to tell me, isn't it, Father?"

"Not exactly," the Duke murmured, once again aware of the width of his son's shoulders, the Fighter's stride he used when he walked, the easy challenge usually to be seen in his eyes. "Your simply pretending

to be unskilled with a sword isn't likely to work, I'm afraid. Nimram isn't stupid, so we have to assume his agents aren't either. How quickly would you believe that a man of your proportions wasn't blade-skilled simply because he claimed not to be?"

"About as quickly as that unattached fighter down in the court believed it," Kylin said sourly, leaning back in his chair again. "I went out with the intention of simply warming up, but I had barely worked up a sweat before he - challenged me. At first I tried hinting I wasn't very good and so preferred passing on the challenge, but that made him even more eager to face me. It was something about those girls, I think, and his wanting to look like a true Blade. Too bad for him it didn't work out that way. So what do we do, sneak me in robed and cowed, or do I have to be delivered in a box?"

"What you have to do is arrive openly, meet everyone, and still arouse no suspicion," his father said, and this time there was no doubt whatsoever about the amusement he felt. "There is a way of accomplishing that, which will, at the same time, explain why you've spent more time away from home over the past years than any of your brothers. Without your saying a word, people will know it was because I couldn't bear the sight of you."

"This time I don't think I want to know what you're talking about," Kylin said, very suddenly wary and cautiously unmoving in his chair. "You could be saying you intend passing me off as a worthless drifter, but somehow I have the feeling that isn't it."

"It always pleases a father to see signs of intelligence in his son," the Duke replied, completely unable to keep himself from chuckling. "Kylin, consider how manly and able your brothers are, and how painful it would be for a man like myself to accept the fact that I had sired a son who wasn't. I would certainly do everything in my power to keep him out of my sight and away from the people whose opinions I valued, just as any man with sense would. Now consider as well what I would do if I had once been very close to someone but now considered him a blood enemy, and he attempted to hold me to a word given while we were still friends. If I had pledged one of my sons in marriage to his eldest daughter, and now he demanded I uphold that pledge because he has no other recourse, which of my sons do you think I'd send? Considering my well-known vindictiveness, which one would it be?"

Kylin Difres, high ranking King's Fighter and fourth son of Trame, Duke of Arthil, sat in his chair with his eyes closed, one hand attempting to shield those eyes from a very painful but inescapable sight. Objectively he knew the joke would be riotously funny, but somehow he couldn't get into the objective spirit of the thing.

"It seems safe to assume Duke Rilfe already knows what will be riding into his courtyard to claim his daughter," Kylin said after a moment, well beyond sighing.

"I hadn't known you two were pretending to feud."

"There are more than enough who do know," his father answered, now with only faintly amused compassion in his voice. "Everything fell into place very neatly at the coronation, so we began the feud then. He'll be furiously outraged when you show up, but he's already registered the betrothal at the King's court, so he'll have no choice but to allow the wedding to proceed as scheduled. After the marriage is consummated you'll be publicly declared Rilfe's heir, and then you'll be free to show your true colors. The girl will be safe then - after all, even if she died you would still be left as heir - and any attempts should be against you. It may well prove more dangerous than fighting two wars at once, so you'll need your wits about you at all times."

"From then on until Nimram falls," Kylin said with a grimace, dropping his hand so that he might look at his father again. "You've spoken of the investigations you and Duke Rilfe have carried out, but you

haven't said anything about what you're doing to counter the influence of the Servants among the people. You certainly can't just leave them where they are and expect to be able to defeat their High Priest."

"Would you like to tell me how we're supposed to do anything at all to priests of Grail without having the peasantry rise up against us?" the Duke demanded, all amusement and compassion gone, his eyes blazing in a familiar way. "No one who isn't blade - skilled follows Evon, and even his priests swing steel; how quickly do you think those followers of Evon would give up ones of their own to followers of Grail? It works exactly the same in reverse, Kylin, and we can't see striking down half a village or more in order to take one priest - who isn't irreplaceable. We want to save our people from Nimram, not feed him their blood."

"Then we need to spend some thought on how to discredit him and his teachings in the villages," Kylin said, putting his cup aside before rising to his feet. "From what you've told me, I'd be surprised if His Holiness wasn't planning a general uprising-scheduled for the proper time, of course."

"That goes without saying," his father agreed as he, too, rose to his feet. "It happens to be one of the major reasons for this charade we're about to enter into. Acting openly against Nimram now will likely force his hand, and we can't afford to do that. If the people rise up we may be able to put them down again, but if so, what will we have left? And what will we have to feed our armies while they fight Traffis and the Zeranese?"

"I can feel the net closing from all around, but simply standing there with swords sheathed won't get us anything but taken," Kyün said with an annoyed head shake.

"There has to be a way out of the trap."

"You can turn your attention to the problem once you've been declared Rilfe's heir," his father said, clapping him briskly on the shoulder. "Right now we'll be leaving this inn, me to return to the war awaiting me, you to find your new escort which is encamped off the highway south of here. They'll be watching for you, and will help you change into your new personality. Two of the three are fighters, and will therefore pretend to be your bodyguard; the third is Jestrion, who will supposedly be your body servant, but who will actually be a role model for your new character."

"Jestrion!" Kylin said with a groan, clearly remembering the son of an old house servant who had begged his lord not to put said son out into the world alone. Jestrion was usually given enough tasks to occupy him out of sight any time the Duke had guests, but everyone who lived in or had grown up in the Duke's castle knew him well enough...

"Try to bear in mind how short a time you'll need to keep up the pretense," his father urged, trying, himself, to keep down amusement. "The wedding ceremony will be held as soon after your arrival as possible, and that should give you just enough time to have some fun. And think of the surprise your bride will have on your wedding night. And after you've been declared heir, you'll know which of Rilfe's advisors and commanders can be trusted and which can't. And also..."

His father continued on with the list of benefits his masquerade would bring to him, but Kylin allowed himself to be conducted to his tunic and swordbelt and then to the door without finding the enthusiasm his father was trying to generate. He knew well enough that he had to go through with it, but he knew something else as well: he would not be spending that night with his new "escort." As soon as darkness fell he would return to the inn, to collect the winnings promised him by the adoring inn girls for his victory. Without doubt he'd need at least that to see him through the next weeks; as things were about to stand, it wasn't likely he'd find another opportunity.

## Chapter Three

It was getting on toward dusk when we came in sight of the inn, and that, predictably, set Timper off. He'd been doing his usual silent groaning during that day's ride, having learned how much good complaining aloud to me did him, but getting a look at that inn was more than he could stand.

"Please, my lady, I beg you to let us stop there for the night!" he jumped in at once, trying not to give me a chance to say we were going on as usual until full dark. "There's no doubt that we'll reach the city tomorrow, and your father's castle lies just beyond it. I would be very grateful if I were to arrive there with one adequate night's sleep behind me."

"I can see now why it took you almost six weeks to come north," I remarked, tugging at my collar a little against the warmth of the air. Only three visits home over the last ten years had left me unused to the climate of the south, and traveling from the north as fast as we had, left my blood remembering the tail end of cold. I should have preferred continuing on and camping out again, but I discovered I was as tired of trail fare as Timper was of sleeping on the ground.

"With the return trip taking barely four, we've certainly earned the right to one night of comfort," the courier persisted, trying to sound more firm than coaxing. "And think of all the gold we've saved, having come without escort and having stopped at almost no other inns. And this close to your father's city, the King's Fighters leave a good deal of the patrolling to the City Guard, who might not be abroad at this late an hour. Surely the blessing of safe, uneventful sleep is worth..."

"Al! right, all right, you've convinced me," I interrupted the flow with an inner sigh, knowing I would probably get no sleep that night no matter where I was, and therefore might appreciate being in a place with drinkables. The next day I would be home, and I'd taken to wondering just exactly how my father would feel about what I'd made of my life until then. I knew him as a man filled with a lot of love and kindness, but he was also a man who knew who he was and what he wanted. My aunt Illi had always said I was just like him, but not at times when she was trying to compliment me.

"My lady has this unworthy courier's undying gratitude," Timper burred, and I would have been a good deal happier if it had been sarcasm rather than sincerity in his voice. "Please follow me, and I'll have us settled in with all the speed due your station."

"No station or no stop," I told him bluntly as he gathered his reins, ready to try urging his poor gelding on to match the pace of my stallion again. "Either we stay at that inn as no more than two anonymous travelers, or we don't stay at that inn. I'd like my arrival at home to be a surprise to everyone."

"Oh, very well," he surrendered with a sigh, annoyed with me but not about to say so. "Two anonymous travelers it shall be. I, however, mean to have the best of their accommodations, and insist that you have the same. Your father would be furious with me if I were to allow anything else."

"As long as we discuss anything but my father and my station once we're in there, you've got a deal," I agreed, hoping he had enough sense to remember the deal when we were inside. Casual questioning over the past few weeks had shown me he knew nothing about the "accident" my brother had had, except that he thought it really had been an accident. It was enough that I knew better; if my father wanted Timper to know, he could tell him himself.

The inn had a wide road leading to it from the highway, and as soon as we reached the front door a boy appeared from around the side of the building to take our horses. Timper didn't quite grumble aloud when he gave the boy a handful of coppers, but I could see he still wasn't happy about parting with what he obviously considered tribute. Tipping for above-routine service was a concept he found entirely alien,

so I'd had to tell him that the coppers were for the danger the stable boys faced in handling my stallion. Since we'd almost lost the first stable boy he knew the danger was real enough, and that had kept him almost quiet the next couple of times.

This latest stable boy seemed to know the proper way of soothing a war horse while at the same time staying out of his reach, but I still watched them gone around the corner before turning to the house - only to find that Timper had already disappeared inside. I grinned as I realized he wasn't taking any chances that I'd change my mind, and followed along after wishing I could pretend I had. Doing something like that with a straight face is a lot of fun, but not with someone like my father's courier. The man hadn't the slightest trace of a sense of humor, and I really hate seeing a grown man cry.

The front door of the inn gave access to a wide entrance hall of rough wood with a counter toward its back, an open staircase to the left, and a double doorway leading to dining tables to the right. Lamplight showed the place to be a little above average as far as neat and clean was concerned, which meant Timper stood in front of the counter trying not to touch anything. He was talking to a youngish man who stood behind the counter in a stained apron, and was trying to ignore the stares and snickers of two others in tan leather who lounged in front of the counter and leaned on it.

"... rooms must be clean and private and have workable locks," the courier was saying, his prissy manner giving the three men a really good time. "I'm traveling with a lady, and her comfort must be considered above all else. We will also take a meal in your dining room, and I expect it to be well above standard guest fare. Do you have all that?"

"Oh, yes, sir, I certainly do," the one behind the counter said very seriously, causing the loungers on the outside to snicker even harder. "This lady you're traveling with - is she yours, or will you be needing the services of one of our girls? I need to know in order to make the arrangements."

"If the lady were mine, why would I have taken two rooms?" Timper demanded, and even from where I stood I could tell he was blushing furiously - which was, after all, the reason he'd been asked the question. "As far as the services of your-girls-go, you needn't worry about that. As I am the escort and protector of the lady, I must be available at all times."

"And one of the girls here would sure make you unavailable," one of the two loungers said, causing the other to laugh and the one in the apron to smirk. "That is, if you knew what to do with her. Somehow I get the feeling you're as good with girls as you are at protecting. Maybe we ought to find out just how good that is."

The second of the two laughed again, this time with anticipation, both of them caressing sword hilts with open palms. They'd seen that Timper was unarmed and were in the mood for a little fun, and the set of his shoulders said the young courier had realized ignoring the two would do no good at all. His continuing silence said he also didn't know what to do in place of ignoring them, but that wasn't a hard question to answer.

"Since you asked, I'll tell you how good a protector he is," I said, causing the two with swords to turn their heads, and the aproned one to look up. "I've found him excellent as a protector, and we've come a good long way. If anyone should know, I should."

The one behind the counter grinned and glanced at his friends, expecting them to be sharing his amusement, but apparently they'd traveled a little more widely than he had. The two toughs were staring at my black leathers and silver medallion, and their faces had turned sober and the least bit pale. They watched carefully as I moved closer, then the one who had done the talking raised his hand to point.

"The Silver Gleaming Company," he said, drawing a nod from his friend, his voice softer than it had been.

"I'll say they've come a long way."

"What's wrong with you two?" the one in the apron demanded, unhappy about being done out of his fun. "Why would we care what a rag in man's clothes has to say?"

"Shut your mouth, fool!" the first bravo hissed while the second winced, both of them suddenly nervous. "Don't you know a Blade of a Sword Company when you see one? Don't you know what it takes to be a Blade of a Sword Company?"

"Not as much as it takes to be a member of a Fist," the second one said, staring hard at my medallion" as he swallowed. "Gist and me joined a Company green, so we know what it's all about. Female Blades gotta be better'n the males, or they can't handle it. You talk loud to her, you do it alone."

The one behind the counter had gone wide-eyed and even pastier than his friends, and seeing my thumbs in my swordbelt really seemed to bother him. As far as being loud goes he no longer seemed to have the inclination, but there was still something left to say.

"I think you gentlemen owe my friend an apology for bothering him," I observed, keeping the suggestion calm and quiet. "If he wasn't more easygoing than I am, he'd be the one needing to apologize to you - or what was left of you."

The three tough types couldn't get the words out fast enough to Timper, all of it running together in a gabble, and then they were interrupted by the arrival of an older, heavier man in an apron. He waddled up and sternly shooed away the two loafers and their friend, then turned a warm smile on Timper. The courier repeated his requirements in a very subdued way, paid over the gold he was courteously asked for, then led the way to the right into the dining room where the innkeeper had directed us. Our meal would be served as quickly as possible, we'd been assured, and until then we were invited to make ourselves comfortably at home.

A good decade of tables were already filled with diners and drinkers, but we had no trouble finding one in a corner that afforded some small amount of privacy. Timper stood until I'd taken the chair near the wall, his face oddly expressionless; once he sat, however, the look in his eyes made up for what was missing elsewhere.

"I must ask you to forgive me," he said in a low, intense voice. "I'm forced to admit I'd begun doubting your nobility, my lady, but now I can see how wrong I was. You are a true daughter to your noble father, and I shall never forget what you did for me."

"What I'm going to do is get violent if you call me that again," I answered just as softly, trying not to let more than a corner of my annoyance show through. "Or if you mention my father again. Can't you find anything else to talk about?"

"I'm no longer fooled by the brusqueness of your manner," he said with a superior sniff, an unaccustomed smile curving his lips. "It was you those ruffians feared, and yet it was to me you made them offer apologies, and me you made larger than life in their eyes. I would not have expected such generosity from one of your tender years, and the attitude does you great credit. You may be certain the effort will be returned to you a hundredfold."

I gave my attention to the serving girl who was approaching, and not only because I wanted a drink. Timper had been the "older and wiser head" from the day we'd left Fyerlin and on through the rest of the trip, and I had long since run out of patience with the attitude. A tenth of a decade more of life hadn't taught him anything worth knowing, but he wasn't the sort to understand or believe that. Treating him at times like a green recruit had been the only way of fighting back, especially since he had the tendency to

jump when I barked.

Timper ordered a cup of very sweet wine and tried to get me to take the same, but I simply shook my head and told the girl to bring the house brew and keep it coming. I was in the mood for something raw rather than refined, and for once the courier didn't argue very hard. He waited the five minutes until our drinks were in front of us and the girl was gone on her way, and then he looked at me with more curiosity than he'd shown at any time during the trip.

"The black leathers, I take it, were what told those two of your-ah-calling," he said, holding his cup with the fingertips of both hands. "It was also obviously your medallion that gave them your Company name, but I fail to understand how they knew you to be a member of a Fist."

"They saw the sapphire," I explained, tasting my brew and getting a pleasant surprise. The inn's product wasn't bad at all, cold and crisp and well-balanced, considerably better than what northern inns usually offered. "When you become a member of a Fist, you have the Fist's stone added to your medallion. That tells everyone you are part of a Fist, and also which one you belong to. I would say those two didn't stay around long enough to learn one from the other."

"I-have also been wondering about the names of the Companies," he said with a nod, obviously having decided to get all his questions answered at once. "I have very little knowledge about Sword Companies, but shouldn't their names be a bit more-boastful or complimentary? If anything, they sound insulting."

"They're supposed to be insulting - to whoever the Company fights against," I said, stretching out long in my chair to hide the amusement I felt at his ignorance. "My Company was the Silver Gleaming - meaning we were so much better than anyone we fought that all they would end with was silver gleaming steel, not a single streak of red marring it. The Crimson Rush and the Opened Throats mean the same, what their Blades will do to whoever they're pitted against. It's boastful enough, if you look at it properly."

"Opposites, in a manner of speaking," he said with another nod, sipping at his wine. "Just as my impression was of the name those others called you. Soft and Gentle, indeed."

His amusement was more of a smirk than a chuckle, the outsider being part of insider secrets, but the comment brought me memory of things I hadn't allowed myself to think about until then. We'd ridden hard those past weeks, supposedly to get where we were going sooner, but riding quickly toward some place means you're riding just as quickly away from somewhere else.

I didn't need to look down at the silver medallion I wore to know it was there, just as I didn't need to stop to think about it to know it shouldn't have been. I'd resigned from the Silver Gleaming before leaving Fyerlin, which meant the medallion picturing a shining sword ought to be packed away among the things in my saddle bags. That I still wore it was not simply a matter of habit, or precisely the fact that I wanted my father to see everything I'd been a part of. One thing I'd been a part of, the most important thing, was now only technically over; once I took off that medallion, though, it would be over for ever and ever.

I stared down into the tawny depths filling my goblet, thinking about the name Timper had mentioned. Rull had been the first to call me Soft and Gentle, when I'd formally met him and the others of the Fist, almost five years earlier. I'd just returned from a visit home, the last I'd made, as a matter of fact, and hadn't had the faintest idea that I was under consideration for healing a broken Fist. At one time or another I'd met and spoken with all four of them, but only in passing conversation or after a fight, just talk that Blades of the same Company engage in. A couple of them had teased me and the others had given me pointers, and although I gave as good as I got with the teasing, I listened carefully to the pointers and remembered them for next time. When a Blade of a Fist makes a suggestion on how to improve your sword technique, you ignore it only if you're interested in a very short career with your Company.

And I hadn't been interested in a short career.

The second swallow of brew went down my throat as smoothly as the first, but I discovered then that I was losing the desire to drown painful memories and anticipations. Getting sloshed doesn't solve your problems; all it does is give you the added chore of having to face those problems while struggling with a hangover. I could just see myself staggering into my father's castle, trying to get everyone to keep their voices down, trying to keep my ears from falling off, getting ready to announce that I was there to accept being named my father's heir...

Timper asked if I would share what I found so amusing, possibly thinking I was laughing at him, so I told him about one of the funnier incidents that had happened some years ago to another Company. He smiled politely at the end of the story, showing again the sort of sense of humor he had, then cleared his throat before leaning forward a little.

"So that, you say, is the reason why most male Blades hesitate over joining a predominantly female Fist," he remarked in a casual way, trying to be worldly but at the same time keeping his voice low to hide embarrassment. "I do suppose one man with four females would be rather - fatigued. Just as fatigued, perhaps, as one female with four males? With just as much danger of an undesirable - occurrence?"

He wasn't quite meeting my eyes as he said that, and although he was tiptoeing around the barn, it was fairly clear he was asking a couple of very pointed questions. Under other circumstances I might not have answered them, but if I were going to be my father's heir I was going to have to get used to questions like that- without getting angry over misconceptions and half-truths.

"Timper, what went on with that Fist was the exception rather than the rule," I said, trying to keep the words gentle. "What made their problem so funny was the fact that most mixed Fists have more sense than to get that deeply involved in just that way. The female Blades all came from the eastern mountains, where they were taught to use a sword as soon as they could walk, but where they learned nothing at all about men. The male Blade was the sort who didn't belong in a Fist, but who joined theirs because he also didn't understand that a Fist's first purpose is fighting, not blanket-warming. He also didn't stop to ask any questions, and the four girls had kept too much to themselves after they came north to have gotten the right answers before it was too late." , I'd thought I was being clear and concise in my explanation, but the confusion showing on Timper's face said I was taking too much knowledge on his part for granted - especially concerning male-female relationships. I wasn't used to knowing more about that sort of thing than the men around me - most especially not with men who were also older - and for the first time in a number of years I began feeling - uncomfortable.

"Maybe it would be easiest if I told you about my own experience," I said, sitting up straighter in my chair after clearing my throat. "Rull and Foist and Jak and Ham got to know me one at a time, and then they came together to offer me a place in their broken Fist. Their first consideration was my ability as a Blade and how well I took helpful advice, and their second was how we all got along together, how well our personalities blended. They told me that when they first began looking they weren't even considering female Blades, but meeting me had made them change their minds."

Very briefly an expression flickered across Timper's face, the sort of dirty-laugh skepticism most outsiders showed when they were told something like that, and just as briefly the surge of anger I felt got the better of me.

"It happens to be true!" I snapped, nearly to the growling point, and then I had control of it again. "When a Fist fights, their lives depend on how good each of their Blades are; choosing a fifth that-will do nothing more than save them night house fees would make them too stupid to survive very long. I joined the Fist on the usual conditional basis until we'd been through the first battle together, and then we all declared

ourselves well-enough pleased to make the arrangement permanent. It wasn't until then that they made sure I'd had my Blue juice."

"Blue juice?" the courier echoed, trying very hard to keep his skepticism to himself. "What in Home's name might that be?"

"It's what those four from the eastern mountains hadn't had," I said, hoping the general comment would do it, but no such kick. I could see he still didn't understand, so I gestured vaguely with one hand. "It's what all female Blades and a large number of other northern women make use of, a blending of Zil fruit and shore berries, which together make a bluish mash. If a female strains it and drinks the juice, she's safe from accidents-until she drinks it a second time. It's so old a tradition in the north that most northern marriage ceremonies have provision for the second drinking, so that the newly married couple will be able to have children..."

"What?" Timper exclaimed, so loud and outraged that most of the other people in the room turned to stare at him. He noticed their looks and lowered his voice again, but his outrage was still firmly in place even though he fought to keep it down.

"I hope you will excuse my outburst, but I find myself rather shocked," he said, as though shocking him wasn't very easily done. "I had no idea those of the north were quite that depraved - Well, it makes no never mind. We are returned home now to the south, praise be to all we hold holy, and need no longer concern ourselves with the doings of the lost. Ladies of the south would never dream of indulging in such scandalous behavior, and you, of course, are at heart a lady of the south. You need only be reminded of the thing - which I'm sure your father will do for you - and we will consider the matter merely as an aspect of a blessing. With no possibility of an awkward-remembrance-of the time, it will all be rather quickly and thoroughly forgotten."

He sat back as two inn girls and a serving man reached us, the man carrying a heavily-laden board, the girls there to serve us from it. Breads and cheeses were transferred to our table with a large lump of butter, and then we were being given the bowls of fish soup, thin tendrils of steam still rising from them. This part of our meal hadn't needed much preparing, and I was glad it was there even if I did hate fish soup. Timper was already stuffing his big mouth, ending our conversation in a much more pleasant way than I had been about to end it, totally unaware of how close he had come to the real shock of his life. What I'd been so happily a part of was depraved, and now that I was returned to the bosom of my loved ones it would all be magnanimously forgotten? I was much more ready to forget Timper, and planned on doing exactly that at the first opportunity.

The rest of the meal was brought rather quickly, and was tasty enough to keep us occupied with something other than talk. Timper stuffed himself to near-bursting, then had to excuse himself rather abruptly which, in my opinion, he more than deserved. Once he was gone I finished my latest brew, refused another, then left the house to visit the stable. My stallion had been put in a reinforced stall a short distance from the other horses, and once I'd seen that he had everything he needed I took my saddlebags and went back to the inn to find my room.

When the door was barred and I had gotten out of my leathers, I lay down on my back on the narrow bed without blowing out the lamp, holding my medallion up so that I could stare at it a while. Timper would never know how close I'd come to telling him about something very important to me, so important that if he'd gone all stiff-necked and insulting after hearing it I probably would have done something very-unladylike - to him. I'd only been a matter of words away...

When I'd become a full member of the Fist I'd been very young, not much experienced, and silently bracing myself for whatever my Fistmates would come up with in the way of extra-battle activities. I'd

known from the start that I wanted to be one of them no matter what I was called on to do, but when all of them asked at once whether I'd had my Blue juice, I felt the sort of nervousness I'd only felt before when my unit of the Company stood as reserves in an important fight. I'd wanted to do what was expected of me, but I'd been afraid I wouldn't do it well enough and they'd be disappointed.

What had been expected of me at that point was going with them to a night house, just the way any other new addition to the Fist would have done. None of them quite laughed out loud at my flustered surprise, but they'd all known what I was thinking and had decided to show me I was just as much a member of the Fist as they were. Member, not blanket-warmer. It had been months before I'd gotten a taste of one of them, and by then it was a matter of mutual curiosity with no "must" about it. I'd enjoyed Jak, and then Ham, and then Foist, but we were all more likely to use the night house workers than pair off together, and then I'd almost casually tried Rull...

The medallion swung in a very small arc as I stared at it, the tiny sapphire glinting warmly, or at least warmly to my eye. Rull was the one who had started our Fist, and continued to be the best Blade in it. If any man was ever born to lead a fighting unit and give pleasure to women without number he was it, and he'd been wise enough to know better than to try settling down. He didn't really mean more to me than the others did - even though he was different - but the last couple or three weeks before I'd left he'd become - distant but not unfriendly, removed despite being where he usually was. I'd thought I could jolly him out of whatever was bothering him, but he'd stubbornly refused to respond - and then he'd said what he had -

I dropped the medallion on the bedside table, got up to blow out the lamp, then lay down again and covered myself despite the continuing warmth of the air. If I hadn't had a place to go and something to do I would have felt terribly lost and more hurt than if my family had been wiped out. Most people don't choose death, and if it comes to them you can only mourn them, not blame them for leaving you all alone. In that way death can be thought of as kinder than life, in that it doesn't withdraw part of your soul to where it continues on, only without you.

I closed my eyes then with the decision that I would sleep, just as I had learned to sleep the night before battle and even during hours of lull. I had things to do the next day, important things, and with a severed soul or not, I would do them.

It was barely dawn when I pounded on Timper's door in passing, then continued on downstairs without waiting to find out if he was ready, or even if he'd heard the summons. If he wasn't ready to go when I was I would leave him, without regret and without excuse. That close to the city of Gensea there wasn't much that might happen to him, and I was all out of both patience and the protective urge as far as he was concerned. If everyone in the duchy was like him, I would have turned off the highway alone and in a new direction weeks earlier.

"Good morning, good morning," the overweight innkeeper greeted me cheerfully from behind the counter, rubbing his hands together. "The night passed peacefully for you, I trust?"

"For the most part," I agreed, tossing him the key I'd been given the night before. "I hadn't known your inn had patrolling House Guards, and when I heard one outside my door it woke me. You really should let people know about things like that, or there could be an accident."

"But-but we have no patrolling House Guards!" the man protested, glancing confusedly at the hilt my left hand rested on as his face paled. "You mean to say someone attempted to enter your room?"

"No, they simply stopped outside the door, paused for a moment, then went away," I said with a frown I could feel, remembering how abruptly I'd come awake and how quickly my sword had been drawn and

ready. If whoever had been out there had touched the door I would have known it, but all they'd done was walk away again in no particular hurry. That was what had led me to believe it was a House Guard; any other explanation made no sense at all.

"It must surely have been someone who searched for his own room, and came to yours in error," the innkeeper said, all at once vastly relieved. If no one had tried breaking in, it couldn't possibly be something to worry about. "Allow me to assure you, young miss, that ladies are quite safe in our duchy no matter the difficulties they may face elsewhere. Perhaps it was no more than the urgings of a dream."

"Perhaps it was," I allowed, knowing damned well it hadn't been a mistake or a dream. Someone searching for a room wouldn't have stopped like that unless he was drunk, and the footsteps had been too even and sure for someone who had been drinking heavily. And if he had been drunk and confused, why hadn't he tried the door? No, it hadn't been a mistake and it certainly hadn't been a dream, but that meant I knew what it wasn't, not what it was. It could have been something totally innocuous, but somehow I knew it was wiser not to believe that.

"You'll be breaking your fast with us before leaving, of course," the innkeeper said, back to rubbing his hands and beaming. "Three choices of grain cereal, eggs in four forms, cold chicken and fish, hot pork and beef..."

"I'm afraid I haven't the time," I said, cutting him off before he listed everything edible in the house and outside it. "A matter of duty, I'm sure you understand. When my companion makes an appearance, please tell him I've ridden on ahead and he needn't worry about catching up. He wasn't feeling quite well last night, and if he finds he needs another day of rest, he's to take it."

"Certainly, young miss, I'll do that very thing, but isn't he your escort?" the man half-protected, calling the last of the words after me as I already strode toward the door. "There are King's Fighters about and the City Guard begins its morning patrol earlier than this, but..."

"Then I'll clearly be perfectly safe," I called back over my shoulder without slowing. "With all those able, masculine Blades out there to protect me, how might I be anything else?"

By that time I was out the door, which meant the innkeeper's comments were at an end whether or not he wanted them to be. I shook my head as I rounded the house toward the stable, no longer wondering as I once had why so many female Blades thought of themselves as in competition with male Blades rather than as partners to them. Most of the male Blades I knew judged another Blade by skill, not by the question of male or female, but those not part of our world seldom did the same. It took a female Blade with clenched teeth quite a while to understand that the only men who would doubt her or belittle her were the ones who had no skill and ability of their own, those who were therefore afraid of her. Those who were skilled also had self-confidence, enough to welcome any equal just the same, regardless of what their gender happened to be. Or possibly female Blades were welcomed a little faster and a bit more warmly; a man of high skill and wide ability is still a man, and a woman who can keep up with him is usually more interesting to him than another man.

Those deeply philosophical thoughts kept me company while I saddled and bridled my mount, but were already replaced by the time I was back on the highway. The stable boy had been very relieved to have that part of his job done for him, and had asked me how I'd managed to get so dangerous a war horse to let me come near him. I'd explained that he'd been a gift to me from my aunt when he was only a colt, and I'd raised him and had even helped in his training. That was why I was able to give his rein to someone else without worrying too much about whether or not they would manage to survive. As long as they were fairly good with horses they would be tolerated by my big, red Bloodsheen, since his rein had been given them by me. Let anyone try to approach him on his own, though, and even a quick sword

might not be enough to save him.

Bloodsheen was feeling frisky that morning, which meant the highway disappeared under his hooves at a very satisfying pace. After a couple of hours we began encountering other traffic on the road, some going in the same direction we were, some in the opposite direction. Those heading for the city were, for the most part, farmers on wagons, bringing in special produce of one sort or another that wasn't meant for the city's markets and shops. Daily suppliers had been in the city since dawn, their deliveries made and wagons probably empty by then, the farmers either lingering to make purchases of their own, or already on the road back home. In Gensea one bought and sold early and fresh or late and half-spoiled, never both if they dealt in perishables. Northern climate was at times more flexible, and more pleasant for those who didn't mind the times when snow rose to the barrel of a tall horse.

Coming from the city were more riders than wagons, among them couriers and those individuals who preferred riding alone. The majority of riders came in company, though, some with friends, some with an escort, and these were the ones who let their curiosity bring their eyes to me. Not all of them seemed to know what my leathers and medallion meant, in fact none of them but the mercenary escorts, and one stem-faced member of a party frowned and tried calling me over to him. I smiled pleasantly and nodded as I passed the place he'd stopped, then pretended I couldn't hear his shouted demands to come back. It was only a suspicion on my part that he wanted to argue the fact of my riding alone, but it was too pleasant a morning to ruin if it turned out I was right.

The city gates were already in sight by the time the Guard patrol passed me on its way back, the dust of the road covering their mail the way I was sure it hadn't on the way out. I rated no more than a glance from their unit leader as they went by, which pleased me quite a lot. There were too many places where Blades were stopped and questioned as soon as they appeared, their calling making them guilty even if nothing had been done that they could be guilty of. Gensea may have been my home, but I was returning to the duchy with the eyes and attitudes of a stranger, needing to learn about the place as though for the first time. I hadn't yet seen enough of its people to be sure, but I was beginning to think I might like all that sunshine and warmth.

When it didn't turn to airless heat on the streets of a city. Getting through the gates had just been a matter of riding in, the Guards posted there inspecting me a little more closely but still making no attempt to stop me. My father's castle stood on the hill on the far side of the city and I could have reached it just as easily by riding around the outer walls, but I'd decided on the slower straight - line route rather than the faster curving one so that I could first have a closer look at my father's people. In the course of time they would be my people, much more than they were right then, and I wanted to see them without their dinner manners.

I quickly discovered that most people went by way of the widest street because it was the widest, which meant it took that many more wagons and hand-carts and tray-peddlers and walkers and urchins, which brought it virtually to a standstill. Strangely enough most of those caught in the unhurried melee didn't seem overly upset, as though they ail had plenty of time to get where they were going, and if they didn't arrive for another day or two, well, no real harm done. Once we were caught up in it with no way of turning back, I found that Bloodsheen didn't feel quite the same.

Despite my hand on his neck and the murmured words that usually calmed him, my mount was beginning to bare his teeth and rear just a little, not enough to hurt anyone who stayed back, but still a very clear warning of worse to come. He didn't like the packed-in crowd, the noise that came at us from all directions, the unfamiliar and well-mixed smells, the heat unrelieved by the slightest breeze, and the crawling pace to which we'd been reduced. For my part it worried me that the people around us didn't seem to understand what being that close to a war horse meant, and acted as though Bloodsheen was

pulling a wagon. They were trying not to get in his way to keep from being stepped on, but other than that were totally unconcerned.

It took the laughing, screaming, yelling and pushing of half a dozen dirty-faced little boys to show me I had no choice about finding another route. We were moving forward very slowly when they erupted from the crowds all around us, purposely trying to startle everyone in sight and hearing before shrilling laughter and racing away again. Bloodsheen screamed and reared, determined to get at least one of the little tormentors, and only the luck of Evon saved them from it. The last thin body slipped past a hand-cart an instant before a steel-shod hoof crashed down onto the wood, leaving behind no more than splinters and kindling, letting everyone know what would have happened if it had struck a small, soft body instead. Startled and frightened, the people suddenly began pulling back from us, and that was the moment I saw the alleyway. I had no idea where it went, but I used the opportunity to go for it without hesitation.

The stone of the buildings so close on either side of us was only slightly better than the crowds as far as Bloodsheen was concerned, but once we'd trotted through the alley to the next street over he began to calm down a little. The street wasn't what could be considered deserted, not after what we'd gotten used to in Fyerlin, but it gave us enough room to breathe and move without having to do it in someone else's lap. Before coming into the city I'd thought about stopping at a tavern for something to eat and wet my throat with, but by then all I wanted was to find my way to the southern gate and out.

Which turned out to be not quite as easy as talking about it. The street the alleyway gave onto was filled with shops and stalls and the calm bustle of people, but rather than paralleling the main thoroughfare it curved away to the right, then began twisting this way and that. I stayed with it for a while to see if it would decide to curve back again in the direction I wanted, but when it began narrowing instead I had no choice but to turn off. I guided Bloodsheen to the left, thinking to check on the condition of the thoroughfare, but the street we took didn't lead to the thoroughfare. We came out on another street instead, a street a bit wider than the one we'd left but otherwise no different, and that was the real beginning of it. I'd started getting us good and lost, but just hadn't yet realized it.

I couldn't help noticing that all the street-name posts were in place and in good repair, but knowing what street you're on and passing helps only when you know where you're going. There were walkers and people with hand-carts moving around us, but when I stopped some of them to ask directions they all seemed to have different ideas as to where things were. Two or three of the people I tried to question backed and ran, as though afraid I was about to attack and rob them, and after the third instance I began seriously considering doing just that to somebody. If I got lucky the City Guard would be called out, and then, at least, I'd be found.

I was blotting again at the sweat on my face with my sleeve and giving thanks to Evon that my mail was rolled up behind my saddle rather than on me, when Bloodsheen came to an abrupt stop. I lowered my arm to see that we'd somehow wandered into a dead-end court, the stone and wood backs of buildings forming a silent canyon ahead, but that wasn't what had stopped my mount. Bloodsheen, a trained war horse, knew better than to simply continue on toward people holding drawn swords without my signal, and he hadn't yet been given that. My hand went to my hilt even as I glanced around, but it was immediately obvious that the five men with their backs to me didn't even know I was there. They were very busily watching a heavy wooden door in the building to the left, which just then began swinging inward.

Not long after I'd first joined my Fist, Ham had tried lecturing me on the dangers of being too "nosy," as he'd put it. My perfectly natural curiosity had bothered him because of the trouble I'd sometimes found due to it, and although the lectures had eventually ended when he got tired of wasting his breath, he had never given up pestering me entirely. For my own part, I've always felt that if Evon hadn't wanted us

investigating the odd or unusual, he wouldn't have appeared to the first Blades and taught them sword "skill. With that in mind I slid my sword noiselessly free of its scabbard, then waited to see what would happen next.

What happened was that the heavy door swung all the way inward, and the five outside gave a step or two of ground to allow a sixth to back out among them. As soon as he had cleared the door, it became obvious why he'd been moving so slowly: his left arm was wrapped around the throat of a woman, and the dagger in his right fist was poised at her side at rib height. That in itself would have been odd enough, but none of the six men were really paying attention to the woman. Their stares remained on the doorway, held by the man who stepped through after the one holding the woman captive.

From the reactions of the waiting and watching six, you would have thought they considered the seventh man an incarnation of Evon himself. To my stranger's eye he fell somewhat short of that, but from the way he moved there was no doubt about his being a fighting man. The six apparently challenging him wore a raggedy collection of homespun mixed with small amounts of leather, as though they believed the presence of leather would add to whatever sword skill they had attained. The seventh wore nothing of leather except for his boots, which were probably as expensive as his fitted dark green trousers and short jacket, and the white silk shirt showing snow-like in the sunlight. The woman wore a day-gown of gold that companioned better with the seventh man's clothing than with that of her captors, and even from where I sat I could see that she was trembling.

"All right, I'm out here alone and you have me," the seventh man said to the others, his right hand, closed into a fist, making not the slightest move toward the sword he wore. "There are enough of you to make sure you won't have any trouble, so you can let the girl go."

"We're the ones who say who stays and who goes," the man holding the girl denied, a nervous grin of satisfaction on what I could see of his face. "You get rid o' that swordbelt right there, and then step out to where my friends can reach you. We don't let the girl go till that happens."

The seventh man looked as though he wanted to bare his teeth in a snarl, a reaction to all the things he couldn't do. He probably didn't believe they'd release the woman any more than I did, but if he refused to obey the commands he'd been given she would have no chance at all. He glanced around at the six men staring at him, all of whom were taller and larger than he, and then his hands began rising slowly to his swordbelt. In another minute he would be disarmed, but I'd decided not to give that confrontation another minute.

There are certain limes in battle when your opponents are just short of being rattled and ready to break, needing only one more push to send them over the edge. Different Fists use different means of delivering that push, but our Fist had always been partial to suddenly charging in from five attack points with piercing whistles, very much like the screams of hunting hawks. I'd always found the tactic to be reliable and effective, but the six bravos in the court found it a lot more than that.

A touch of my heels to Bloodsheen's sides sent him happily and eagerly forward, the sound of my ear-splitting whistle telling him joyous battle was about to start. The five men with swords nearly fell all over themselves whirling at the double sound of hooves and attack cry, and even the sixth almost lost his hold on the woman captive, so fast did his head snap around. Most of them did nothing more than stare at me gape-mouthed as I charged forward, showing how battle-experienced they really were, but the seventh man didn't have their trouble. His startlement lasted no more than seconds, and then he jumped to the man holding the woman and pulled her out of a shock-loosened grip. By then I was just about in amongst them, and there was no more time for paying attention to anything other than fighting.

Bloodsheen claimed first contact with his hooves and teeth, but my swordstroke didn't follow much

behind his attack. Two men went down fast with screams, and then I was out of the saddle and fighting on foot, a necessary gesture with opponents like those. The ones simply holding their swords in front of them like talismans of luck quickly found it didn't work that way, and those who actually managed to swing their steel didn't fare much better. In what seemed like the blink of an eye I was down to a final opponent, one frightened enough to try carrying the attack to me, but fear-backed berserker rage isn't as effective as some people think, not against proper training and skill. I felt the wind of the man's weapon as it flew past me in a wide swing, and then I felt the jar of contact up my arm as my sword thudded into the middle of him. His backswing faded to nothing as his knees crumpled and he tried to scream, but men already dead have trouble making sounds. I jerked my blade out of him and he fell the rest of the way to the stone of the courtyard, then I looked around to see what had happened to the would-be victims.

The man stood with the woman trembling in his arms, his expression concerned but not overly worried even though he wasn't being allowed to move an inch from where he was. He seemed to be familiar with the ways of war horses, and knew that as long as he let Bloodsheen hold him at bay without reaching for his sword, my mount would not attack. I whistled again, this time in a different key, and Bloodsheen backed off to let the two move as they pleased.

"Thank you," the man said at once with a grin, his hand now patting the woman's shoulder. "I appreciate that almost as much as your sudden appearance. I think you know my sister and I owe you our lives."

"I just happened to be here at the right time," I said with a shake of my head, holding my dripping sword away from them as I walked forward. "I make it a practice never to accept the lives people sometimes think they owe me - I have enough trouble keeping just my own life straight. Do you happen to know why they were after you?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," he answered, his dark eyes going suddenly cold. "A -certain group of people decided I was in their way, that as long as I stayed in business they couldn't complete the stranglehold they want over - another group of people. You deserve more in the way of answers than I'm giving you, I know, but at this point the less you know about these things, the safer you'll be. Will you be visiting our city long?"

"Probably for the rest of a very short life, if I don't get some directions to the south gate pretty soon," I came back, beginning to look around for something to wipe my sword on. I would have enjoyed having more details on the problem the well-dressed man was in the middle of, but that wasn't the time to ask for them. For all I knew my father already had the details, and if he didn't I could always come back and discuss the question of safety.

"Oeran, we must at the very least supply her with a guide," the woman said as I bent to use the homespun of a former bravo on my blade. She still sounded shaken, but there had been no hysterics out of her, and she was clearly beginning to pull herself together.

"I'd take her myself if that wouldn't endanger her, Agia," the man responded, chuckling at what I'd said. "And if, I didn't need to get you quickly on your way away from here. I won't give them another chance to use you against me, sister, and certainly won't let you continue risking your life. You'll go home and stay there until this-disagreement-is over."

"But Oeran... !" the woman began, glancing at me in embarrassment as I straightened up again. She could see there was no one around telling me what to do and where I had to go, and she was a few years my senior. What she didn't seem to realize was that I was a Blade, and that that was one of the reasons I'd worked so hard for the calling.

"No buts," her brother said in a final way, grimacing as he looked around. "By the time they find out the

attack failed, you're going to be well out of reach. In the name of Evon's glowing hilt, young Blade, you have, as I said, my deepest gratitude. If I didn't owe you, though, I'd be tempted to complain about your manners. The only one of this filth I got to put my hands on was the one holding my sister, and that isn't right. Weren't you ever taught to share?"

"But I did share," I told the faint amusement in his eyes, resheathing my weapon as I looked down at him. "I shared with Bloodsheen, just the way I usually do. You don't hear him complaining, do you?"

"Well, as a matter of fact I thought I heard an unhappy mutter or two when you called him off us," the man Oeran said with his grin back, his gaze flickering to my mount before returning to me. "I could tell it from my own muttering because it was higher up. If you'll wait here just for a minute, I'll see you get your guide. And once again-thank you."

I nodded to acknowledge his thanks, then watched as he guided the woman back through the door by the arm he had around her shoulders. He hadn't introduced himself or his sister, but he also hadn't asked my name, not even in the light of my having gone against the most widely accepted rules of conduct by deliberately neglecting to offer even a false name. He probably thought I was in trouble with the King's Law, and I wondered if he'd hurried his sister inside because he wanted her safe - or because he wanted her away from a bad influence. They might owe their lives to me, but there are certain kinds of people one simply doesn't associate with.

I grinned as I remounted Bloodsheen, glad to have my mood lightened from what it had been. The last time I'd been home no one had considered me a bad influence, which is an indication of how dull the visit had been. I had no doubt that this visit would be different, and I was actually beginning to look forward to it. This time I could be myself, which my father had always maintained was the best thing to be. I'd show him just how right he was, and then we'd happily get on to family matters.

It wasn't much more than the minute specified before a large group of men came out of the building into which the man and woman had disappeared. They all wore the livery and device of some House I didn't recognize, all but one who wore none-too-clean homespun, a day or two's growth of beard, and no visible weapon. The ones in livery began moving bodies and mopping up pools of blood, but the one in homespun gestured me after him as he trotted out of the court. A touch of my heels and Bloodsheen was right after him, following behind as he led us to a small stabling two streets away. He worked fast getting an old nag of a horse saddled and bitted, and once he was mounted he sidled as close as the bag of bones would come to an impatient war horse.

"Follow behind me, but not too close," he said in a rasp of a voice, his eyes moving around to see if anyone was paying too much attention to us. "I'll lead you to the south gate, and you make sure you keep going through it. If you ever find it- comfortable to come back to this city, buy a drink or two in the Ax and Shield and just wait. Hire or help - it'll be yours for the asking."

He nodded to show he'd been passing on a message, then turned his mount and moved off as though he were going somewhere all alone. I'd noticed that his accent was of a higher class than his appearance, and I'd also noticed that the small fighting man hadn't been joking about gratitude. I had hire any time I cared to claim it, which made me grin even more than I'd been doing.

The old horse had more left in the way of speed and endurance than I would have guessed, so it wasn't long before I found myself directly on the way leading to the gate I'd earlier begun believing someone had moved. The man ahead of me took a narrow street to the right before reaching the gate, his attention on nothing more than shouting people out of his way, so I followed his example and passed the street he'd taken without even glancing at it. For the third time City Guardsmen looked at me without saying or doing anything, and then I was out of the city in the afternoon light, and riding up the winding road leading to my

father's castle.

To the castle, not into it. Riding up a road and being allowed inside guarded walls are not things done with equal ease, something I'd forgotten in the presence of the waves of homecoming washing over me. The waves suddenly ended, though, when I tried riding straight in and found a hedge of swords and bodies barring my way.

"Where d'you think you're goin', girl?" a grizzled and burly sergeant demanded, sounding more annoyed than worried about Bloodsheen's rumbles of warning. "The Duke don't hire no girl fighters for his House Guard, so botherin' the cap'n won't buy you nothin'. Why don't you go home like a good girl, and find a man the way you oughta."

"But I can't go home now. Sergeant," I said with helpless tragedy and a deep sigh, stroking Bloodsheen's neck to calm him. "One look at you and I knew I was in love, so you can't just send me away. Besides, I'm expected."

"Expected by who?" he demanded in a harder voice, not very pleased with the hooting laughter forced out of the men around him. "Damned smart-mouthed Blades, never seen one yet that didn't need a good, long taste o' real military discipline. If you ain't lookin' for hire, what d'you want here?"

"Frankly, the first thing I want is a drink or three, and then a decent meal," I said, handing over the letter I'd taken out of my saddlebag and tucked into my swordbelt. "It's been something of a long ride."

The sergeant sheathed his blade and stepped forward to take the envelope, glanced at my father's seal, then pulled the letter out and began reading with a frown. I was surprised to see that he was able to read, but surprised is too mild a word for what the man in front of me felt. The expression on his face changed to stunned shock, and then his washed-out blue eyes were staring up at me.

"I'll be dyed and damned," he said in a choked voice, causing his unit to shift uncomfortably, wondering what was going on. "It ain't the same face, and yet it sure as hell is, five years'r no five years. I was here the last time you come, but then it was in a carriage, just like the first time you left. What in hell's the Duke gonna say?"

"Do you expect me to find out from way out here?" I asked, annoyed at the question he'd put and the way he'd put it. "If it's too much trouble for you to move your men out of the way, I'll go back to the city and get lodging in a tavern."

"Like hell you will!" he barked, totally incensed at the idea. "The Duke'd have my skin for a rug, an' me the first in sayin' he had the right. Inside with you now, an' let 'em see to you fit and proper!"

He turned to shout his men out of my way, giving them even more of his sweet disposition than he'd sent in my direction, and men he turned back to me with a glower. He must have been ready with a demand as to why I hadn't yet ridden through, but seeing my outstretched hand reminded him that he hadn't returned my letter. He muttered under his breath while he folded it, replaced it in the envelope and handed it back, then, to the surprise of his men, stalked under the stone arch ahead of me. It looked like I had an escort again, and one who liked Blades even less than Timper.

The arch led through the approach tunnel into the wide outer court, which had people moving back and forth on business of their own. Most of them turned to look at the unit sergeant - who seemed ready to walk through anything in his way, including walls - and then moved their glances to me, probably considering me wise for staying on a war horse while I was that close to him. For my own part, I was too busy rolling in the waves of home-return again to really care about the sergeant.

My father's castle was big and solid, designed to withstand the attack of armies, gray and ominous in the sight of many, as beautiful as ever in my admittedly prejudiced eyes. I'd been born in that pile of stone and had spent the first half of my life there, exploring every corner of it and getting to know it even better than most of my brothers. My mother had always tried to do things to pretty it up and my father, who had loved her very much, had never told her she was wasting her time; she kept trying until the day she died, never having seen the real, true, inner beauty of the place we called home. I had seen it, though, and that perception always made home-coming a very special time for me.

"You grow roots on that spot, Soldier?" a heavy voice demanded, bringing me back to an awareness of the wide doors we'd stopped in front of. "I told you to get Sir Fonid, an" I mean now!"

"Right away, Sergeant!" the boy he'd been barking at shrilled out, and then he was running back through the doors he'd just come out of. A servant in livery just inside watched the goings on with confusion, wondering if he should be holding the doors open or closing them, and then his mind was made up for him.

"Get a stable boy from the watch room," the Sergeant ordered, his tone of command only slightly different from the one he'd used on the Guardsman. "Make sure it ain't one o' the new ones, 'cause they don't know the handlin' o' war horses yet. Get 'imfast, so the lady c'n go inside."

The servant looked the least bit indignant over being ordered around by someone who wasn't noble, but arguing the point wasn't something he was up to doing. He left the doors and headed toward the watch room in a gait that could only be called a dignified run, and the sergeant waited until I'd dismounted, then moved a step closer to me.

"The Duke ain't here now," he announced in a tone that almost accused my father of having run away from home - at the most inconvenient time. "Sir Fonid'll see to gettin' you what you need, an" don't you go givin' him no Blade backtalk. He only been here three years'r so, but he got this place runnin' real smooth. The Duke wouldn't like seein' 'im flyin' in circles, like you done to some before you got sent north. I remember them days, just like they was yesterday, so you watch your step."

"Say, I remember those days, too!" I responded as though

I'd forgotten till then, beaming happily at the sergeant. "They were a lot of fun, weren't they? I could use some fun after the long wintering I just went through, not to mention the ride. Thank you for suggesting it, Sergeant."

The poor man started to go purple and he began drawing himself up, so outraged that the words simply refused to come, but he was saved from exploding by the hurried reappearance of the Guardsman he'd sent off, accompanied by another man. The newcomer was likely into his fifth under-decade, and was so filled with that special inner calm that his dark hair and well-cut, conservative clothing were probably never an inch out of place. He'd had no trouble keeping up with the hurrying Guardsman, but it was fairly obvious that he was the sort who never had to hurry.

"What problem do you have. Sergeant?" he asked as he came up, his voice as even and calm as his appearance. "Your man here said my presence was required."

"Likely you'll soon be wishin' it weren't, Sir Fonid," the sergeant managed to get out, his glare at me the sort to melt stone walls. "This here ain't just any petticoat Blade, she's the poor Duke's bane. He's sure to want to see her, for a minute'r so anyways, so you get to look after her till he gets back. Me, I got gate duty waitin'."

With that he stomped away, undoubtedly planning on chewing up his unit when he got back to them,

seeing nothing of the puzzled look he'd left Sir Fonid with. My father's major-domo transferred the puzzlement to me, and then his eyes widened with sudden inspiration.

"Perhaps I'm mistaken, but I believe the sergeant was trying to tell me the one we've been awaiting has arrived," he said, a surprising amount of warmth now in his voice. "Have I the honor of addressing the lady Sofaltis?"

"I'm not sure how much of an honor it is, but I am Solfaltis," I admitted, trying to keep as much of my amusement as possible on the inside. "You might want to ask the sergeant his opinion."

"I think I already have his opinion," Sir Fonid said with an unexpected twinkle in his eye, then stepped smoothly aside to let the newly arrived stable boy dash past rather than into him. "If you'll give your horse to the boy, I'll do what-looking after-needs to be done."

I watched just long enough to be sure the boy really did have experience with war horses, then went inside to join the quietly waiting majordomo. His dark eyes were studying me openly, and when I reached him he began leading the way across the very wide entrance hall.

"I understand you haven't been home for some years now, my lady," he said in a way that made me feel we were already friends. "You and the sergeant, I take it, have a previous acquaintanceship to draw on?"

"I don't remember him, but apparently he remembers me," I answered, giving most of my attention to the house and its familiar contents as we walked. "He seems to remember how-high-spirited-I was as a child, and now hasn't much use for the Blade I've become. Just before you got here, he was ordering me to behave myself."

"A rather impertinent attitude to be taking with a lady of the Duke's family," Sir Fonid murmured, still inspecting me with those eyes. "A lady nobly born may always be counted on to behave in a proper manner - or so I've found it to be. I hope you berated him soundly for his insolence."

"Berating isn't nearly as interesting as doing things my way, Sir Fonid," I replied, moving left with him toward the wide stairway leading above. "And as for always behaving in a proper manner - why, of course I do. Don't you?"

I turned my head then to look straight at him, letting him see exactly how far off his calculations had been. I didn't wonder that the household ran well under him, not with all the ways he obviously knew to handle people, but I don't enjoy being handled - or admire attempts to back me into a corner. If I was a "lady nobly born," which I was, and that sort always did a certain thing, then it followed that I had to do the same. Sir Fonid looked back at me, apparently understanding that our ideas of "had to" were not going to coincide, and a faint smile curved his lips.

"I think I'm beginning to have a bit more sympathy for the sergeant," he said, having stopped at the bottom of the stairway. "You remind me quite a lot of your father, Lady Sofaltis, which I find myself surprised to discover in a female who is also rather young. Have you already dismissed your escort, or would you like me to arrange billeting for them?"

"I had no escort," I said, allowing him the chance to fall back and regroup as I turned my attention to starting up the stairs. "What I would like is my old apartment supplied with food and drink, to be ready for me as soon as I've finished saying hello to my sisters. Are they still in the same apartments they used to have?"

"Of course, my lady," he agreed with something of a bow as he climbed beside me, his expressionless face saying he would treat me as he probably did my father until he found my weak spot. "I'll escort you

there, and then see to the refreshments."

Nothing needed to be said to that so all I did was nod, but I couldn't help noticing that so far my homecoming wasn't much of a joy for those around me. I supposed they would have been happier if I really was the sweet, shy, well-mannered little thing I'd been pretending to be on my last visit, but that was only because they didn't yet know I was going to be my father's heir. Once they found out, of course, it would make all the difference.

My sisters had grown an enormous amount since the last time I'd seen them, and only Sella faintly remembered me. She'd been about seven the last time I'd been home, old enough to retain something of the memory, but Saeria had only been five. At ten and twelve they found meeting their older sister an exciting event, especially since I wore a sword the way "ladies weren't supposed to do," and I was almost wheedled into a chair to tell about every exploit I'd ever had. I would have been hopelessly trapped if a servant hadn't appeared then to tell them it was time for their embroidery work or some such, and I was able to escape by promising that I would spend hours with them at another time. They were little-girl disappointed but went with the servant without much in the way of rebellion, not exactly the way I'd done it when I'd been their age. I thought about that as I left Sella's apartment, and was still thinking about it when I got to my own.

Opening the door showed my sitting room spotlessly clean and dust-free, the silvered curtains fluttering freshly at the windows, the furniture uncovered with pillows fluffed, and a tray holding a pitcher and goblets on the table next to a heavy leather chair. It looked like I really had been expected, but happily no maidservant had been moved into the smaller bedroom as yet. As I walked toward the pitcher and goblets I remembered the last girl sent to "help" me, not more than halfway through her second under-decade and already so stuffy that I had been able to imagine her in her sixth. She'd ridden me unmercifully the entire time I'd been there, bullying the "shy young lady" with straight-faced but glittering-eyed glee, and I hadn't been able to do more than think about dismembering her. This time, though, if she was still in the house and assigned to me again...

I couldn't have been more than two steps from the pitcher and goblets when a quick knock came at the door, and then it was thrown open to allow a big man to stride through. He wore the brownish red leather of a Fighter with a swordbelt firmly about his hips, and although his dark hair was beginning to be streaked with gray his weather-creased face was still as young and alive as it had always been. His dark and merry eyes found me at once, and without hesitation he strode forward with arms opened wide. I couldn't remember a time when Traixe hadn't greeted me like that, and I turned back to meet him with a hug of my own.

"Sofaltis, girl, it's so good to see you again," he said in his very deep voice, crushing me carefully in the painless bear hug he always gave. "And you've grown even taller than the last time we-"

His words broke off as though something unexpected had just occurred to him, and then I was being held out at arm's length, his eyes narrowed and his big hands on my arms. Traixe had been my father's most trusted advisor and a priest of Evon since well before I was born, and I didn't know a single soul who could be inspected by him like that without privately reviewing their latest actions in the hopes of finding nothing he would disapprove of.

"This is just another prank, isn't it," he said rather than asked after a moment, the end of his inspection shifting his gaze to my face. "You thought it would be amusing to come home dressed as a Blade, pretending to be something you're not. Tell me I'm right."

Most people who wanted to continue enjoying full health and life made it a practice to tell Traixe exactly what he wanted to hear, and then worked hard to be sure it was the truth. I, however, didn't have that

pleasant option, which made me even more aware of the hands wrapped around my arms.

"If you'll remember, I always said I wanted to grow up to be just like you," I offered, my voice so small and hesitant I might as well have been Sella or Saeria. "As a matter of fact I promised, and you know how I feel about promises..."

This time it was my voice that trailed off, but only because Traixe had closed his eyes, as though in the grip of deep pain. It's always best to be yourself, my father had a habit of saying, and I couldn't help wondering who had given him such misinformation.

"The last time we saw you, you were as proper a young lady as it's possible to be," he said after taking a very deep breath, and then those eyes were on me again. "I want to know how you go from that to this in only half a decade time. You spend two or three seasons green before you even rate a Company medallion, and no Fist alive and wanting to stay that way would - No, no guesswork. I want to hear it from you."

"Do you mind if I get a drink first?" I asked, deciding that if he was going to let me live long enough to give him the information he wanted, I might as well take advantage of it. "Long-winded explanations after longer rides tend to be wearing on the throat."

"I don't have the time for you to be long - winded," he rumbled ominously, but still let my arms go. "Get your drink and we'll both sit down, and then I want to hear it all - briefly."

"I think I'll need Evon's help for that," I said as I turned back toward the tray, not missing the way he flinched at the words. He couldn't be very used to hearing women call on Evon, I knew, but he didn't jump on me for it. Traixe wasn't anything if he wasn't fair, and he knew as well as I that I had the right.

I filled two goblets automatically while trying to decide where to begin and what could be left out, then carried them over to where Traixe stood waiting in front of two brocaded chairs half-facing one another. I handed him his cup with a smile then raised mine to my lips, took a sip-and almost spit it out again. I didn't realize I'd said anything until the big man put those eyes on me again.

"It's been a while since I heard barracks-talk like that," he remarked, not in the least amused, "If I hear it again, we'll start right now with helping you to unlearn it. What's the matter, did something sneak up and bite your-boots?"

His very obvious altering of a common Blade saying was meant to show where he stood on the question of language, but I'd heard him use worse than what I'd said any number of times, when he hadn't known I was listening. If I hadn't had a question to answer, I might have mentioned the point.

"What's the matter is this-drink," I said, looking down into my goblet with a grimace. "I wasn't expecting iced sweet fruit."

"Why not?" he countered, deliberately drinking from his own cup to show me it could be done without certain verbal accompaniment. "Iced sweet fruit is the drink usually brought to proper young ladies. Are you trying to tell me you're not a proper young lady?"

The calm stare he was giving me was a direct descendant of the ones I'd gotten all too often as a child, usually after being caught doing something I shouldn't have been doing. That same question had always accompanied the stare as well, but for the first time I was hearing it as a full-grown Blade rather than as a small girl-child. Traixe, well into his fourth under-decade, was still a better fighter than I would ever be. but I found myself straightening where I stood and meeting that stare unblinkingly. The question he'd put to me so often was too close to a standard insult every female Blade ran into on a regular basis, and my

reaction was too automatic to even consider letting the matter slide by.

"By Evon's Silver Bracers-!" Traixe exclaimed, taking one step back with a convulsive movement of his right hand. He stopped the movement almost before it began, but his calm had been shaken very slightly out of his grip.

"Sofaltis, you startled me," he said, his brow creased with the disturbance he felt. "The way you looked at me-for an instant I thought you were going to draw on me. What could I have said-" His eyes widened as he realized exactly what he'd said, and then he shook his head as he put a hand over those eyes. "And I complained about the language you used," he said with a deep sigh. "I'd forgotten what circulates as proper for a young lady among Blades. I apologize, of course, sincerely and humbly. And why the hell didn't you draw on me?"

He was so indignant so quickly that it was my turn to be startled, and then I was laughing and shaking my head the way he'd done. If female Blades made a habit of starting fights over that insult, male Blades who associated with - female Blades started them faster and a lot more often. None of us who were female knew exactly why that was, but that particular insult could set our Fistmates off faster than an attempted backstabbing.

"I didn't draw on you because I only just got home," I told him after a moment, still chuckling. "That means I'd like to wait awhile before inviting a sendoff, especially of the final sort. I may take you on some day, Traixe, but not before your ninth or tenth decade."

"Well, at least they taught you more good sense than you used to have," he said, trying to look and sound gruff rather than pleased and flattered. "I can't wait to find out how this all came about."

"I suppose it was something of an accident," I answered, taking the hint to get started while I gestured him to a chair and took the other myself. "When I first got to Aunt Illi's house, she and I didn't exactly hit it off. We both knew why I'd been sent there, and while she was determined to see me become a true lady of quality, I was just as determined that I wouldn't become one. We went back and forth for weeks, Aunt Illi fighting with every weapon she could think of - including patience - me ignoring overtures and orders alike, and then she had an inspiration. She was sure her idea would work, so she went ahead and made the arrangements."

"For hiring someone with a belt to use on you, I hope," Traixe said, back to giving me that look again. "If you hadn't been the daughter of my lord Duke - and he too softhearted where females are concerned - you would have had it from me the very first time you pulled your shenanigans. Is that what she did?"

"You're closer than you know," I said with a grin, not about to tell him how relieved I'd been when I'd first found out he wasn't allowed to discipline me with anything but lectures. If he had been permitted a free hand, so to speak, my excursions of freedom, as I'd liked to call them, might not have been quite so frequent. "Aunt Illi had gotten so sick of hearing me flatly refuse to be a lady of quality, she decided to give me a chance at my only other "option." Being nobly born I had to be something of quality, so if I refused to be a lady the only thing left was being a gentleman. The arrangements she made were for me to begin serious weapons study, which would have been done as a matter of course if I'd been a boy."

"Thinking that would change your mind if anything could," he said with a nod and another deep sigh, then rubbed at his eyes with his free hand. "The theory was sound, and one I might have tried myself if I'd thought of it. How quickly did it backfire?"

"Oh, just about from the very first day," I said, swallowing down some of my grin when the satisfaction in my voice brought his stare to me again. "I was taller than most of the boys training with me, faster than all of them, and didn't believe in crying if I got hurt. At first the arms masters, at Aunt Illi's orders, were

harder on me than on any of the others, but once we began getting deeper into the drills they went from riding me to teaching me in almost the blink of an eye. I hadn't known that armsmasters never question talent, only train it, and neither had Aunt Illi. By the time she found out, it was much too late."

"But didn't she withdraw you and try something else?" he asked, not up to understanding that part of it. "If it wasn't working, why did she continue with it?"

"Traixe, the Countess Illi happens to be that rarest of all people, someone with a born sense of honor," I said slowly, trying to make him see it in the proper light. "What she wanted for me was what would be best for me, and when she saw how really happy I was she refused to take away that happiness. If she'd found my talent in sewing, or stately dances, or playing a lap harp and singing, she would have seen me thoroughly trained in that; once she found that my talent - and interest - lay in sword work, she did her duty with the same thoroughness she does everything. By the time I was fourteen I was accepted into a Company, and I had my medallion even before I came home for my last visit."

"An acquisition you didn't see fit to share with your father or me," he said, still sour. "Was that because of your age, or because you were waiting for the perfect moment to break the good news?"

"Mostly the first," I admitted, still fighting with my grin. "Aren't you the least bit proud of me? And prouder now than you would have been half a decade ago? We went through some pretty heavy fighting before first snow, but the Silver Gleaming had the lightest casualty rate of any Company involved. How about it, Traixe, not even a small pat on the back?"

"If it was up to me I'd give you more than one pat, and not quite on the back," he growled, slamming his almost - untouched cup down on the table between us before getting to his feet to prowl up and down. "Not only do you not learn what your father wanted you to learn, you corrupt a Countess, join a Sword Company, and fight as a Blade in a war we all thought you were safely protected from! Is that what you want me to congratulate you about? How close you came to getting killed?"

He stopped to glare at me with the question, his eyes really angry, and somehow that made me remember what Rull had said just before I'd left Fyerlin. It came to me then that I was also still holding a goblet, so I reached to the table to put mind down next to his. When I looked back Traixe was closer than he had been, and then he was reaching down with a sigh to pull me to my feet and back into that familiar bear hug.

"Of course I'm proud of you," he said with the sort of gentleness most people didn't know he was capable of, his hand stroking my hair as he held me to him. "I couldn't be prouder if you were one of mine rather than one of the Duke's, and I know your actions are and always will be of the sort to make Evon's name shine. Pride has nothing to do with worry over your safety, child, especially in times such as these."

"Which is, after all, the reason I'm home now," I said at the reminder, raising my head while trying to understand how I could have forgotten. "Traixe, how serious is the trouble we're facing?"

"Serious enough to make us desperate," he answered, letting me go with a pat on the shoulder. "I won't say any more than that, I know your father wants to tell you himself, but you'll have to wait until he gets back. He's out hunting with the Counts and Barons he's currently guesting."

"I heard he wasn't home/" I said with a frown, reaching for my cup before remembering what was in it. "Why would he be guesting the Counts and Barons at a time like this? And that reminds me: how did you know I was here?"

"I'd asked Sir Fonid to let me know the moment you arrived, and he did," Traixe answered, scowling

down at his own cup. "As far as the guessting goes, that's part of what you'll be discussing with your father, but I've just thought of something that makes me feel a good deal better than I've been feeling. I'll still be supplying you with some of my men as a bodyguard, but now I don't have to worry about whether or not they're perfect. All they'll need to do is slow any attackers long enough to give you warning; if a Blade of a Fist in the Silver Gleaming can't handle it after that, no one can."

He was showing a very evil grin just then, the contents of his cup no longer bothering him, just as what I was had suddenly become a Good Thing. Life in a Sword Company had taught me to be very suspicious of abrupt Good Things, as what they usually turned out to be was something else entirely.

"You know, I seem to remember the last time I saw a grin like yours," I remarked, folding my arms as I stared at him. "It was when a Fist leader named Seepar came to tell us how lucky we were to have his Fist backing ours. Why were you so eager to find out the minute I got here, Traixe, and why would you imagine I need a bodyguard?"

"I had to know because you do need a bodyguard, and there's nothing involving imagination about it," he said, the grin gone and the growly Traixe back again. "Your brother decided he didn't need a bodyguard and slipped away from them, and by the time they caught up with him again it was too late. He'd already had his "accident," and that was the end of that. I'll go down myself first before I let the same thing happen to you."

"And I'd rather let them try it with me - ," I said, finally able to show what I'd been feeling ever since I'd heard about Rymar. "My brother was one of my favorite people, Traixe, and they killed him with the uncaring ease others use on insects. I want them to try it with me."

"I haven't got enough men to pick up the number of pieces there would be left," he said, a wishful-thinking satisfaction peeking out of his eyes. "I'd turn you loose on them if I could, girl, but there's too much at stake here to do something like that - even if your father agreed, which he never would. From now on you'll be having a bodyguard whether you like it or not, so you'd better get used to the idea. Now, what say I have them bring us something decent to drink?"

Traixe knew better than to try bribing my attention away from something, and I was about to say so when a knock came at the door just before it was opened. I turned to see a serving girl entering with a tray of food and a large pitcher that didn't look as though it contained fruit juice, and my companion decided to use what distractions the intervention of Evon gave him.

"Aha! See there? The best service in the kingdom," he announced with a grin, predictably enjoying my annoyance over the interruption. "Bring that pitcher here, girl. The lady and I mean to sample it before we get to the food."

"What's in this here pitcher ain't for the lady, Lord Traixe," the girl answered primly, putting everything down on a table a good distance away from me. "Sir Fonid says to bring it for you so I did, but she can't have none o' it. Soon's she eats she's gonna get a bath, and then be put in clean, decent clothes before she takes her nap. M'lord Duke'll want "er lookin" fresh and pretty at the feastin' tonight, and that's gonna take me some doin'."

"Will it really?" I murmured from two feet away behind the girl, causing her to turn fast in startlement to look up at me. I'd thought I recognized her voice and manner, and sure enough I hadn't been wrong; she was the same servant I'd had five years earlier. I looked down at her with my fingertips resting on my swordbelt, and suddenly she was out of words and observations. Traixe, moving as fast as only a fighter can, "accidentally" shouldered me back from her, then put an arm around her wide-eyed form and headed her toward the door again.

"I think it will be best if the lady sees to herself until she has the time to choose a permanent personal maid," he told the girl, using his most soothing voice as he gently hurried her out of harm's way. "You go back to whatever your regular duties are, and if someone tries to send you here again, you refer them to me."

The girl opened her mouth, probably to argue the point if my past association with her meant anything, but Traixe had no intentions of having her blood on his hands. He put her out the door and closed it in her face, and the two fighters I'd seen out there before the door closed were left to keep her from coming back in.

"You don't waste any time," I observed, referring to the fighters. "If I had to guess, I'd say you brought those two with you. And what's this about a feasting tonight?"

"I brought more than two with me, and the feasting is to welcome you home," he said, going for two fresh cups from the other tray before returning to the newly-brought pitcher. "If you're hungry now, you'd be wise to do justice to what's on this tray. The feasting won't start until well after dark, to give your father and the others a chance to freshen up after the hunt."

"Why do I get the feeling you're not saying about three times more than you're saying?" I demanded, still annoyed at the way things were going. "Why can't you give me even a small hint about all these things I'll be discussing with my father?"

"If I give you a hint, then you'll be discussing those things with me instead of your father, and that's not the way he wants it," Traixe replied with a grin, turning to me with two cups filled with the brew I'd been able to smell since it came through the door. "Since you're all grown up and a full Blade I'll give you one of these, but if you don't make it to the feasting because of it, it's iced sweet fruit for you from now on."

"If I had to stay with iced sweet fruit, I'd end up saving the enemy the trouble of designing an "accident."

"I said as I took the cup being held out to me, my comment widening Traixe's grin to chuckling. "And if you're going to be stubborn about it, I just may empty that tray myself. I skipped breakfast this morning through being in a hurry to get here, and was too lost in the city to make a stop at noon."

"How did your escort manage to get lost in the city?"

Traixe asked, watching with continuing amusement while I swallowed at the brew then moved forward to take a chunk of deep-fried boar meat. "The City Guard usually leads escort groups through, just to be rid of the extra traffic faster."

"Groups may be led, but lone Blades don't get a service like that," I said around a mouthful, impressed with how tender my father's cook had gotten the boar meat. "I would have been better off if they'd distrusted me enough to keep an eye on me, then I wouldn't have had to..."

"You just hold it right there!" he interrupted in the hardest voice yet, his fingers closing tight around my arm. "What do you mean, "lone Blades"? What happened to the escort you left Fyerlin with?"

"I didn't leave Fyerlin with anyone but that courier Timper," I answered, wondering why he was back to that black scowling he was so famous for. "The more people you have in your party the slower you move, and I was even tempted more than once to leave Timper behind. I would have done it, too, if he wasn't so helpless on the trail. Do you believe he didn't even know how to set up a night camp?"

"There are a lot of things I don't believe," he said in a mutter, his hand gone from my arm so that he could rub at his eyes again before favoring me with another lowering glare. "We won't mention the fact that

your father sent along enough gold to hire three escorts, just to be sure you got the best protection available. We won't even mention the fact that you were so dim you actually rode through the city alone when you must have at least guessed how dangerous that was. What we will mention, however, is that you alone took to the trail with a man alone, and the two of you spent all that time together alone." Have you any idea what that does to your reputation? Who's going to believe nothing happened between you?"

"Anyone who's spent more than five minutes in Timper's company," I retorted, my ears ringing from the way he'd been shouting. "If I even glanced in his direction after dark, he was immediately ready to jump up and run for the King's Fighters screaming rape. It may have been a long ride, Traixe, but no ride would be long enough to make me that desperate. And why are you yelling at me like that? What can a trip, even one like that, do to a Blade's reputation? If there wasn't fighting involved, and there wasn't, who would even care?"

"Evon help us all," he responded in a hoarse voice, his eyes suddenly so wide he looked as though he were about to fall over. "How could I have overlooked that or forgotten about it? If you're a Blade, then you must have - more than once -" He turned away from me to empty his cup in a single gulp, then immediately reached for the pitcher again while muttering, "The Duke's strong, he'll be able to take this in stride, but the other - he'll be expecting what all men expect. Will he be wise enough to ignore it for the sake of the bargain?"

"Traixe, would you like to tell me what you're talking to yourself about?" I asked as sweetly as I could. "Then all three of us will know enough about the conversation to contribute to it."

"All three of us?" he echoed, now looking as though he were coming out of a dream-a confusing one. "Sofaltis, there are only two of us in the room. Maybe that brew is too strong for you after all."

"What's getting too strong is the rank smell of suspicion," I snapped, suddenly back to the annoyance I'd thought I'd left behind. "Why are you acting like a Blade in a night house whose groin guard won't come off? And what was that you were muttering a minute ago about a bargain? What sort of a bargain, and who is it with?"

"It's time for me to be getting back to my duties," he said, emptying his cup again more slowly before placing it carefully on the tray, his eyes deliberately avoiding mine. "There will always be four fighters stationed outside your door, and if you go anywhere at all, they're to go with you. It's good having you home where you belong, girl, and you needn't worry that you'll have to leave again."

He finally turned to face me but only to bow, and then he was striding toward the door, his intentions obvious. I got a second glance of the fighters outside and then I was alone, to stew in some very unsavory juices. Something was going on, but I wasn't to find out about it until my father got back. I muttered a few suggestions as to what they could all do with their secrets, Traixe in particular, and turned back to get on with my interrupted meal.

Duke Rilfe of the House of Kienne of the Duchy of Gensea had barely reached his apartment when a knock came at the door. He turned with the cup of mulled wine in his hand to see Lord Traixe entering, an arrival which caused the servants in the room to bow and take their departure through another door. They would have done that at the appearance of any of the Duke's advisors, but just at that moment the Duke was particularly pleased with the custom.

"Traixe, she's here!" he was able to say almost at once, grinning as the other man moved toward him. They would both keep their voices down, but there was no reason to do the same with relief. "Fonid told me as soon as I came through the door, so our guests would know about the feasting. I've had word that Trame's son should also be here soon, so this madness might work out after all. Her safety was my

greatest worry, but now that she's here I may be able to sleep again."

"Yes, she's certainly here," his old friend agreed, something of a wry expression underlying his sobriety. "I have fighters stationed outside her door, of course, and she and I had a little talk."

"What's wrong?" the Duke asked at once, his pleasure turned to concern, his free hand reaching to the other's arm. "Is she ill or harmed in some way? They haven't gotten to her, have they?"

"No, no, nothing like that, Your Grace," Traixe said even more quickly, his own hand gripping the Duke's arm. "She's not only in full health, she's also furious at what was done to her brother. They haven't a prayer of shifting her allegiance to their cause."

"Furious, eh?" the Duke said with a chuckle, able to relax again at the assurance. Traixe never lied to him, not even to spare him hurt, which was one of the reasons he valued the man so highly as an advisor - and as a friend. "She sounds like a chip off the family rock, more than she seemed to be five years ago. She's well, you say, and for the most part unchanged?"

"I suppose it might be accurate to say she's unchanged," Traixe murmured, his expression one of a man choosing his words carefully. "Possibly my lord Duke would be best advised to cast his mind back not to her visit of five years ago, but to the time she was first sent north."

"Now I'm worried, Traixe," the Duke said with narrowed eyes, sipping at his wine without moving his gaze from the other man. "Not only are you giving me my title in private, you're raising your skirts to come at what you want to say on tiptoe. You can't mean she's back to being the hellion she was when she left?"

"Maybe we'd better sit down," Traixe said with compassion in his eyes, causing the Duke to groan inwardly. Nothing was really wrong with the girl, or Traixe would have said so straight out. Ah that concern for his comfort had to mean awkwardness or embarrassment, not as easily accepted or handled as trouble. It had been a long time since Traixe had last acted that way-come to think of it, the time before Sofaltis had been sent north...

"Out with it, old friend," the Duke said with a sigh, deciding he'd soon know whether he should have taken the advice to sit. "If I'm strong enough to face my enemies on my feet, I should be strong enough to face my daughter in the same way. Now that I'm braced, tell me what she's done."

"The sitting down would have been for my benefit," Traixe came back, rubbing at his chin with a finger. "I can tell you that she's prettier than she was five years ago, and also a little taller. She seems to take after you in a lot of ways, my friend, and I couldn't help but let her know how proud I was of her."

Traixe paused, as though waiting for the Duke to pick up the new topic thread he'd dangled, but the Duke knew him too well to follow so appealing a lead. He stood silently, simply staring at him, which gave Traixe no choice at all.

"It seems the Countess Illi is a believer in training whatever true talent a child has," he said with a sigh of resignation. "Sofaltis has spent the last decade having her talent trained, and is now a Fistmate Blade of the best Sword Company in the north."

The Duke continued to stand unspeaking, no sign of expression on his face, he was sure, but only because he felt incapable of deciding on an attitude that would produce an expression. He'd thought he was braced to hear just about anything, never having realized how vast a territory lay beyond the boundaries of "just about."

"My daughter is a Blade?" he heard himself saying, as though from very far away.

"My sons were no more than adequate with a sword, but their sister made Blade status? You're joking, aren't you, Traixe?"

"In one way I wish I were," Traixe answered gently, finding the question very familiar. "In another way, however, I couldn't be more pleased. No matter how trustworthy or capable a bodyguard is, it sometimes comes down to the one being guarded ending up on his own. If that happens with Sofaltis, I pity her attackers. They'll find they would have been better off going against her bodyguard."

"Why, you're absolutely right," Duke Rilfe said with dawning awareness, his mind no longer frozen in shock. "If they do manage to reach through to her, she'll be a good deal less of a victim that way. Of course, you're right; it's just that it was so unexpected. Did you say she's been accepted into a Fist?"

"And in the Silver Gleaming," Traixe agreed, privately relieved to see the Duke taking it so well - so far. "I know that Company by reputation, and they don't medallion anyone unless they're really good. And it seems she also saved you some expense. She came south from Fyerlin without escort, dragging young Timper kicking and screaming all the way."

"The damned fool let her travel without escort?" Duke Rilfe growled, nearly choking on the wine he'd been swallowing. "If he finds the nerve to show up here again, I want him brought to me! What did he think all that gold was for? To keep him from being blown out of his saddle by the wind?"

"I wouldn't be too hard on the boy," Traixe said, this time certainly trying to rub a grin away with his finger. "I said Sofaltis takes after you, and I didn't mean only with a sword. If we thought her headstrong as a child, I'm afraid we'll soon be learning the true meaning of the word. Timper hadn't the faintest chance against her."

"That's no excuse for the stupidity of risking her," the Duke grumbled, but part of him was clearly pleased with what he'd heard. "Headstrong she may be, even more so than her mother, Evon guard her sleep, but that's the sort of woman a family needs to keep, it strong and ahead of the pack. The sons she gives Trame's boy will do him as proud as he and his brothers have done their own father, sons who will also be my grandsons and grandheirs. Her husband will find her a greater prize than simply a means to heirhood."

"Assuming he shows himself to be a man of reason," Traixe added, his tone and manner now circumspect. "She tells me she had her medallion even before her last visit, which means she's been a Blade for some years now. Blades are many things both good and bad, but one thing none are, and that goes for both male and female. Few fighters of any sort will strive to preserve what may be lost along with life in the very next battle."

"The hellion has thrown away her virginity?" the Duke demanded in such a roar that Traixe winced over how many of the servants might have heard the words despite not having been deliberately listening. "She would dare do such a thing without marriage vows wrapped firmly about her? Does she think herself lowborn, and of common blood?"

"She thinks herself and is a Blade," Traixe replied in lower tones, watching the Duke stride to his unlit hearth and then return. "She couldn't have known she'd be needed to keep her bloodline alive, otherwise she would certainly not have done as she did. Do you doubt that? You know her as well as any father may know his daughter; do you doubt her loyalty to you?"

"No, her loyalty isn't in question and never can be," Duke Rilfe grudged after a moment, still unhappy but forced, as always, to be fair. "She may turn this household inside out with her pranks and high spirit, but

she would never betray it. Is it too late to give you permission to spank her lame?"

The Duke's anger had turned to sour dissatisfaction, and Traixe grinned to know they were now over the worst of it.

"Too late by a decade or more," he said, also knowing his old friend would forgive his amusement. "Not to mention that blade now hanging at her side. If her husband-to-be is wise enough to become her husband in fact, he'll have to find a way around it if he decides it's not too late after all."

"The man's a King's Fighter, not a laced and beribboned sham-noble with perfumed kerchief," the Duke said in a fittingly low tone, gesturing his friend with him to the chairs, he'd earlier refused - "He won't let a thing like that stand in his way, not when he stops to think about it. And consider how much better his wedding night will be, to find a dry-eyed and eager bride instead of one soaking the linen with her tears. He'll still be a stranger to her, but not a feared one."

"Laced and beribboned," Traixe echoed, the expression frozen on his face, his body suddenly motionless in the midst of seating itself. Duke Rilfe, already in his chair, stared at his friend without understanding, which Traixe seemed to notice after a moment. He completed the movement of sitting, rather heavily, the Duke thought, then shook his head in annoyance.

"You hadn't planned on telling her what he's really like, but now you can't afford not to," the Duke's advisor said, automatically shifting his sword into the carved slot of the chair. "She's not the shy and quiet little thing we've been picturing, remember. If he minces in the way he's supposed to without her knowing what's happening, she'll take one look at him and reach for her sword."

"I hadn't thought of that," the Duke admitted, rubbing distractedly at his face as his mind worked. "No one but you and I were supposed to know, but it wouldn't do to have her attack my new heir even before the naming. We'll have to - Ah, Evon take it and broil it! We can't tell her, Traixe!"

"But why not?" the other man asked, his confusion obvious. "If we don't there'll be hell to pay; that I'll wager gold on. Once you speak to her you'll see."

"See that she'll then have to play a part more demanding than ours?" the Duke interrupted, just as upset as his advisor. "The Servants of Grail must be hoodwinked; if not, it's Sofaltis whose life may well pay for the failure. Everyone in the house must know her status as a Blade by now. What will happen if she greets the appearance of young Kylin without a murmur? That would be like shouting the truth to everyone in hearing, and if she tries to pretend disapproval, how convincing will she be? Do we dare take the chance that she'll be convincing enough?"

"No more than we dare take the chance that she'll refuse to be convincing at all," Traixe answered, sour frustration having wrapped him around. "It won't take her long to see that hers is the life which is most at risk, and she's already told me she wants to lure Rymar's murderers into coming after her. She may well turn out to be the embodiment of sweet reason, but after speaking with her this afternoon -"

"You strongly doubt it," the Duke finished for him, accepting the opinion with a nod of understanding as he sat back in the deep chair. "For her sake most of all, then, the thing goes ahead as planned. You and I will be shocked at Kylin's lack of manliness, but there will be nothing we can do. The wedding will need to proceed as planned."

"What we can or can't do isn't what's gnawing at me," Traixe said, still sourly unhappy and wishing the Duke's servants had stayed in the room long enough to warm him some wine. "I've already agreed the girl mustn't be told, but I'd still like to know what will happen when she catches first sight of the groom-to-be. I don't envy your future heir, my lord."

"Traixe, you can't let yourself worry about every little detail," the Duke soothed him, sipping now at the excellent wine in his cup, his gesture one of dismissal. "I'll speak to Sofaltis before the feasting tonight, and give her formal notice of the planned wedding. After that she'll need to accept the man even if he slithers in on his belly and hisses at her. She's my daughter, after all, and a daughter is still required to obey her father."

A daughter, yes, Traixe couldn't help thinking, but a Blade? The big fighter settled back in his chair, unaware of the fact that his thinking had already changed to brooding. He had a feeling deep in his bones that had nothing to do with advancing age, although he would have been happier with stiffening up as its cause. The feeling had always warned him of unpleasant things to come, but this time the Duke had told him not to worry. If he worried anyway, could that be considered insubordination and disobedience? Traixe sighed, glad that at least he'd had the foresight to speak a few words of warning to his fighters, about bracing against a possible storm. He had also told them what to expect if any of them should put a hand to the girl, even at her express invitation. As if there weren't enough problems to worry about...

"What do you mean, she resigned?" Rullin thundered, the look in his eyes causing the Company clerk, a man of proven courage and ability, to wish he was elsewhere. The Fist leader leaned his knuckles on the clerk's desk, which afforded an unimpeded view of the flames of rage flaring from the Blade. Behind him three of the others of his Fist hovered menacingly, as though it were the clerk's fault that the girl was gone.

"Just what I said," the clerk repeated evenly, knowing better than to try backing off in a situation like that. "She came in here last night, asked to see her book, then wrote something in it. After she left I looked to see what, and found the resignation. That's about as official as it gets."

"Rull, what are we going to do?" one of his men asked, in his own way more agitated than the Fist leader. "Her gear is gone, her horse is gone-and now this!"

"It's all my fault," the big Blade answered, straightening away from the desk but not turning to the others. "If I'd stopped her last night - but it's too late for that now. All I can do is go after her."

"Leaving us two Blades short?" another of the three asked, more quietly than the first. "We'd need to break up the Fist until you got back."

"Which means we'd be better off going with you," the third put in, also calmly. "To help you rehearse what you're going to say to her, if nothing else. She belongs to us, too, you know."

Rullin nodded to show that he did know, but what he didn't show was the relief he felt. He would have gone with or without the Fist, but with them along he would have the chance to relax and examine the very disturbing thoughts he'd been experiencing since the night before. He'd talk to Soft and Gentle when they caught up to her, all right, but what he would say might not be what the others were expecting.

## **Chapter Four**

I made use of my bed chamber to get a couple of hours' sleep, and when I woke again I went out to the sitting room to find that someone had brought my saddlebags and gear. I took it all back into the bed chamber, stripped off the well-worn leathers I had on and washed, then got into my dress leathers with the silver trim. If nothing else I expected to be impressive at the feasting, enough so that the barons and counts guesting with my father would know who they were dealing with. He didn't need their approval before naming an heir, but their opposition could get to be annoying. I was combing my hair and trying to decide whether or not to band it when a knock came at my door, and when I went to open it found a small serving girl standing there holding a gown in both arms.

"The lord Traixe sends his compliments, my lady," she said with a curtsy, smiling from a round and plainly pretty face. "He said to say he knows you traveled without much in the way of baggage, and would therefore like to offer you this gown for the feasting tonight. It was made for one of his daughters, but somehow came out much too long, and then the seamstress died and his daughter was afraid to wear it even if it were shortened, and - He said you wouldn't mind."

The gown she held was a gleaming silver with jet black panels alternating, as beautiful a creation as any to be found in the feasting halls of the north. At another time I wouldn't have minded wearing it in the least - nothing but leather can get very tiresome after a while - but that was the wrong occasion for telling everyone how womanly I was. First they had to meet the Blade, and then they would have less difficulty getting along with the woman.

"Please convey my thanks to Lord Traixe, and say that I would feel honored if I might borrow the gown at another time," I told the girl, watching the smile fade from her face. "I've already dressed for tonight's feasting, and I'm really not in the mood to change again."

"Oh, but my lady, you can't go like that!" the girl exclaimed, close to being horrified, her brown eyes wide. "The other ladies will all be gowned, and the Duke will be..."

"Very glad for the difference," I finished firmly, grateful for the sleep I'd had. If the girl's reaction was any indication of what I was about to face-which it probably was - I was sure to need all the self-control I could muster. My father was certain to be annoyed if I ended up inviting one of his guests to join me and my sword outside.

The girl looked to be ready to continue the discussion, so I gave her a friendly smile and closed the door in her face, then went back to combing my hair. Having spent half my life in the north meant I had learned to look at things in the northern way, but that didn't mean I'd totally forgotten how those of the south viewed them. Members of the lesser nobility tended to be very rigid in their beliefs and habits, the women just as much as the men, which meant my father and I might have something of a struggle ahead of us before I was accepted. If I stood up to them stubbornly enough they would have to accept me or challenge me, so I had to make sure they were more than reluctant to give the challenge. The game-playing would have to be balanced as carefully as a battle attack, but I was determined to see it work out.

The one lamp I'd lit in my bedchamber had been straining at the dimness for a while, but I didn't notice it until I went back out to the sitting room. All the lamps were lit in there, and a fire laid in the hearth as well, and the serving girl who had come to my bedchamber door earlier was moving around straightening things that didn't need to be straightened. There was no sign of the gown she'd had, but when she turned her smile was back in place.

"My lady, there's been word from your father the Duke," she said, coming across the carpeting toward me. "When you've finished dressing he asks that you join him for a few moments before the feasting, and has sent someone to bring you to him. He's a messenger and he's waiting outside with the fighters, and - Are you really going to wear that sword?" Her eyes had gone wide and rounded again and she'd stopped about five feet away, as though debating whether it would be safe to come any closer. Or maybe it was a matter of taste that put her off, and she didn't think a black swordbelt went well with black and silver leathers.

"I hadn't realized the custom had changed," I told the girl, deciding it might be best to find amusement in everything that was said to me for as long as I could. "Aren't members of the nobility still expected to wear their usual weapons to a feasting? In case they need to be called on to defend the castle in the event of an attack?"

"But of course that's still the custom," the girl answered, blinking at me in confusion. "There hasn't been an attack for years and years, but - Don't you know that's only supposed to apply to the men?"

"It is?" I asked, trying to make my eyes go as wide as hers. "Well, what do you know? Maybe in that case I'd be best off first asking my father. The messenger he sent is outside, you say?"

Her nod was very relieved and satisfied, saying she was glad she'd told me something I hadn't known. She was a good deal better than the servant I'd had during my last visit, but I intended speaking to Traixe as soon as I saw him. If he couldn't find one who was difficult to shock, I'd do without a girl altogether.

The hall outside had five men instead of four, and the older man who wasn't a fighter did a double-take when I left my apartment. He had so obviously been expecting someone in a gown that it really was funny, and then he made it better than the serving girl had.

"By alt the gods, my lady, you're supposed to be dressed," he blurted, his round and pudgy face snowing how appalled he was. The rest of him was quite a bit like his face, and he looked up at me from the midst of his own finery.

"Evon help me, do you mean I've come out naked again?" I demanded in turn, quickly crossing my arms in front of me. "I'm so terribly embarrassed, and oh! What you must think of me!"

The man suddenly didn't seem to know what to think about anything, and the chuckling coming from the four fighters of my bodyguard only helped to turn his face ruddier than it had been. When he settled on affronted dignity he drew himself up, and then seemed doubly upset that he still didn't match my height.

"That was quite amusing, my lady," he allowed, etching a smile on his face to show that he really did have a sense of humor. "Sir Fonid has spoken of the sharpness of your wit, and as always he's quite correct. Am I to take it that you mean to attend the feasting just as you are?"

"You may take it, keep it, or give it away if you like," I answered with a pleasant, friendly smile, disappointed that he hadn't managed to put a third "quite" into the speech. "You're here to show me to my father?"

"Of course, Lady Sofaltis," he said in a stiff and brittle way, bowing to cover his expression. He had briefly forgotten the only reason he was there, and resented the fact that I'd reminded him of it. "If you will follow me, please."

He led off down the hall and turned right, going toward my father's wing of the castle, and just the way I followed him my bodyguards followed me - or, at least, three of them did. The fourth moved out ahead to walk just behind the round, unjolly messenger, an eyes-ahead who would probably be the first to fall if there happened to be an attack. None of us really expected there would be an attack, not right there in the castle, but that only goes to show how complacency can ruin even professionals who should know better.

If the two doors on either side of the hall hadn't been opened just at the same time, we would have had no warning at all. The hall was broad in that wing, the carpeting old but still thick, most of the rooms left unused unless there was a royal visit with an entourage to put up. The wall lamps had been lit and left that way, obviously to keep us from becoming suspicious, but the fighters of my bodyguard must have been just as used to passing doors there that stayed closed as I was. The sound of the doors being thrown open just as we passed them made us all reach for our hilts, and then the fight was on.

How do you describe a fight between five defenders and four times their number or more in awkwardly swinging but grimly determined attackers? My first thought was to wonder where the hell they all could

have come from, but that was a question to be answered at another time. The men all wore homespun with small swatches of leather pinned to them, and the ones who swarmed in front of me didn't stand very long. I had the fleeting impression that they weren't terribly eager to face me, for which I couldn't blame them, but the wide hall wasn't so wide that they had much of a choice. We fought almost in each other's laps, my bodyguard swallowed up fast in the raging torrent of bodies, each of them probably as alone and surrounded as I was.

I didn't realize how wordlessly quiet the fight was until I heard a shout and the pounding of boots on carpeting above the clatter of steel, obviously a sizable group coming to join the elbow-lo-elbow melee. I had managed to put my back to a wall hanging before anyone had found the opportunity to swing at me from behind, and was spending most of my time keeping the men in homespun from charging in on me. One or two of them had tried throwing their lives away to a purpose by attempting to impale themselves on my sword - which might have kept my blade entangled long enough for the others to reach me - but I wasn't fighting my first or second battle. After I'd cut down the first of them to try the ploy the others had given up on it, but when they heard the approach of a relieving force they grew even more frantic than they had been.

I honestly don't know how long I would have stood against them then if they'd been even slightly more skilled with the swords they held. I'd whittled them down to half a dozen or less, but still couldn't attack without exposing my back to their friends. Defensive fighting usually does very little more than give your opponent a chance to find an opening through that defense, but you don't attack in a situation like that - especially without mail - unless it's to a purpose or your life depends on it. They all began beating at me with their weapons, as though they thought they were holding sticks instead, and only the heavy sweep of my blade kept them from rushing forward as they struck. Then the newcomers reached us with shouts of outrage, and the attackers, almost as one, turned and threw themselves at them.

Needless to say, it was only a matter of seconds before was no one left standing who didn't have my father's colors on the left side of his tunic. The newcomers had been more of Traixe's fighters, and their leader stormed up just a - little behind them from what was probably a different direction, not realizing that his shouted orders were coming too late. Traixe was trying to tell his men to keep at least a couple of the attackers alive for questioning, something they should have thought of on their own and might have if they hadn't been so outraged. All of the attackers had escaped the need to worry about being asked anything awkward, and when Traixe saw that the expression on his face made some of his men look as though they were envying those who littered the floor.

"... damn" fool byblows who use mush for brains!" Traixe was muttering as he came up to me, furious but still inspecting me closely. "Are you hurt in any way at all, Sofaltis? If you aren't it can only be because Evon stood as your shield and guided your blade-as well as having been your teacher.""

He was eyeing the number of bodies around me at that point, and even as I wiped at the sweat on my forehead with the back of my left hand, I had to agree the number was impressive. Now that I could look around, it seemed that most of the attackers had been in my vicinity.

"None of them were good enough for Evon to have needed to bother," I said, tossing my head to get the damp hair out of my eyes, my bloody sword held carefully away from what were supposed to be my dress leathers. "What about the fighters who were with me?"

"Three of them are fine; no more than a scratch here and there," he answered, and then the rage increased in his eyes although his voice changed not at all. "I passed the fourth on my way over here, lying on the carpeting with his throat slit-and his head bashed in from behind. The only blood near him was his own."

His glance had gone to my left, the direction we'd been walking in, which meant the lone fighter out ahead of us had been the one to die. I remembered thinking that was usually the way of it - but not under those particular circumstances.

"Traixe, they couldn't have gotten behind him!" I protested, definitely feeling confused. "They didn't come out of the rooms until the other three and I had passed. And what happened to that messenger? Did they cut him down, or is he the reason reinforcements got here so fast?"

"My other fighters got here so fast because some of them can actually think," he said with something of a headshake. "They were called out when two bodies were found in a back passage behind the kitchens, a passage that hadn't been used for years. The two kitchen workers weren't the sort to disappear without reason, so the kitchen master sent the others around searching, and the bodies were found more by accident than design. When the unit leader of my fighters saw them, his first thought was that they'd stumbled into something they shouldn't have seen and had been killed for it. That thought led him into wondering what the something could be, and then it came to him that the only thing different about the house right now was that you had arrived. He sent his unit off without worrying about looking foolish if he were wrong, then came pelting over to my apartment. We both ran all the way, but we were still too late."

"Not as far as I was concerned," I said, giving him my own headshake. "But that still doesn't answer all of my question. What about the messenger?"

"He's gone," Traixe growled, the sound of betrayal discovered in the two short words. "He has to have been the one who hit my fighter from behind, no one else would have had the opportunity and position. Also, someone had to have arranged to get that pack into the castle, and out again if they'd pulled off whatever they were trying. Do you have any idea how many years he's been in service with the Duke? How deep does this Evon - forsaken thing go?"

"Deep enough, obviously, to have reached into the household," I said, as angry at that as Traixe was. "The one bright point is that you now have someone to question when you catch up to him. He couldn't have made it out of the castle yet, could he?"

"Have you been away too long to remember how many nooks and crevasses this castle has to hide in?" Traixe asked, justifiably sour. "I get the feeling we'll be searching for months without finding anything, but that doesn't mean we won't bother. Let me have a couple of words with my men."

He turned away to the fighters who were searching bodies in an effort to see if they could learn anything, which gave me the chance to look around for something to wipe my blade on. After a moment I had to settle for the homespun of one of my former attackers, and was just straightening up with my sword as clean as it was likely to get until I was back in my apartment, when my father arrived.

"By Evon, this is not to be tolerated!" came the sudden roar, causing everyone to look up or turn around. "In my very house, damn them! If this is the sort of war they want, this is what they'll get! Traixe! I'll have you and your captains just after first light tomorrow! Right now my only concern is for Sofaltis."

"She's unhurt, my lord," Traixe said at once, putting his hand out in my direction. "See, as I said: it was her enemies who came to harm."

My father turned his head to look at me, and relief lightened the burden from his shoulders. He was still as tall and unbent as ever, his brown hair untouched by gray, still the strong man in his prime who had never considered warmth and love indications of weakness. When my aunt Illi had become exasperated with me she would tell me how much like my father I was, and I'd usually annoyed her more by taking that as a compliment.

"I can see, Father, that you took Duke Verid's criticism to heart," I said by way of greeting, sheathing my sword as I walked toward him. "He was the one who claimed your welcoming hospitality wasn't as exciting as his in the east, wasn't he? If I ever meet him again, I can now tell him how wrong he was."

"I can see, Daughter, that you haven't changed after all," he came back, a grin breaking through the disapproval he was trying to show for my flippancy. "I would much rather have seen Verid partaking of this-"exciting welcoming," and then I, too, would have found some amusement in it. Have you gotten to be so excellent a Blade that you're now beyond a proper greeting for your father?"

He held his arms out to me as I laughed, and then I was in them, hugging as hard as I was being hugged. I would never be beyond needing that sort of a greeting, and somehow my father seemed to know it. It had felt good to be home before; now it was wonderful.

"Let's leave this mess for Traixe to see to," my father said after a moment, loosening his hug but still keeping one arm around me. "You and I have some things to discuss before we join our guests in the feasting hall. Come with me."

Just because my father had taken over as my escort and guide didn't mean Traixe was satisfied. We hadn't taken three steps before there were sounds behind us on the carpeting, sounds of following boots. The boots were filled with six of Traixe's fighters, and rather than being annoyed my father seemed grimly contented. I suppose that should have given me a hint of some sort, but as it was I put it down to the scare of a close call and forgot about it.

The door to my father's study stood open, apparently as he'd left it when he'd come running out, but the two House Guards were still at their posts to either side of it even though they looked as if they wished they'd gone along. We left our six shadows outside with the guards and father closed the door on all of them, then he went to a silver tray and began filling two silver cups from a crystal pitcher.

"I've been saving this wine for a long time," he said, replacing the pitcher and turning to me with the cups and a smile. "I must admit I was upset at first to learn that your aunt had let you become a Blade, but now I mean to write her at once and express my profound thanks. If not for that, I might have saved this wine to no purpose at all."

"Really, Father, they weren't anywhere near good enough to worry about," I assured him, taking one of the cups with an answering smile. "If I hadn't been a Blade, they would have gone down by tripping over their own feet."

"Of course they would," he said, his agreement more a refusal to argue than a belief in what I'd said. "I bid you welcome on your return home, Daughter, and ask Evon to continue guarding you for the short while you remain in danger. To alertness till then, and a speedy end to the need for alertness."

He had raised his cup for the formal welcoming toast, with me, of course, doing the same, and then we drank. The wine really was excellent, but I couldn't help wondering about the odd way he'd put the toast.

"Are you trying to say you have a plan to finish off our enemies, Father?" I asked once the cups were down, the sudden inspiration making me eager. "Whatever it is, I hope you know you'll have my blade to add to the showdown. When do we get started with it?"

"Patience, child, patience," he said with a laugh, enjoying what he saw in my face. "One day we'll have those shadow-skulkers on their knees before us, all their crimes about to be paid for. What we're doing now is only a stopgap, but one that will give them a blank wall to raven against, a wall that will have you safely behind it. Then they can plot and plan to their hearts' content, and it won't do them any good."

"I have the feeling I'm missing something," I said slowly, finding it impossible to follow him. "But I also have the feeling I ought to tell you about the plan I came up with after getting your letter. I was going to wait to see if the same thought already occurred to you, but now I think it's better if I mention it first. After what just happened, I don't want you thinking you'll be taking advantage of me or putting me in danger I'm not fully prepared to deal with."

I broke off then to take another swallow of wine, finding it a lot harder talking about my plan than thinking of it had been. My father looked at me with raised brows, just as he always had when I'd been very young and trying to ask for something he would probably consider inappropriate, and that helped to make it worse. To the rest of the world I was a grown woman and a Blade, but I had the definite impression he still saw me as nothing more than his little girl.

"Father, now that Rymar is gone you have no heir," I plunged in, turning from him to look around at the wood and silk-draped walls of his study. There were weapons on those walls, weapons that the Dukes of our family had used each in his own day, and sight of them, I discovered, was also doing more harm than good. "In times like these you need an heir who's skilled with weapons, one who won't be put out of the way as easily as Rymar was, one who will be of your blood and make you proud of that blood. With all my brothers gone or missing, there's only one person left who fits those qualifications. I'm asking you to name me your heir."

I just had to turn back to look at him then, but there was no change in the expression I'd turned away from, unless his brows had gone even higher. He almost seemed frozen in shock, and then he suddenly began chuckling, as though at a particularly good joke.

"Your sense of humor certainly hasn't changed, Sofaltis," he said, raising his cup to sip from it, even his eyes amused. "For a moment there I thought you were serious."

"Father, I am serious," I said, trying very hard not to show the abrupt and intense insult I was feeling. "How can you think I'm not?"

"Girl, no one with any sense could seriously propose something like that," he answered with a snort of lighter amusement, gesturing aside the entire concept. "My Barons and Counts would be up in arms so fast it would take our breath away, and who could blame them? No sane man would make a woman his heir, even if it weren't against the strictest traditions we've always lived by. Women's heads are too easily turned by pretty words and a handsome face, and the fool who named a woman his heir would soon have a common-born stranger in that place. And in this instance, it would only serve to plunge you even more deeply into danger. No, child, under no circumstances will I name you my heir."

"Father, that's unfair!" I protested, hearing the beginnings of anger no matter how hard I fought against it. "I've met enough men to know how I react to them, and I haven't seen one yet who's been able to turn my head. And I'm more than willing to put on a demonstration of Blade skill to keep your Counts and Barons prudently quiet, the sort that will let them know I'm no stranger to war. As far as being plunged more deeply into danger goes, that's utter nonsense. They're already coming after me with what seems like everything they have, so what more could they do?"

"By my calculations, quite a bit," he answered, turning away to seat himself in a deep leather chair before bringing his eyes back to me. "The one named my heir will be targeted for assassination at all costs, and that one won't be you even if you pout and throw a tantrum the way you used to when you were small. Only a man can survive under something like that - and convince them to try their luck elsewhere rather than here - and that's who my heir will be. A man."

"Really," I said, so flatly furious that his eyes narrowed just a little. "A man. Rather than a helpless,

empty-headed female. So which of my brothers have you located?"

"My agents have been able to find neither one of them," he said with a headshake, something of an edge to his voice in reaction to my less-than-docile attitude. "The key to my current problem is my eldest daughter Sofaltis, who will not dig her heels in and demand her own way. She will obey her father as she's duty-bound to do, and everything will continue according to the very careful planning her elders have made. Do you understand me, girl?"

"Father, I haven't understood a thing since we first began talking," I said, finding that the least incendiary answer I could think of. "If you don't believe I'm good enough to be your heir, why did you call me home?"

"If you weren't so set on having everything your own way, you'd scarcely need to ask," he returned, leaning back in complete comfort in his chair. "You're a good number of years beyond the time a girl of your station should properly be settled, but that's worked out for the best. As soon as he gets here, you'll be married to the man I've chosen as my heir."

Pleased anticipation shouldn't have the ability to drop a ceiling on your head, but that's what I felt my father's words had done to me. I stood and stared at him in silence for a moment before quickly draining the cup I held, and only then did it come to me that I had nothing to worry about.

"For a minute there you had me going, Father," I said, snorting my amusement the way he had done. "I'd almost forgotten I'm of age, so I thought you were serious. You can't complain about not having gotten back at me, because you have."

I shook my head as I turned to the wine pitcher, wondering if he'd been as shocked as I had felt. Hearing something like that out of the blue is enough to rattle anyone, but I felt a good deal better. Better, that is, until I turned back with my cup refilled to find him grinning faintly and shaking his head.

"I'm afraid you've spent too long a time in the north, my child," he said, sounding anything but afraid. "Here in the south only men come of age, a tradition which is also supported by King's Law. As my daughter you're bound to obey my wishes, and would be bound so even if you had just begun your true-tenth decade. Your betrothal to Lord Kyjin of the House of Torain, son of Trame, Duke of Arthil, has already been registered at the King's court. Which means you'll be married to him as soon as possible after he arrives here and we've all met him. Now that you've been given formal notice of the arrangements, you may consider yourself bound by Law as well as tradition."

"Bound to marry someone even you haven't met," I said, so furious it was all I could do to keep my hand from my hilt. "Is that why you got me back here without telling me why you wanted me so badly? To trap me with the Law in case I wasn't loyal enough to the family to do things your way after simply being asked? Am I too- female - for anyone to expect rational cooperation from me?"

"No, no, girl, it isn't that at all," he said, finally disturbed enough to put his cup aside and rise again. "Of course I was prepared to ask and expect your cooperation, it's just that your attitude made me feel this was the better approach. And it's best, of course, if you understand you have no choice in the matter."

"Is that so?" I asked, stepping back from the arms he tried to put around me. "You think I have no choice in the matter? Well, it so happens that if you'd asked rather than told me, you would have been right. I would have had no choice but to agree, but you didn't ask so I have a very definite option. Call the King's Fighters and have me arrested."

This time I was the one who turned away to a chair to sit, and when I looked back at him he was simply standing and staring at me. He was wearing a very faint frown, as though he were trying to figure out a

puzzle, and finally he shook his head.

"I don't understand," he protested, his tone showing he was definitely not used to not understanding. "What could King's Fighters possibly have to do with any of this?"

"They're the ones who enforce the King's Law, aren't they?" I asked in turn, sipping at my wine while being very, very reasonable. "Since I'm about to break one of the King's Laws, you'll need them to arrest me. I don't care how many times that betrothal was registered, I'm not marrying anyone. Stuff that in your traditions and broil it."

My father had been a Duke for many years, running every-one and everything to suit what he considered right, but he hadn't gone entirely without various kinds of opposition. He had experience dealing with that opposition in all ways including diplomacy, and that, despite the anger smoldering in his eyes, is what he tried on me next.

"Sofaltis, a refusal like that would do nothing more than bring ridicule down on our family name," he said, working hard to "out-reason" me. "Your agreement to the marriage isn't required, you know. The contracts already have my signature, which leaves nothing but the formality of the ceremony to complete the legalities. Why make a fuss when you really have no choice but to accede to my wishes?"

"Ah, yes, the formality of the ceremony," I drawled, smiling at him over the rim of my cup. "The meaningless formality during which a priest of Evon asks if the bride is truly willing. Since I'm not willing and would not hesitate to say so, I wonder what would become of that unimportant little formality? Would a priest of Evon try pretending he hadn't heard my refusal? Especially with my point to his throat?"

I think it wasn't until right that moment that my father actually understood what sort of female he was dealing with. He seemed to be very used to the sort who trembled and wept and tried desperately to refuse, but ended up obeying anyway. I had never understood that sort of woman, no matter how hard I'd tried; as long as you were willing to accept the consequences of refusal, how could anyone force you away from your chosen stand? With pain? With the threat of death? If forced capitulation isn't the worst of pain, if death isn't preferable to living life to the tune of someone else's flute, then why bother protesting in the first place?

"So that's it," my father said softly, nodding his head as he looked down at me. "I couldn't see it at first, but now I do. You're using not having been "asked" as an excuse. You wouldn't have agreed to a marriage no matter how it was presented to you, no matter how it made the family look. You're not interested in responsibilities, only in rights, and now that you're a Blade you think you can overlook duty entirely. I'm very glad you weren't a son rather than a daughter, Sofaltis. My sons may not have earned Blade status, but I never had difficulty being proud of them."

"Father, you're wrong!" I protested as he turned his back and simply stood there drinking his wine, undoubtedly aware of just how upset he'd made me. "I know the meaning of duty as well as anyone! You're trying to force me into doing things your way, into agreeing to something you have no right..."

"No right?" he interrupted, turning back quickly to look at me with the intensity of anger. "I do beg your pardon, my lady, but those who are lowborn may not have the right. Those who are nobly born have not only the right but also the responsibility. The people of my lands may be unimportant to others, but to me they're very precious and must have the best I'm able to give them. My family and I are bowed to and enabled to live well so that we, in turn, will watch over our people and allow no harm to come to them. Now my people are about to come to harm through my having no competent heir for my place, and you tell me I have no right? Say rather that I have no choice, and would not betray honor even if another choice was possible. I do as I must, child, and so shall you."

"Then what I must do is be sacrificed to your honor?" I demanded, putting my cup aside so that I might stand and face him. "How I feel about marriage isn't the point here. What is the point is that I'm expected to give up every say in my own life, just so that you and your people can all go your merry way. What makes it my duty to do that, the accident of my birth? What makes me less important than you and your precious people? The fact that I'm not a male heir and therefore expendable? It's your honor and your problem, so go ahead and solve it yourself. If you want that Duke's son so badly, go ahead and adopt him and then name him heir. That way you can leave me the hell out of it."

I began to turn away, wanting nothing more than to go back to my apartment, but suddenly my father's hand was on my shoulder, holding me where I was.

"Sofaltis, the Law won't allow that," he said quietly, a trace of compassion in his voice. "As long as I have a daughter of marriageable age, that daughter must be married to whomever I choose as my heir. In that way my own blood can't be disinherited, our family line forced to die out. The Law was meant for your benefit, girl, not to trap you into an unwanted match. Despite what I said, I know you won't refuse to do your duty. I told Traixe your loyalty to our family has never been in question, and you, yourself, will prove me right. And now I think we've been closeted together long enough. We've a feasting and guests awaiting us."

Rather than answering I simply pulled away from his hand, strode to the door and threw it open, then headed back in the direction of my apartment. I was so upset I barely noticed the six fighters who scrambled after me, or the servants who were trying to clean the blood out of the carpeting in the hall where the attack had taken place. All I wanted was solitude, and when I finally reached my bedchamber I slammed and bolted the door, took off my swordbelt, then threw myself face down across my bed.

"Damn him!" I whispered fiercely, my fists pulling at the red silken cover I crushed under me. "Evon take him and broil him to a turn!"

I was so miserably angry I would have torn the silk if I could have, into small, tiny, insignificant pieces. Not the same sort of insignificant as I was, however, because according to my father I was very important as far as insignificant goes. I had a duty to perform, and family obligations to complete, and all that was being asked of me in return was to give up everything I was,

I turned onto my back and stared up at the canopy above my head, its dark gold color even darker in the dimness of lamplight. I'd pretended to myself that my father would welcome the idea of naming me his heir, but even when I'd considered the possibility of his refusal I hadn't pictured him laughing. And what he'd done to me after that - using his ability in ruling people to twist me into agreeing with what he wanted! He'd taken advantage of his own daughter for the sake of people who were almost all strangers to him, people he claimed he had a responsibility toward. Would a peasant father have traded away a daughter just that easily, or was concern like that reserved only for the nobility? My father loved his people more than he did me, and I was supposed to rejoice and join him in his sacrifice?

I put an arm over my eyes to block out vision of the world, but inner pictures refused to stop forming. I probably would have agreed to the marriage if I'd been asked, but I hadn't been asked, no more than any other female was asked. Did anyone care that I didn't want to be married? That the very thought of being trapped like that for the rest of my life made me more afraid than I'd been just before my first battle? My mother had been glowingly happy in her marriage, but only because being married had brought her more freedom than she'd had in her father's house. What marriage would bring to me was the exact opposite, a slavery most fathers seemed endlessly eager to consign their daughters to.

Well, I was one daughter who intended fighting those chains! I dropped my arm and sat up on the bed, blinking back the multi-colored circles in my vision. I hadn't pledged myself to my father's demands, and

no matter how tightly he thought he had me caught up, I wasn't about to. If he forced me to it I would refuse the vows, breaking both Law and tradition where everyone could see it. Sooner than have that happen he'd let me go, to return to the life I never should have left. As a Blade I'd been happy, and no one had tried forcing me into anything I wanted no part of. That's the life I'd go back to, and then I'd be happy again.

I lay back on my pillows, calmed by the decision I'd made, and tried to imagine what Rull and the others were doing right then...

Traixe knocked and entered the study, but Duke Rilfe didn't look up immediately. The lord of the castle was seated in a chair staring into the middle of nothingness, and a full minute went by before he sighed deeply and stirred.

"She isn't in the feasting hall, and she isn't here," Traixe observed, an odd reluctance to his words. "Does that mean it went badly?"

"Badiy would be too understated a word," the Duke returned, looking up wearily. "She offered to be my heir, Traixe, and I had to laugh at her."

"Had to, my lord?" the other man ventured, suddenly less sure of himself. "The Law's rather plain on the point, isn't it? Why would..."

"Hang the Law!" Duke Rilfe snapped, clearly in no mood to be disagreed with or questioned. "Has a Duchess never been widowed, and then found to be a more competent ruler than her lord was? The Law might have been fought, and win or lose I would have been honored to make the attempt for a daughter like no other man has ever had - but not when the effort would have meant the signing of her death warrant. I had to hurt her, Traixe, and manipulate her, but once the marriage is consummated and we can drop the pretense, she'll know I did it all for her sake. Her life is more precious to me than my own, and this is the only way I can be sure of preserving it."

"She agreed to the marriage, then?" the big Fighter asked, his voice gentle out of concern for his lord. "She made no attempt to refuse to obey you?"

"She invited me to call in King's Fighters to place her under arrest for breaking the Law," the Duke returned with a snort, not entirely in amusement. "She is still a hellion, and young Kylin will have his hands full with her, but she's also filled with that sense of duty all my children have been blessed with. She may fight and scream and rage and threaten, but she'll never go so far as to put her point to a priest of Evon's throat in refusal."

"If that's so, I'll be sure to thank Evon," Traixe answered, unable to keep his tone from going dry. "Since I'm the priest of Evon who will be uniting them, I find the assurance of more than passing interest."

"Traixe, you must stop worrying," the Duke said with a grin as he stood, the dark mood having passed from him. "You and I both know she'll be far happier once she's wed, just like any other woman, even above the safety it will bring to her. Right now I need your help in apologizing to my guests for the absence of the object of the feasting. Shall we say she's weary from her long journey, or shall we find another, more likely, excuse?"

"I think, my lord, we would do best using a padding of the truth they all certainly know by now," Traixe answered, returned to sobriety. "Your enemies were so desperate to reach the girl they actually attacked her here in the castle, and although she had no difficulty in defending herself, you've insisted she keep to her apartments until a thorough search might be made for signs of any further skullduggery. Your no refusal to allow her to expose herself to another attempt would be perfectly understandable."

"Yes, you're right as usual, Traixe," the Duke agreed with a nod, rising from the chair. "And if it should happen that one of them had a hand in this, it may well cause the son of a night house crawler to squirm and worry about what the investigation will turn up. Watch them closely during the feasting, my friend, and we may learn a thing or two."

"I mean to be more watchful than ever, my lord, till the girl is past all danger," the other man agreed, beginning to lead the way from the room. "May Evon grant that the wait for the young lord be as short as possible."

"May Evon indeed grant that," the Duke agreed in turn, and then set his thoughts to the matter of dealing with his guests.

## Chapter Five

Lord Kylin of Arthil, son of Duke Trame of Arthil, also known as Kylin Difres, King's Fighter, sat his horse as it moved along the road, wondering if his nerve would hold. Just then they circled the city of Gensea on their way to the Castle of Duke Rilfe, and the nearer they got the more Kylin wished he could simply turn around and ride away.

"Only a coward runs, but what's really wrong with being a coward?" he muttered, keeping his eyes on the ever-shortening road. "Cowards live long, happy lives, I'm told, and never find themselves in danger of dying of mortification."

"Mortification don't hurt more'n a short while. Lord," Strangis said from behind and to his left, the chuckling clear in his voice. "Ain't many who die from it, neither, 'cept maybe a King's Fighter'r two."

"An" mebbe a Duke's son'r three," Frask added from the same position to Kylin's right, also enjoying himself immensely. "You know you ain't gonna run, Lord, so why you been sayin' it for th' last half day?"

"It's possible I made a mistake leaving Jestrion back at that inn," Kylin said, still in a mutter, still not looking at the two fighters who rode somewhat behind him leading the pack horses. "For some reason I feel naked without him, and maybe even worse than naked."

"You was right leavin' 'im at the inn, Lord," Strangis assured him, now clearly working on getting rid of his amusement. "You got

'im down so good it's like seein' two of 'im, an' that could set folks to wonderin'. Them like Jestrion ain't many, an' they don't take't'each other's company."

"They don't like the competition," Kylin muttered, then fell to brooding. Jestrion's sort was rare and unexplained, but everyone seemed to know at least one like him: too delicately horrified to enmesh themselves in anything that involved sweat or strength or war skills, more flamboyant than any female ever to have lived, ridiculously graceful and overly talkative - and almost completely uninterested in the pastimes indulged in by most human beings. It wasn't that Jestrion and the others liked something better than women; they tended to dislike everything with an equal intensity. Women were too flighty and men too sweaty, and their own kind appealed to them even less. It was Evon's way of making sure the mistake was self-correcting, Kylin thought, but that didn't explain why the mistake had to be made in the first place.

A mistake which he now had to mimic.

Kylin sighed deeply, trying to keep firmly in mind the fact that he was protecting the life of the girl who would soon be his wife. She would probably faint when she first laid eyes on him, and not only because

of the flouncing he would do. His father had known how difficult - if not impossible - it would be to disguise his size, so he had taken the road leading in the opposite direction. Kylin's clothing emphasized his build, but with so many flairs and folds and drapes that he seemed fat rather than large. Fat and soft and flouncing, covered in yellow and orange and pink and pale green, with red boots and - Evon help us - a red swordbelt and new-seeming sword. The sword, with hilt silvered and rewrapped in new red leather, was really his own in disguise, but it looked so out-of-place on him that no one would believe it was anything more than decoration.

"And I've got to remember not to swear by Evon," he muttered again, this time to himself. Jestrion rarely swore, and then only by all the gods: It would be left to those around Kylin to swear by Evon, and then the Fighter brightened with a thought he hadn't had before: if any of Duke Rilfe's people got upset enough to try attacking him, why, he'd just have to defend himself, now wouldn't he? After that he could protect the girl personally until they went through the ceremony - betrothal allowed him that and more, if he wanted it - and everything would work out just the way it was supposed to. Why his father and Duke Rilfe hadn't thought of that he didn't know, but since he'd already agreed to do it their way he'd have to see if he could push matters over into more pleasant territory. Simply acting like Jestrion ought to be enough, but just in case...

By the time the road Kylin and his "escort" rode joined another coming out of the city and began to wind uphill, the disguised King's Fighter was struggling not to chuckle. Using his pose to shorten the length of time he needed to keep up that pose appealed to his sense of humor, and if just a few minutes earlier he'd been reluctant to reach the castle, now he was just short of being eager. He could see it easily from where he rode, a gray and comfortable pile of stone very much like the one he'd grown up in, so much like it, in fact, that he wondered about its secret exits. And how many of the Duke's household knew about those exits.

Being reminded about the problem into which he rode sobered Kylin, and his eyes narrowed against the afternoon sun as he looked all the way up to the castle's battlements. Getting into a fortification like that was either a matter of being allowed through the entrance tunnel or throwing an army against its walls, but it had been decided by one of the very first dukes that leaving it shouldn't always have to be a matter of record. Although most people didn't know it, the castles of the four Dukes each had their own private exits, accessible from inside the castle but not from without. Normally the arrangement was private enough and safe enough, but those days were far from normal. Once he'd been named heir he'd have to speak to Duke Rilfe about it, to be sure Archil's safeguards were duplicated in Gensea.

Riding up to the castle's main gate was an experience in itself, and Kylin realized it was a good thing he'd unconsciously braced himself. The House Guard unit manning the gate had started to lower their pikes in challenge, and then most of them had stopped to stare and then to laugh and point. Kylin ignored them with the sort of dismissiveness that most people found extremely insulting, and when the unit leader stepped forward, scowling rather than laughing, he made very sure to continue the attitude.

"What'n hell is this, a Celebration Day dress-up parade?" the sergeant barked, mostly to the object of his ire. "What you doin' knockin' at our gates, boy? You sellin' somethin' you think we're hard up enough to buy?"

"Watch y'r mouth, Sergeant," Frask said from Kylin's right, moving up to sit his horse beside the very obviously bored young gentleman. The men behind the sergeant were snickering, and Frask was coldly unamused by their reaction. "This here's Lord Kylin, son o' Duke Trame of Arthü, come to marry up with Duke Rilfe's girl. You wanna show us th' way in?"

Kylin was prepared for almost any reaction - yells of rage, snarls of disbelief, growls of insult and refusal, even gales of laughter-but what actually did come surprised and confused him. To a man the unit froze

and stood staring, even the crusty unit leader, and then the man closed his eyes and covered them with a hand.

"I ain't gonna do it," the sergeant muttered, apparently to himself, his voice faint but determined. "This time I ain't gonna have nothin' 't do with it. Bithit-you take 'em to the hall, then get y'r carcass back here. Move it!"

One man from the unit detached himself as the others moved back and to the side, and then the man was trotting through the entrance tunnel, left hand holding his sword still, possibly trying to outdistance those who were supposed to be following. Frask sent Kylin a startled glance, showing that the fighter didn't understand what was happening any more than his lord did, - and then he moved ahead into the tunnel first, leaving Kylin to follow with Strangis behind as third. That Frask was uneasy was obvious, but the men of the gate unit seemed too deep in their own thoughts to notice.

Frask's suspicions turned out to be groundless; the three riders drew rein in front of large metal-bound doors without anything untoward happening. Granted there had been plenty of stares and goggling, and the Guardsman who had beaten them there was still talking softly but animatedly to a serving man just inside the doors, but there hadn't been anything in the way of attack. Kylin couldn't help feeling the least bit disappointed, but had to admit it was really too soon for his plan to work.

Frask, having left the pack horses to Strangis, dismounted as soon as they'd stopped and came to hold Kylin's bridle so that his lord might also dismount. Kylin made a production out of it, brushing his cloak aside and then swinging down with careless grace - only to lose the grace at the last moment and be left with nothing but the careless. Frantic footwork kept him from going flat on his back, but in the process his swordbelt went askew and the scabbard nearly ended up unmaning him. He grabbed for the stirrup leather and managed to steady himself, at the same time silently thanking Evon that it wasn't a war horse he rode. If he'd tried that nonsense with his favorite mount Thunder Shadow, he would have been lucky to get away without teeth marks in his hide.

With both feet firmly if somewhat heavily on the ground, Kylin smoothed his clothing and swordbelt straight with short, gentle movements, then turned toward the open doors as if nothing had happened. Frask was looking down at the ground with his jaw clamped tight, obviously having enjoyed Kylin's effort and trying not to show it, but the fighter hadn't been the only witness to the affair. Inside the doors were more people than had been there the last time Kylin had looked, and every one of them stared in frozen speechlessness.

"Is this Duchy so barbaric I need to ask for something to soothe the dust from my throat?" Kylin plunged in at once before he decided to think better of it, his normally deep voice whiny and petulant. "I knew it would be like this, I just knew it, but would 'Father listen? He certainly would not, and now I've come all this way just to watch them pretend to be statues, as though they'd never in their lives seen a gentleman before..."

"Lord Kylin, please forgive us!" one of the statues said as it came to life, a statue that hadn't yet reached the doors before stopping. The man was obviously an upper servant of some sort to judge by his clothing, and he spoke from a place behind all the others who had magically appeared. Closest to the threshold were the guardsman and the door servant, with another servant and three boys who were probably there for the horses behind those two. Directly behind the boys were two maid servants with trays, pretty enough to make Kylin groan inwardly at their expressions, and behind the girls was the man who had spoken.

"Lord Kylin, your road cup and an assortment of tidbits are right here," the upper servant went on in an instantly soothing way, pushing the girls forward ahead of him. "Please step into the hall in full welcome

from Duke Rilfe, who will be here personally to greet you in a moment. I am Sir Fonid, and would consider it an honor to have fetched whatever you require."

The others in Kylin's path melted away to either side, probably afraid of being run down as the important new arrival sniffed disdainfully then lumbered forward through the doors. There was an attempt at grace in the heavy gait, but the results of the attempt were not pleasant to the eye. Kylin's pretty red boots had small strips of wood in them, to keep him from reverting to his natural walk. When he reached the trays the girls held he took a goblet from one and a handful of tiny sandwiches from the second, swallowed the sandwiches fast before tasting the wine, then turned to the man who had named himself Sir Fonid.

"A pity the Duke's master cook has taken ill," Kylin remarked, dabbing delicately at his lips with a pale green kerchief from his wide sleeve. "And do be sure to let me know when your better wines have been brought up from the cellars. I tend to enjoy unusual occasions such as those."

Sir Fonid's expression was a strictly held neutrality as he bowed, but the shuffling and muttering to be heard elsewhere in the hall gave Kylin a good deal of hope. There had to be fighters somewhere in the house, and the sooner they got there to hear what he had to say, the better it would be.

"You must be exhausted after your journey, Lord Kylin," Sir Fonid said when he'd straightened from his bow, still wearing the neutral expression. "If you'll excuse me for a moment I'll have a chair brought, and also make certain that the Duke knows of your arrival."

He bowed again then escaped as fast as he could, something that would ordinarily have made Kylin laugh out loud. He, himself, was the sort who would have preferred staying to bait the unpleasant new arrival, but even a high servant wasn't really in a position to do that. The man was retreating in good order to await the arrival of stronger reinforcements, and it wasn't possible to fault him for using such sound tactics. The delicate new arrival therefore turned away from the departing servant with a flick of his kerchief and a put-upon sigh, then returned his attention to the tray of "inferior" sandwich snacks. He hadn't eaten much when they'd stopped at noon that day, but with his appetite back he was ready to make up for it.

Duke Rilfe knew he'd been difficult to keep up with on the way to the main entrance hall, but Traixe's stride had matched his every step of the way, the two of them ignoring the fighters straggling behind. He couldn't credit the luck they'd had so far, with Kylin showing up only a day behind Sofaltis, but he knew it couldn't last. Tradition forced a three-day celebration period on him before the ceremony could be held, and those three days could well seem like three hundred if there was trouble. If only he could lay hands on the one in his household who was in Nimram's pay! There was no doubt there was such a one, everything pointed that way, but they'd all been with him for so many years! How could he let Traixe ask questions the way he wanted to, with instruments of persuasion that would -

The Duke stopped short just at the entrance to the hall, startled at sight of the man who waited there. For a moment he'd forgotten what Trame's son would look like, and very briefly he prayed fervently that it was a disguise. The man was just as large as the King's Fighter he remembered, but somehow muscular size had been turned into mountainous flab, commanding gestures had become over-graceful waves, and the balance of a Fighter was nowhere to be seen. And those clothes! In full daylight he must be blinding, and Duke Rilfe couldn't help admiring the man's courage. There wasn't much in the world that could have gotten him into clothes like that, especially in the midst of strangers.

"Red boots to go with a red swordbelt," Traixe muttered, glancing at the Duke with amused pain quickly hidden. "Shall we go to greet your future heir?"

"And get it over with as fast as possible?" the Duke murmured back, sharing the amusement before

resetting his expression into the scowl it was supposed to be. "I think it's time we found out what in hell is going on here!"

The Duke's last words were spoken forcefully enough to reach everyone in the hall, causing them to turn toward him as he stalked forward. The servants faded quickly back out of harm's way, but the nightmare in flowing Flower colors tripped forward a few steps and then bowed.

"My dear Duke Rilfe, how good of you to finally find the time to greet me personally," the man sniffed, the petulance in his tone bringing the Duke the definite urge to put a fist in the other's face. "My father assured me I would be more than welcome here, especially since I come to fulfill family obligations. I really do believe I shall need to speak with him when next he and I meet.""

"Which, if Evon's luck should return, won't be that long in coming," the Duke growled, glaring into blue-green eyes that thankfully weren't entirely like the rest of the man. "Your father was supposed to have sent a husband for my daughter, and although he and I have had our differences of late, I refuse to believe him dishonorable. He would have kept to his word."

"And so he did," Kylin answered with another sniff, brushing at his sleeves to fluff them. "As his son I fulfill the word he gave, and he advised me not to allow you to be rude and abrupt. As the betrothal has already been registered with the King's court - something done by you, I believe - I must be welcomed with full ceremony and hospitality. It is the Law."

"Laws need to be challenged every now and then to keep them viable," the Duke snarled low, held where he stood only by the presence of Traixe's hand tight around his arm. That damned superior, smug smile on the fool's face-! "You come with me right now! This conversation calls for more private surroundings, where impertinent young men might be - reasoned with. Traixe! Make sure he follows!"

Duke Rilfe turned away to stalk out of the hall again, leaving a hard-eyed Traixe to see to the visitor. Kylin could tell that the man who'd been put in charge of him was an experienced Fighter, but neither he nor the fighters who now followed the Duke out had gotten insulted enough to start anything physical. With that in mind he thought fast, then came up with something to add.

"If you think I'm going to give up the life of a Duke's heir, you're quite mad," he called after the stiff, retreating back, making sure he added a ridiculing simper. "Since my father won't have me at home for some reason, this Duchy promises my sole opportunity for living as a gentleman really should. I won't..."

"Ease up before he forgets you're playing a part, you young idiot!" the man Traixe hissed at him in the lowest of voices as he closed a hand around his arm. The Duke had nearly paused in his stomping exit, and Kylin realized Traixe was right. Kylin's aim was to start a fight, but not with the man whose heir he would be.

"Very well, I'll come, but I trust I've made my position clear to everyone," Kylin said in supposed answer to what Traixe had hissed, men let himself be manhandled out of the hall. Kylin was pretending to be extremely put-upon, but Traixe was feeling considerably better. The arm he'd closed his hand on was larger and more muscularly hard than the Duke's or his own, something that had been very cleverly concealed by Kylin's gracefully garish clothing. It looked like things really were going to work out well, the way plans as complex as theirs rarely did. With Evon's help they were almost out of the woods.

It didn't take long to reach the Duke's study and enter behind him, the fighters having been left out in the hall with the on-duty House Guards. The Duke seethed with hopefully pretended rage and glared at Kylin while servants hurried around setting out refreshments, leaving Kylin nothing to do but look critically and unenthusiastically around at the mar-velous chamber. His father had a study like that, with his ancestors' weapons all around him, and Kylin had always felt strengthened after visiting the place. The weapons

represented the continuity of life as well as his family's responsibility to stand themselves before any danger threatening those who weren't similarly armed. Not every man could be a fighter, but every man deserved the defense of his lord, should the need arise. The people provided sustenance while their lord provided safety, and-

"What in broiling hell is this?" a voice suddenly demanded from behind Kylin, causing him to turn around. With the servants still here the door to the hall hadn't yet been closed, and standing just inside the doorway with fists on hips was the sort of girl Kylin hadn't been expecting. She was a big girl but lithe and shapely, with long brown hair banded around her brow above flashing gray eyes. Her black leathers, swordbelt and silver medallion said she was a Blade, which made the son of Arthil wonder who she could be. A girl like that was enough to interest any man, and that despite the fact that she was no more than pretty. Spirit had a more lasting attraction than beauty with nothing behind it, but then

Kylin remembered he was, for ail intents and purposes, a married man. Night house girls were one thing, not at all the same as someone who seemed to be a member of Duke Rilfe's household...

"Sofaltis, what are you doing here?" Duke Rilfe demanded in turn, almost sounding shaken. "I was going to send for you later..."

"Were you really," the girl interrupted with cold fury, her eyes on a Kylin who suddenly wanted desperately to be rid of the role he was still being forced to play. "Word travels unbelievably fast around here, which means I heard about the arrival of your newest guest without having to wait to be told about it by you. Are you seriously trying to suggest that this is a son of Duke Trame of Arthil?"

"Kylin of the House of Torain at your service, my lady," Kylin couldn't keep himself from saying with a bow, but to his horror it also came out with a simper!

"Do allow me to say how honored I am to . .

He had begun to step forward automatically to reach for the girl's hand, but was stopped in his tracks when that hand went to the hilt hanging to her left. From the look in her blazing gray eyes he knew she would draw on him if he came one pace closer, and it never occurred to him that he'd almost found the fight he'd been looking for. Going up against a Blade wasn't a lark under any circumstances, and the last thing he wanted to do was hurt the girl.

"Absolutely and immovably no," the girl said in a growl to Duke Rilfe, the blaze in her eyes now meant for him. "Never, under any circumstances, not even if Evon himself appeared to demand it! Do you understand me? NO!"

With that the girl turned and stormed out of the study, the fighters in the hall falling all over each other to get out of her way. Kylin thought there were more fighters out there than had been there when he'd arrived, but the servants being hurried out of the chamber by Traixe kept him from certainty. He turned away from the door being closed to see Duke Rilfe standing with his head down and one hand over his eyes, but didn't get the first hint about what had just happened until the man Traixe came back from the door shaking his head.

"It has to be my fault," Traixe said, sounding old and tired. "Everyone knows Evon dislikes having people count their victories before they're won. What are we going to do?"

"What can we do but go on with it?" the Duke asked with a sigh, sounding much like the other man as he uncovered his eyes. "We'll have to think of something to tell her, something a lot more compelling than the truth would be. And you. Did you have to talk to her, not to mention try to approach her? Are you intent on getting yourself killed?"

This time the Duke was addressing Kylin, and since everyone left in the chamber already knew what he really was, there was no reason not to shrug and grin.

"Being too attracted to danger has always been a failing of mine," he answered in his own voice, straightening up from the slouch he'd been making himself stand in. "I know how close I came just now, and I hope you'll excuse me for considering the meeting worth it. Under the circumstances it's terribly bad manners to ask this, but - who is she?"

Traixe chuckled as he recognized the look in the young Fighter's eyes while he asked his question, and even Duke Rilfe was forced to show a faint grin. As badly as everything had suddenly gone, they hadn't dared hope for so excellent a turn of events.

"So you want to know who she is," the Duke said abruptly, no longer showing any amusement. "You come here to marry my daughter, and the first thing you do is insult me, then ask about a woman of my household. Is there to be no end to such insolent and frivolous misdoings?"

"Oh, no, don't tell me!" Kylin said with a groan after thinking for no more than seconds, suddenly wishing he were back in the middle of a nice, calm war. "I can understand your wanting to get even with me for what I said down in the hall, my lord, but please don't tell me that was my future wife! I don't think I could stand it-"

"He's really bright," Traixe said with more than chuckling, clapping Kylin on the shoulder before moving toward the refreshments the servants had laid out. "And I think he'll be needing a drink."

"Bright but not terribly lucky," Duke Rilfe contributed with his grin returned, but also with some measure of compassion. "You should have let me distract you into defending yourself, Kylin, you would have had a few more unconcerned minutes that way. It was your misfortune to be too bright to be lured into that, and also your misfortune to meet Sofaltis before I could prepare the way. So you like the look of her, do you?"

"Just now that doesn't seem to be the point," Kylin answered, his broad face registering pain, his voice so hollow the other two men nearly laughed. "I can't believe I actually simpered at her. I'd stake my sword arm on the fact that she doesn't know what we're up to, so the only question I have is this: how quickly can we get her back to tell her?"

"We can't," the Duke said quietly, sympathizing deeply with the young man who stared at him. To be less than a man in the eyes of the woman who was his would be painful for any man, but under circumstances like those - "I regret having to say it, but we can't let Sofaltis know what we're doing. If she happens to find out, it might well mean her life."

"The girl, as you may have noticed, is headstrong," Traixe put in, coming forward with cups for Duke Rilfe and Kylin. "If she finds out that one of the main purposes of the marriage is her protection, she'll most likely rear back and refuse to go through with it.""

"But she's already refused to go through with it," Kyfin objected, accepting the goblet of wine automatically. "Not that I can really blame her, after what she thinks she saw. Can't we tell her the truth about me at least, and then convince her the marriage is for the protection of her father? A man without an heir is a tempting target for anyone with an interest in promoting chaos, and that should be close enough to the truth to satisfy anyone."

"That would be a fine idea except for one thing," Duke Rilfe said, glancing at Traixe where he now poured wine for himself. "Sofaltis doesn't know who's behind our troubles, but she's already found out the hard way who the primary target is. There was an attempt made against her yesterday, here under my

very roof, which shows how desperate Nimram's people were growing. Evon willing, your excellent performance of a few minutes ago should convince them they have little or nothing to worry about, but what will happen if the truth leaks out before the ceremony is concluded?"

"And Sofaltis is - Sofaltis," Traixe added as he came away from the board with cup in hand. "She's already announced to three-quarters of the Duchy that she'll have nothing to do with you. Let's assume we tell her the truth and she eagerly agrees to go along with us; what do you think would happen then? Either she would have to pretend to still be furious, or she would have to find a reason for a change of heart. Will she be good enough at either pretense to fool the people who will be watching very, very closely? Can we stake her life on there being not even one small slip? If even once she happened to smile at you - and someone saw it - the game would be up."

Kylin stood silently and - in his own opinion-expressionlessly, and didn't see the two men with him exchange a raised-brow glance. He had no idea that his light, changeable eyes had taken on the cold, hardened appearance they did when the man who owned them was ready to end lives without number. When Duke Rilfe had mentioned the attack against his daughter, Kylin had experienced a surge of rage stronger than any he could remember ever having felt. He didn't know the girl who would become his wife, hadn't even seen her until just a few moments ago, but that brief glimpse had shown him someone he very much wanted to get to know. That strangers, intruders, had tried to keep that from happening, had tried to harm a girl like that -!

"Your daughter and I are officially betrothed, Duke Rilfe," Kylin said after the pause, bringing those eyes to the man he addressed. "I'm sure you know as well as I do how much latitude that allows me. I can't take her to my own apartments until after the ceremony, but there's nothing to stop me from moving into hers for the days before. And believe me - nothing will get past me to reach her."

"For some odd reason, I have no doubts on that score," Duke Rilfe murmured, eyeing his heir-to-be over his cup rim. The Duke was not a man who had ever had occasion to question his personal courage, but he suddenly found himself exceedingly pleased that he would never need to go through the young man before him to reach a desired objective. He had managed to choose even better than he'd known, and for that he fervently thanked Evon the Shining.

"Kylin, I have no doubt that you would protect my daughter and your wife-to-be, but there's still something you don't understand," Duke Rilfe said. "Sofaltis has always been independent, and high-spirited, and somewhat on the impulsive side, and right now she's distressed and upset. Considering that, it might be the least bit difficult convincing her to agree to your proposal. What do you say, Traixe?"

"Since she's not my daughter, what I say can be said more plainly," Traixe answered, his tone faintly on the hesitant side despite the bluntness of his words. "The girl is stubborn, hardheaded and wild, and she isn't upset; she's screaming mad. If you tried moving in with her, it wouldn't be attack from without that you'd have to worry about. And I can just see her standing behind you if there was an attack. And what about the traditional rivalry between Fighters and Blades? Right now she's spoiling for a fight, and if she finds out what you really are she'll probably jump in with both feet just for the hell of it."

"Then what can I do?" Kylin demanded, frustration blazing from him like sunlight. "If I continue with the masquerade, she'll think I'm a Flower; if I don't continue with it, she'll be out for my blood. And what happens after the ceremony, when she has to learn the truth? Am I supposed to spend my wedding night defending myself from my bride? Or were you planning on tying her up?"

"Say, that's not a bad idea," Traixe put in, considering it rather more seriously than Kylin enjoyed seeing. "We'd first have to work out a plan for sneaking up on her in large enough numbers, but..."

"Traixe, stop tormenting him," Duke Rilfe ordered, finding it prudent to hide his own amusement. "Kylin, the truth of the matter is, we weren't expecting any difficulty at all from Sofaltis. The manner she adopted the last time she was home led us to believe she would do whatever she was told to do, and we haven't yet recovered from learning of her Blade status, I think frankness is called for here, so let me be frank: my first concern is for my daughter's safety. Once that ceremony is completed she'll be safe, but not until then. Afterward, well, are you really all that worried about her mood on your wedding night? If she orders you out of the bed chamber, is there any possibility of your going?"

"Not really," Kylin admitted, grudging a relaxation from the grimness he'd been showing. "I didn't get to see that much of her, but I think I'm safe in believing I'm bigger than she is. And you're absolutely right. Duke Rilfe. Her safety is our most important concern. After we're settled down we'll work something out to suit both of us, which I expect will put more interest in the marriage than I'd been anticipating. A sweet, obedient wife adds very little spice to a man's life."

"You do find an attraction in living dangerously, don't you?" Traixe commented, the amusement in voice and eyes dry. "I've always admired men who charge all alone into the thick of battle, but I can't say I have a very high opinion of their intelligence. Present company excepted, of course."

"Oh, of course," Kylin agreed with a grin while Duke Rilfe chuckled, but the young Fighter's amusement didn't stay with him. "Meanwhile I've got to continue being a Flower," he said with a glum sigh, finally noticing the cup he held to the extent of sipping from it. "My wife-to-be won't care for that, but I want to get acquainted with her now. How are we going to get her to hold still long enough for me to do that?"

"A fair question, and one that merits discussion," Duke Rilfe allowed, liking the young man more the longer he spoke with him. "Since we also need to discuss other things as well, let's sit down and see what we can come up with. As soon as I was told of your arrival I ordered a Grand Feasting for tonight, and despite my terrible disappointment I won't sink so low as to cancel it. We have until then to plot our plannings."

"During which time we will come up with something," Kylin declared, moving with the others toward the chairs. "I consider it completely sufficient that the enemy intends having my life; I'm not about to accept the same thing from the woman who will be my wife - especially when she's most likely better with a sword than they are."

"Definitely better," Traixe and Duke Rilfe said at the same time, causing all three to laugh as they made themselves comfortable, and then it was time to get down to serious discussion.

I can't honestly say I was calm and tranquil when the knock came at my reception room door, but I had managed to stop pacing and sit down. It was an excellent indication of what my mood had been like, that the door didn't open after the knock. Whoever was out there didn't seem inclined to take any chances, or possibly my bodyguard felt it was everyone else who needed their services more than I. At that point I wouldn't have argued the contention, which might be why I called out my permission to enter. The enemy wasn't too likely to knock before coming in, but one never really knows, and I had my hopes very high.

"I'm not sure I believe the lack of hostility in your voice, but I'm coming in anyway," Traixe called through a very small crack, then opened the door wider to step inside. "I'm a man of unquestioned courage, and besides that I've had a long, full life."

"Well, it looks like I was wrong," I said into his grin as he closed the door again behind him while watching me swallow at the brew in my cup. "Here I thought the enemy wasn't too likely to knock, but that's just what happened."

"Please, Sofaltis, don't say that even jokingly," he asked, actually wincing at the thrust. "No matter how it

may look, your father and I aren't your enemies."

"My Fist name is Soft and Gentle," I informed him, looking at him over the toes of my boots. My feet were crossed at the ankles and propped up on a very elegant, very expensive table, and from the way he glanced down and then quickly up, I was willing to bet that under other circumstances he would have commented. "If you expect to be answered when you talk to me, don't call me Sofaltis. She's someone else entirely, and has nothing to do with me."

"How much of that brew have you swallowed?" he demanded, apparently finding it impossible to stick to the apologetic tone he'd started with. "You're expected at the Grand Feasting in a short while, and if you show up swacked your father will probably have you taken out behind the stables and taught the folly of overindulgence. He's in no mood to be kind and understanding right now."

"Neither am I," I said with a shrug, deliberately taking another swallow. "Pass that word along to whichever poor soul my father gives that order to, and don't forget your condolences. You won't have another chance to offer them."

"Damn it, I'd be the poor soul he gave that order to, and you know it!" he snapped, putting his fists on his hips as he stepped forward just a little. "Do you expect me to believe you'd draw on me? For any reason?"

"Do you know what they call men who depend on friendship to keep them alive?" I asked, meeting the anger in his eyes. "More often than not, they call them dead. I'd probably be sorry afterward, if it's any consolation to you."

"Probably sorry," he echoed, still angry but now in a different way. "That's really very effective. If I didn't know you so well, that deadly understatement would probably have convinced me. And telling me to use your Fist name. That's to make me forget who you really are, isn't it?"

"That was to remind you of who I am," I said, beginning to get annoyed. "I'm the one with the sword and the pretty silver medallion, not the one in the gown with the vacant smile who says, "Yes, Father, no Father, anything you like, Father." If you remember that, Traixe, I won't have anything to be sorry about."

"So you think you can best me," he said, this time folding his arms and smiling at me very faintly. "Are you absolutely sure about that? No doubts, no hesitations, just convinced?"

"No doubt about it, you've got that deadly understatement part down better than I do," I conceded, reluming his very faint smile. "As far as besting you goes, when is the outcome of a private fight ever that sure? The only certain part is something I am convinced about, because I know I'm good enough: I can force you to the choice of your life or mine. Is that unhesitant enough for you?"

"Evon broil it, girl, what are we arguing about?" he demanded, his face suddenly drawn from the realization that I wasn't joking - or bluffing. "Do you really think I would face you with weapons? Or that any man of this household would? How did we end up talking about killing?"

"That's what comes from associating with certain people who shall remain nameless," I answered, not any happier than he was. "If those certain people - or you - think I'm going to chain myself to a Flower for any reason at all, you and they are in for a rude awakening. I'm not being difficult, I'm flatly refusing, so if you want to avoid conversations about killing, forget about whatever you were sent here to say. And go away so I can get drunk in peace."

"Sofaltis, you aren't being betrayed," he said in a gentle way, his eyes now reflecting hurt. "I didn't come here to tell you what you don't want to hear, I came to say your father is just as furious as you are."

Would you rather sit here and swallow brew until you pass out, or would you rather try helping us to get out of this Evon-forsaken travesty of tradition and Law? We're going to fight to get out of it whether you help or not, but your efforts might make all the difference."

"Efforts to do what?" I asked with a snort, completely unimpressed with his sincerity. "Am I expected to challenge him, or do I simply take him to bed and work him to death? Always assuming, of course, that he'd know what to do in bed, which I strongly doubt. Did you see the nerve of him? He actually tried to touch me!"

"He - ah - pointed out to us that by betrothal Law, he has the right to do at least that," Traixe said, then waved his hand to keep me from interrupting. "Stop foaming at the mouth, the subject came up when your father tried to take him to task for the very thing you just complained about. It seems your - intended - is unexpectedly taken with you."

"I'll take him somewhere," I growled, pulling my feet down from the table. "And I don't mind telling you what I "intend" doing with him. I'll start with letting out just a little blood, from his wrists, say, and then..."

"And then you go on to guaranteeing that we all swing with you," he interrupted flatly, stating rather than arguing. "It was your father who registered the betrothal, which means that we're legally responsible for seeing that the marriage rites are performed - and also legally responsible if something fatal happens to the groom because the bride doesn't care for him. You'll swing for doing it, we'll swing for allowing it, and only Duke Trame will have all his problems neatly solved."

"Then what do you expect me to do?" I demanded, slamming my cup down on the table before getting to my feet. "Are you suggesting I pretend to marry him, not seriously, of course, only as a joke, and simply keep the pretense going until he dies of old age or overeating? Do I look as though I'm in the mood for any sort of joke? If you stop to think about it, you'll realize I find considerably more appeal in the thought of hanging."

"If you"!! just listen to me for a minute, you might discover none of us has to hang," Traixe said, and if I hadn't known better, I almost would have thought he was finding the situation very funny. "We can't refuse to go through with a registered betrothal, but if the groom changes his mind it won't be our fault - or at least it had better not be. If you can show him - honestly - what he can look forward to with you as his wife, he just may decide the Duchy isn't worth it. But just in case there's an inquiry later, everything you say and do has to be strictly true, an accurate example of what you're really like. No man could mind the real you, but Lord Kylin, now, that might be another story."

Traixe finished up looking very innocent, but the gleam in his eyes was anything but. I hadn't had so much brew it was affecting me, but I still had the strangest feeling his amusement had a source other than what he had proposed against the Flower. Or an additional source. I couldn't think of anything it could be, but that didn't mean I was willing to ignore the suspicion.

"You said that overblown joke was "taken" with me," I finally tried, groping around to see if the suspicion had flesh and bones. "Flowers, almost to a - you'll excuse the expression - man, don't usually like women. Or real men. Or other Flowers. What could there possibly be about me that attracts it?"

"Your father and I were discussing that very point," Traixe said, leaning down fast to take my cup of brew before I could pick it up again, and then draining it. "Ah, I needed that," he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand before replacing the empty cup. "No matter how long I've been with your father, I still don't feel comfortable drinking in his presence. Not that he's ever discouraged it, you understand, it's just something that I feel."

"Help yourself, then," I returned with a shrug, deliberately folding my arms to show unconcern. "Plenty

more where that came from, especially if I insist."

"Soft and Gentle," he said, looking at me sourly. "I think Sweet and Reasonable would have been more fitting. Do you mind if I sit down, or will that start you considering sacking the castle?"

He sat down in the chair to the left of the one I'd been in without waiting for an answer, which was very wise of him.

At that point I was waiting for an answer of my own, and wasn't about to be decoyed into discussing other things.

"All right, all right, the truth of the matter is - we're not sure," he gruded, looking up at me where I still stood. "Not only were we surprised at the way he reacted to the sight of you, we were just short of shocked when he defended what he'd done by insisting it was his right. The only thing we could think of was that Duke Trame is his father, and that might account for the difference. His brothers are certainly lusty enough, so maybe the seeds are just dozing in him."

"You certainly know how to choose the proper words and phrases to convince someone to go along with your plans," I observed, swallowing the urge to make a face in reaction. "So all you want me to do is encourage it while discouraging it. Also while being my own sweet self. Nothing to it. If I can't use my sword, I'll use my boot dagger."

"You can't simply refuse to try," he said, holding down annoyance. "What we want you to do is start out treating him the way you did earlier, but let him talk to you and get to know you. While he's being eager and what he considers charming, you make sure he understands exactly what he's getting in you. Let him get to know the Blade as well as the woman."

"And if it decides it likes the Blade as well as the woman?" I asked, still extremely unhappy with their brilliant ploy. "If there's attraction involved there's always that possibility, but I can tell you right now what my final answer is and will continue to be: under no circumstances will I have anything to do with a marriage ceremony, not for anything imaginable. Have I made myself clear?"

"You have a talent for making yourself clear," Traixe said, back to the sourness. "As long as you're willing to help us try, though, your father will be satisfied. And since you've been so generous as to share your thinking with me, I've decided to do the same with what I've come up with. Your father blames himself for what's happened, and although he hasn't said anything aloud, I'm convinced he means to order you to leave before the time of the ceremony if Lord Kylin still insists on going through with it. I can't begin to tell you how much trouble that will bring down on his head, but he'll find it the better bargain over betraying his daughter into something that would destroy her. He loves you, you see, and doesn't want to see you hurt. Do you want to freshen up a little before we go to the Grand Feasting? We still have a few minutes."

I don't remember whether or not I nodded, but I did turn toward my bedchamber and a minute later was closing the door behind me. Traixe had accepted my departure without comment, so it was possible he didn't know what his words had done to me; for my own part, I felt the way I had that time in battle, when someone had come at me from a direction I hadn't been expecting. I'd thought the blood I'd lost had taught me not to let that happen again, not to let anyone in any position get past my guard, but there I stood, bleeding again without a single blade having touched me.

Once again only a single lamp was lit in my bedchamber, and its feeble efforts weren't quite up to letting me see myself clearly in my mirror. I put a hand to my face to convince my mind that that was really me I saw, the young Blade with brown hair, gray eyes - and the look of helpless devastation covering everything else. I'd been so calm and in control, so easy and assured over the decision I'd made - and now every bit of that was gone.

Or almost every bit of it. I left the mirror to fall heavily into a brocade chair, then cursed under my breath when my sword hilt came back at me and jabbed at my side. There was no sword slot in that chair, not when it was meant for a lady's bedchamber, and that silly, unimportant little mishap suddenly blossomed into a major crisis. I leaned forward to put my face in my hands, elbows resting on thighs, but the situation was much too serious for tears.

Traixe was sure my father was going to order me to dishonor him. Order me to it.

What in Evon's name was I going to do?

The dark behind my hands was very peaceful, but I wasn't fooled into thinking it was real. There was no such thing as peace, not that side of Home, and anyone who didn't understand that was a mindless idiot. While my father was insisting I obey tradition and the Law, I'd had no trouble flatly refusing; how was I supposed to continue with that when he was ready to order me to his dishonoring? How could I do that to him? And how could he do that to me?

I sat back in the chair feeling the sharp edges of a shadow weapon in my flesh, but although I could reach it easily I couldn't draw it out of me again. If I'd turned around and walked away as soon as that marriage nonsense was mentioned, everything would have been fine; now if I walked away the blame would be my father's rather than mine, and he would not be denying that blame. To keep from betraying the daughter he loved, to keep from "destroying" her. How destroyed could a woman get being married to a Flower?

"It would drive you crazy in no time flat," I growled, as though in argument, but the contention wasn't too likely to hold up. That's what night houses were for, after all, and with a Flower named my father's heir, someone had to be around to run the Duchy when its present Duke no longer could. It wasn't much of a life to look forward to, but it was better than the one a normal marriage would bring, constantly disappointing though it would be...

"Broil it!" I growled as I got to my feet again. I'd almost had myself convinced, and the game wasn't even over yet! There were all sorts of decisions yet to be made, and none of them were the sort to be made without a lot of prior thought. I didn't want to bring hurt to my father, but committing myself to a lifetime of frustration just to save him from discomfort or embarrassment wasn't what I considered an equitable trade. Traixe's revelation had startled me and gotten me upset, but Blade training helps you snap back from that sort of thing in as short a time as possible. Nothing of a lasting nature had to be decided right that minute, not even if I had the sinking feeling I knew how I'd have to decide, so the best thing to do would be to put it aside. I still had a Grand Feasting to attend ahead of me - and a Flower to meet and do my damndest to discourage. I walked purposefully to the door and pulled it open, and Traixe looked up when he saw me, then got to his feet.

"That didn't take very long," he observed, inspecting me in a casual way. "It might have been a good idea to wear that gown I sent, just to push Lord Kylin off-balance, but at the very least you ought to leave your sword here. My fighters and I will be with you, and Lord Kylin might..."

"No," I interrupted, flatly and finally, meeting his eyes to show I meant it. "If you're afraid my being armed will be a temptation I can't resist, kindly grant me more self-control than that. I'll talk to that Flower of yours, but right now that's as far as I'm willing to go with it. Take it or leave it."

"Evon take it, you've got more stubbornness than the rest of your family rolled together," he growled, some of my frustration finding a home in him. "Have it your way then, but don't expect it to be your way every time. The day will come when someone makes you do things his way." . "Not without a sword, they won't," I came back, starting for the reception room door. "And at least we know the someone won't be the infamous Lord Kylin. It may be wearing a sword, but if it tries to use it it'll be too busy with

its self-inflicted wounds to worry about anything else."

"Sofaltis, you're still looking for a fight instead of thinking about helping," Traixe protested as he hurried to follow me to the door. "You've got to stop calling Lord Kyün an "it."

"

I opened the door and walked outside without answering, picking up my escort of fighters as I passed them. Traixe sounded a growl of annoyance deep in his throat as he caught up to me, but he didn't add anything. He must have thought he was wasting his breath, but he certainly had no grounds for complaint. After all, I'd warned him what would happen if he called me Sofaltis.

The feasting hall was usually more than spacious, with stone blocks, flagstones, and heavy wooden beams surrounding the long boards, tall, wide windows and broad fireplace, but it didn't look the same that day. My father's colors of silver and green on the woven hangings were nearly obscured by all the people crossing back and forth in front of them, or milling around in front of them, or hurrying past them. The Counts and Barons guesting with my father were resplendent in their finery, their wives were even more splendidly turned out, the city people were almost their equal, and what seemed like every servant in the household moved around them, either with tidbit trays, pitchers, or piled-high platters for the tables. My father's kitchens had to have been preparing for days and days for that Grand Feasting, but his guests seemed more interested in the conversations they were holding than in what was being offered them.

"It looks like the subject of the new arrival is making the rounds," Traixe murmured from my left, his eyes moving over the animated conversers. "I don't think I've ever seen the lesser nobility so chummily close to the merchants and city higher-ups before, but there's never been such complete agreement between them before. I'd say they're discussing tradition and Law."

"I'd be happier if they were discussing assassination," I murmured back, looking around the way he was. "That's what's wrong with associating with the law-abiding."

Traixe's grunt was more noncommittal than agreeing, but I wasn't really paying attention to him. My roving gaze had found my father, who stood not far from the main board with his special guest beside him - and no one else within speaking range except for servants. The crowding of the rest of the room didn't extend to their corner, something my father was more than aware of, to judge by the tightness of his expression. The Flower, though, seemed blissfully ignorant of the true state of affairs, and chattered on into his host's unresponsiveness while striking poses for the rest of the world to chatter about.

"Well, what do you know," I commented, leaving it to Traixe to hear the very soft observation. "It's finally taken off its cloak. I wonder if it's chilly now."

If Traixe heard me he didn't respond immediately, but the observation was true. The Flower stood in nothing but flowing trousers, long-sleeved tunic, swordbelt and boots. Red swordbelt and red boots. I was about to say something about people's appetites having to have been ruined after seeing something like that, but Traixe spoke first.

"I think the Duke could use someone on his side right now," he said, taking my arm.

"Are you remembering what you'll be doing with Lord Kylin?"

"I'm remembering what I'd like to do with Lord Kylin," I answered, unhooking my arm from his gentle grip without looking at him. "If at any time that doesn't suit you, just let me know and I'll be glad to leave. Unless and until that happens, just remember the role played by the general strategist once the battle is in full swing. You've appointed me to the position of field commander, and that's what I intend being."

With that I simply walked away from him, and I didn't have to look back to know how he was reacting to what I'd said. Traixe had never been one to stand with arms folded, watching while others fought, but that's what he'd be doing then, or he and my father could do their fighting without me. I didn't like any part of what was happening, and I couldn't help thinking that if I had any sense at all I'd walk out of there and leave them all to play their little games together.

Making my way across the floor proved not difficult at all, even though half the people there seemed to want to ask me my opinion of what was going on, or give me the details of theirs. Each in turn would start to approach me with a smile, suddenly notice the expression I wore and the way my left hand rested on my hilt, and then they would step back into their former places in the crowd. Since by then they knew exactly how I felt about the entire situation and no longer had the need to ask, I was able to get where I was going quickly and directly. My father looked up when he saw me approaching, which made the - man - with him turn around and immediately fix me with a light-eyed stare.

"Ah, Lady Sofaltis, how delightful to see you again," he said with what was almost a giggle, bowing grandly in my direction. "The moments since our last meeting have seemed like ages."

"That's odd," I said, stopping about three feet in front of him. "To me they seemed exactly like moments."

And then I fell silent and just stood waiting. If he was all that taken with me, he could carry the conversational burden, at least for a while. And possibly during that time he would learn not to make inane comments. He stood there looking down at me, expecting me to add to what I'd said, but after some more of those moments he'd mentioned he finally realized there weren't going to be any additions. At that point he stopped looking expectant and cleared his throat.

"Yes, indeed, just like moments," he offered, working to get his smile back in place. "How delightfully clever of you to phrase it exactly that way. The gentlemen of your acquaintance must find you a most stimulating partner for conversation."

"Oh, my, yes," I agreed, flashing him the most suggestive grin I could come up with. "If there's one thing the gentle-men of my acquaintance have always said about me, it's that I'm a stimulating partner. I'm so glad you agree."

"Uh, yes, most certainly I agree," he mumbled, actually backing a step as though I'd advanced on him. His expression had turned peculiar as well, and suddenly I knew I'd stumbled on exactly the right time of pursuit. Our Lord Flower disliked references to intimate relations, and that meant he'd named the subject we'd be talking about most.

"I think it's time we began the Feasting," my father said to no one in particular while signaling to a servant with a gong who stood at the wall behind the main board. "Kindly follow me to our places at table."

"Allow me to escort you, my lady," the Flower said, coming out of whatever had been bothering him fast enough to step forward with his arm out. The servant was stroking the gong and my father was already moving toward the board, and the conversation in the room was beginning to fall off as people started heading for their own boards. With Traixe still behind me I should have been trapped into taking the Flower's arm, but sometimes ignorance or innocence can get you out of a trap faster than intelligence and experience.

"Oh, that's all right, I know the way," I answered with a small laugh, as though he were being silly and amusing, ignoring the arm being held out to me. "It's only a few steps, so why would I need an escort?"

I turned alone and moved after my father, leaving the Flower with his arm out and a confused look in his eyes. It was then up to Traixe whether or not he wanted to take the arm, but a quick glance back

showed he didn't. As I moved along the board to its center, I decided that that was too bad; at the very least it would have given my father's guests an additional topic of conversation.

My father took his place in the Great Chair at the center of the board, and I almost walked past him before it came to me that the chair to his immediate right was mine. The last time I'd been there my brother Endrin had had the place, with Rymar to his right. The chair to my father's left was always kept empty, a tribute to my mother, and to the left of that was where I'd usually sat with Traixe beside me. If my sisters had been older they were the ones who would have been to my left, but they had been too young to be brought to Feastings.

They were still too young, which made the number of our family members at that board distressingly few.

"Allow me, my lady," the Flower said, helping me with the chair as I began to seat myself. He certainly was fast at overcoming surprise, not to mention persistent, and his smile suggested he was being generous with something that was really his. As my father's oldest child the place to his right was mine, but only until I married. After that my husband would be my father's heir, and the place would be taken by him. The Flower's smile said that it would be silly to take a stand on betrothal rights - which he could have done - when the matter would be settled permanently in so short a time, and simply lowered himself into the chair beside me without a murmur. I decided it was a good thing my father hadn't adopted the use of glass tableware like certain of those of high position in the north, and sat back to try recapturing the hold I'd had on my temper.

When everyone in the hall was finally seated, Traixe rose from his place in my old chair and asked Evon's blessing for all those attending the Feasting, as well as a special blessing for those the Feasting honored. That, of course, meant dear Lord Kylin and me, and officially began the three days of celebration traditional before the wedding ceremony. I could feel the Flower's eyes on me and sensed his deep satisfaction, two reactions I still found impossible to understand. When he said "my lady" I kept getting the feeling he meant "my lady," and that brought me the sensation of corners closing in. I had to find out what his specific interest was, and then do my damndest to kill it.

Traixe's invocation was as short and to the point as ever, and then the balance of the food began coming. Fried and stewed meats and fish, chicken of every possible description, breaded boar and edged venison, vegetables and breads and cheeses and greens. Four different kinds of soup with sixteen varieties of trimmings and dunk-ins, and with it all the wine and brew flowed like an unending waterfall. No one alive could have found fault with the Feast offering, and that seemed to lighten my father's mood to the point where he began talking to Traixe over the empty chair between them. That, unfortunately, left only a single someone for me to talk to, a circumstance which the someone was quick to take advantage of.

"I must admit this is most likely the finest Feasting I have ever attended," my lord Flower allowed graciously, holding his cup out so that it might be refilled from the wine pitcher of a hovering servant. "May I inquire, my lady, as to which of these dishes is your favorite?"

"I think I would have to say the boar," I told him, holding my own cup out to a servant with brew. "I've always found a great attraction in roasting boars."

He was sipping at his wine when I said that, and if he'd been swallowing at it instead he probably would have choked. As it was he was reduced to coughing for a moment, and when he raised his head I was surprised to see that what had started the fit was laughter.

"Clearly I'd need to be more cautious in future," he said, lowering his head again to give one last cough into his hand. "The dangers of so excellent a wine, a misswallow in overeagerness - I do hope you'll

forgive me."

The gaze that came back to me was sober again, just as though the laughter had never been, and that gave me another puzzle to worry at. If he thought what I'd said was funny, why would he pretend instead that he'd swallowed wrong? It didn't make any more sense than the rest of it, and I decided it was time to ask a few questions of my own.

"Why ever would you care about my forgiveness?" I came back, for the first time looking straight at him. "You can't possibly believe I'm here of my own free will, so what difference does it make how I feel?"

"My dear lady Sofaltis, in a matter of days you will be my wife," he returned, the protest absolutely prim and proper, but with the shadow of something else behind it. "How could I not be concerned with your feelings? I look forward to the time with an eagerness I would have you share, and find myself distressed that I seem unable to accomplish that objective. Am I so loathsome to you, that you cannot even accept my concern?"

Yes, I wanted to say, absolutely and inarguably yes, but with those light, innocent, vulnerable eyes on me I just couldn't do it. He might have been a Flower, but apparently even Flowers had feelings.

"You still haven't really said why you would feel concern," I compromised, ignoring the subject I didn't care to get into. "All nonsense about marriage aside, you don't know me and don't need to know me, something that would please any other member of your - persuasion. Why this sudden and unexpected push for the attention of the fly caught in the middle of the web?"

"I, myself, find my reactions somewhat surprising," he said, somehow making me think he was trying to look surprised. "Despite my father's many and varied attempts at interesting me in the fair sex, I've never before discovered a woman worthy of my sincere interest. Now, however, that seems to have changed, and I am smitten with the woman who will be my wife. Happily, happily smitten."

He beamed at me then, to show just how happily, I suppose, and I felt the need to check on the quality of the brew my cup had been refilled with. Even he didn't know what he found so attractive about me, which meant I had almost no chance of countering that attraction. But I had to counter it, or my future would be as black as my leathers.

"And so, my lady, I shall not allow you to speak of yourself as "a fly caught in the middle of a web."

" he went on, and I looked at him again to see the ridiculously stern expression he was now bending on me. "You are the woman who has been pledged to me in marriage, and I mean to dedicate myself to your happiness."

"Do you really," I said, suddenly annoyed that a Flower would even consider "not allowing" a Blade to do something. "I feel a great admiration for those who are dedicated, and I'm wondering how you intend proceeding with your intentions. What if I don't want to be happy?"

"Then I shall certainly take great delight in making you unhappy," he said soberly, then raised a hand to titter behind it. "Meaning, of course, that if being unhappy will make you happy, then I shall see to the matter that way. As I told you, I am completely dedicated."

"Completely dedicated," I echoed in a mutter, staring balefully at his scatterbrained amusement. "There was a free-worker in a night house I used to frequent who told me that once, but it turned out he was misphrasing. What he should have said was that he was completely inadequate to the task at hand."

I expected the Flower to continue assuring me how capable he was, but instead his smile went vacant

even as his expression brightened, and suddenly he found a renewed appetite for what was on the platter in front of him. At first I couldn't understand so odd a reaction, and then I remembered it wasn't the first time he'd reacted that way. I was desperate enough to try anything to discourage him, and that sort of anything wasn't difficult at all.

"Yes, I've found there are both benefits and drawbacks for women who use night houses," I commented, as though unaware of his new preoccupation with food. "One of the benefits, of course, is the constant variety, but strangely enough that's also one of the drawbacks. You look for the workers who really have learned to do it right, but in order to find them you have to go through a large number of gropers. Then, after you've made the effort and have learned who your favorites are, the word somehow gets around to the other female Blades and you walk in to find all your favorites already claimed for the night. Sometimes it's downright discouraging."

"You must have had quite a lot of adventures as a Blade," he responded, still paying an inordinate amount of attention to eating. "Fighting in battle is quite horrendous, I'm sure, and I can't imagine how you keep from being frightened. If it were I, I would be quite beside myself."

"Anyone who isn't frightened in battle isn't safe to fight beside," I said, silently congratulating him for managing to get three "quites" into his little speech. It was one more than the messenger who had led me into the trap had gotten, but it still wasn't enough to distract me from my original topic - as he seemed to have been trying to do.

"The fool who isn't afraid has no real interest in staying alive," I said after pausing to swallow at my brew. "Fighters with sense let their fears protect them, but once the battle is over you have to cope with relief reactions. Sometimes that means nothing more than uncontrollable shaking, but once you've been a Blade for a while it most often comes out as outrageous silliness. I remember one time when battle's end left my Fist not far from a stream, and even though it had already begun turning really cold, four of us stripped and jumped into the water. We might have been laughing on our way in, but once we hit the icy-coldness there wasn't anything to be heard but howls. Then Foist blundered into me, and immediately decided he knew how to warm up even in that liquid ice. He pulled me close and began running his hands over me, trying to make it possible, you see, but he was so cold that even touching me didn't -"

I broke off my story and just sat there with brows raised high, pretending to be surprised when Lord Flower hastily excused himself, surged to his feet, then hurried away from the board. Once he was gone I sat back in my chair with a satisfied inner smile, wondering just how far I'd be able to take that tactic. I didn't know if it would be enough to send him running even from a ceremony he was "eagerly looking forward to," but a little more experimentation ought to give me the answer.

"Sofaltis, what have you done?" my father asked suddenly, just as though he didn't approve. Traixe had left his place to hurry after our guest in distress, which meant I'd have to question him later. Whatever he found out was bound to be a help for our side.

"I'm terribly sorry. Father," I answered, looking at him with sorrowful sincerity. "I seem to have distressed Lord Kylin with something I said. Wouldn't it be awful if he decided he didn't want to marry me after all?"

My father's expression went through rapid change as I drained my cup of the brew it held, but he had it under control again as I got to my feet and bowed my request to be excused. He had seemed to be anxious to question me, but knew as well as I that that wasn't the place for it. In a way I was glad not to need to stay through an explanation; the hall had grown very close despite the opening of the window-doors leading to the battlements, and I needed a short stroll in the cool night air I could see beyond the lamplight. By the time I got back Lord Flower might be ready for another treatment, which

meant I was actually looking forward to seeing him again. I nodded pleasantly to the circulating guests, and just kept going until I was through the doors.

Traixe hurried out after the young man who had left the hall right before him, but he didn't manage to catch up until they had put two long corridors between themselves and the feasters. When Lord Kylin opened his mouth to speak Traixe quickly gestured him to silence, then led the way to a door not far from where they'd been. Inside was the small chamber Traixe used when he needed to speak to one of his fighters in his capacity as a priest of Evon, and once a lamp was lit and the door closed behind him, the older Fighter turned to the younger.

"All right, now we can speak as we please," he said to Lord Kylin, studying the younger man's agitation. "I hope you're not going to tell me she's actually managed to find something to make you change your mind."

"That sounded like a really excellent plan to keep her occupied when we decided on it," Kylin answered, running a big hand through his streaky blond-brown hair. "I particularly liked it because it meant I would have the chance to get to know her, but I'm afraid she's picked up on something that's going to give me trouble."

Kylin's expression of discomforted near-embarrassment was familiar enough to Traixe to keep him silent but encouraging while he gestured to one of the comfortable chairs the chamber held. Kylin barely hesitated before going over to drop into it, then waited for Traixe to do the same before gesturing vaguely.

"You have to stop to remember how many weeks I've been practicing and living this part," the younger man said in an effort to explain what was bothering him. "If I'd taken time out for relief on the way and someone found out about it, it could have ruined everything, so I didn't. I haven't often gone that long without a woman before, but there were other things to distract me and I knew it wouldn't be forever. Then I got here and met Sofaltis instead of the pale, frightened little thing I'd been expecting, and suddenly everything changed. For an entire hour before the Feasting, my mind refused to think about anything but what our wedding night would be like."

Traixe nodded sympathetically, understanding what the other man meant. The girl wasn't an eye-stopping beauty, but when she walked into a room she tended to draw attention. To keep from thinking about bedding her would be difficult for any normal man; for the man who had come to take her to wife, it would have to be three times worse.

"When she first came up to me in the feasting hall, I was delighted to see her again," Kylin went on, now looking down at his knees. "I expected to have a very pleasant time talking to her and getting to know her, but I made the mistake of giving her a chance to pass a suggestive comment. It was nothing, really, no more than a remark about her being a stimulating partner, but suddenly I was on fire! For an instant I was terrified that she'd touch me; if she had, I probably would have had her then and there! It took me a broiling long time to get enough control back to talk to her again, but I was sure I'd kept everyone from noticing the struggle. Well, no one did notice - except for her.""

"Are you sure?" Traixe asked, faintly worried now. "We can all insist we don't know why you're interested in her and that will keep her from having anything to get suspicious over, but that's not the same as being hot for her. Most Flowers don't even get mildly warm, which is what makes them Flowers in the first place."

"It's possible she doesn't know about the hot part, but she's definitely settled in the wrong district," Kylin answered, meeting the other man's eyes as he rubbed at his face. "She mentioned something about her

experiences in night houses, and when I tried to change the subject to battle she used that to go right back to what was making me wonder how easily leather tears. When she spoke about her Fistmate running his hands over her body and I found myself deciding that rape would be a good hobby to take up, I knew I had to get out of there for a while. I don't know if she knows what it's doing to me, but she's definitely doing it on purpose."

"We should have expected it from the little hellion," Traixe muttered, definitely unhappy. "A proper lady would avoid topics like that, but she finds it amusing to constantly remind everyone that she's more Blade than lady. If you take my advice, the first thing you'll get yourself after the ceremony is a good, heavy strap. She's been needing one across the backside ever since she first learned to walk and talk. If you don't, it's not beyond her to make your life a living hell."

"I think we first have to concentrate on getting her through the ceremony," Kylin said with a concealed grin for the sourness in Traixe's expression. "Once I'm her husband I

can use my own ways of turning her reasonable, then fall back on yours if mine don't work, is there any sign of how distant or close I am to the possibility of being left at the dais without a bride?"

"I think I may have good news there, at least," Traixe said as he brightened and shifted in his chair. "The Duke was right in his opinion of the girl's sense of duty and honor. When I told her the Duke was prepared to take all the dishonor of disavowing the match on his own shoulders, you should have seen her face. She came out of it fast enough to continue insisting she would not go through with it, but I think she will. She isn't capable of putting her own welfare and desires before those of her father and family."

"She said something about being caught like a fly in a web," Kylin offered, an agreement that rid him of all amusement. "I don't want her feeling like that, Traixe, not even for the short time left before the ceremony. She's my woman now, and I don't want her feeling pain because of me. We've got to think of a way to tell her the truth."

"Even though the truth is most likely to bring her actual harm?" Traixe asked calmly, resisting the urge to react to the look in the light eyes burning at him. "If she finds out about the deception now, you know she's bright enough to realize that everything we've said and done was for the purpose of tricking her into the marriage. It won't matter that that wasn't our original purpose, it will be the only one she's able to see. And what do you suppose she'll do right after that?"

"At the very least, turn around, walk away, and never look back," Kylin sighed, leaning back in his chair in defeat. "Giving Nimram's garbage every chance to reach her. I know that's what would happen, I know it, but maybe there's a way of avoiding it. I gave her a chance to slam hard at the character who's being forced down her throat, Traixe, and she refused to take it! If she was a backstabber she would have taken it, but she simply let it pass. How can I go on backstabbing her?"

"You're learning to like her well enough to want her to know and like you," Traixe said, the soft words full of the sympathy he felt. "Your reactions are natural, Lord Kylin, but this isn't the time for them. What you must remember is that she'll refuse to marry you if she learns the truth, even though the marriage is the best thing for her. All questions of safety aside, she needs to be married, just like any other woman, and to a man strong enough to give her a good life. Do you want to drive her instead to a man who doesn't care for her as much as you do?"

Kylin knew his silence was answer enough, and that Traixe would take it just that way. His fingers drummed on the arms of his chair, the only outward sign of his inner struggle, the fight to control his temper at the suggestion made. He'd only met his future wife that very day, had spoken to her for what amounted to no more than minutes, and he wasn't an inexperienced child to indulge in infatuation or fall

immediately in love with the first female who allowed him in touching distance. He was a man and a King's Fighter, damn it, but the thought of any other man taking that particular woman away from him filled him so full of rage he was ready to explode with it. She was his and was going to stay his, no matter what he had to do...

"I think we're going to have to figure out a way of getting you a woman tonight," Traixe said, breaking into Kylin's thoughts. "We might have to end up blindfolding her, but at least your problem will be seen to. I'll speak to the Duke immediately after the Feasting."

Kylin nodded in distraction as he and Traixe rose to their feet, then followed Evon's priest to the door. There was too much depending on Kylin for him to refuse the suggestion even if for some odd reason he wanted to, but the King's Fighter found himself privately wondering just how much good another woman would do him. It was Sofaltis he wanted, his bride-to-be who would grin and dare him to impress her, the soft and rounded Sword who would give as good as she got. But it would be another three days before he could have her, another three endless, interminable, eternal, hellishly long, minute-dragging, frustration-filled...

The night air was wonderful, especially out there in the dark all alone, especially over that part of the lower battlements. It was still too early for any night-guards to have been posted, so I had all the shadows to myself. I wandered around for a while, remembering the fun I'd had there as a child, pretending I was grown up and defending the castle from invaders. Now I was grown, and actually involved in defense of the Duchy, but it wasn't turning out to be the fun I'd thought it would be. My mind kept demanding what I would do if I couldn't chase the Flower away on a permanent basis, and I couldn't find an answer to that. I didn't know what I would do, but the decision would be one to make trouble no matter what it turned out to be.

I sighed without sound and stroked the stone I stood beside, wishing that was the side of the castle that faced the city, wishing I could take the time to circle the battlements until I could see the city. I hadn't been out there all that long, but it was time I got back before Traixe sent my bodyguard after me. I would have had them to begin with if Traixe had been around to see me go, and I didn't want them stomping around, ruining my pleasant memories of that place. Better to get back before they were sent, and be grateful my father hadn't thought of it.

I patted the stone one last time and began to turn away, and that's when the arm whipped around my throat and the hand pressed a wet cloth hard over my nose and mouth. I immediately began to struggle against the strength in those arms, instantly realized I was wasting my time, then reached for the dagger in my right boot as fast as I could. I'd already gotten a breath of whatever was on that cloth, and although I'd halted my breathing after that, I could feel the dizziness and lethargy crawling over me. Raising my boot to where my fingers could reach it wasn't easy, not with the fist curled into the chain of my medallion to give my attacker a better grip on me, but after what seemed like an hour my hand closed around the dagger hilt. I jerked it free, reversed it, then stabbed backward.

There was no scream from the one who held me, but he convulsed so hard from the stroke that the chain in his fist snapped, and then he was sliding down to the stone we stood on. I tore the cloth free of my face with my left hand and began gulping in the air my lungs were shrieking for, but rather than clearing the muzziness from my head, the air seemed to make it worse. It was pitch dark there on the battlements, so dark I couldn't even see who it was who had attacked me, but the more I breathed in and out, the more an odd grayness spread on the black. I suddenly discovered I was down on hands and knees, the stone under me nearly unfelt, and then somehow the cloth was back over my nose and mouth, and the grayness-

"She's well out of it now," a voice whispered, speaking to the shadow who crouched not far from him. "If

she'd known enough to wipe away what the cloth had left on her before she breathed again- Well, she didn't, so we're all right. How's he?"

"He'll never hunt again unless he's allowed to" hunt at Home," came the answering whisper, sounding annoyed. "Now we have him to carry as well as her. I wish we could simply leave him, but that would be very unwise. Everyone knows who he takes orders from, and the Duke won't be in the mood to spare anyone after this."

"And we have to hurry," the first voice said, beginning to sound anxious. "He wants her out of the castle as soon as possible, preferably before she's even missed. I don't envy the ones taking her, not with the sort she is. Why would His Holiness want her brought to him rather than simply put out of the way?"

"I don't pretend to do His Holiness' thinking for him," the second voice replied, dismissal in the tone. "We're just fortunate that she was seen leaving the feasting hall alone, and in time to send the hunter after her. She couldn't have heard him approaching, but she was still able to- Well, I wouldn't want her either, so all I can think is that His Holiness must have his reasons. Do you have the weapon she used?"

"Yes, a dagger," the first voice responded. "I'll turn it over along with her sword, but we're fortunate she kept it in her hand. Searching without striking a light can be awkward."

"Not as awkward as moving bodies," the second voice said, a shadow straightening to its feet. "Let's see if we can't move them together."

## **Chapter Six**

"My Lord Duke, over here!" a voice called from near one of the scattered torches, and Kylin was moving even before Duke Rilfe, Traixe thought. He himself wasn't more than a step behind, and wouldn't have been even if someone had been in the way. How that broiling girl could walk out there alone! He would have sworn she knew better than that... !

"We found this, my lord." the fighter who had called said, holding up something that gleamed silver in the torchlight. "And-that."

His free hand pointed down to the stone, and Traixe had to put an arm about Duke Rilfe's shoulders, to keep his lord steady on his feet. The blood was actually pooled on the stone, dark in the darkness but unmistakable, and no man-or woman-had ever lost that amount and lived.

"It isn't hers," Kylin said suddenly, not in desperation but with assurance, his light eyes examining everything there was to see. "Tell me, Fighter: was there any blood on that medallion or chain?"

"Lord Kylin, perhaps you'd like to rest after so terrible a shock," Traixe interrupted, very aware of the way his fighter was staring at the young lord. He'd dropped his assumed characterization completely, but maybe something could be salvaged from the slip.

"It's a waste of time going on with that now, Traixe," Kylin denied with a headshake, then looked at the fighter again. "Well? Was there any blood?"

"No, my lord," the fighter gruded, still not entirely certain he ought to be answering like that, but needing to do something with those light eyes on him. "We found it there, three feet away from the blood, and it was just like you see it."

"I would have wagered all I own on that," Kylin said, looking to Duke Rilfe with satisfaction. "Your daughter is a Blade, my Lord Duke, and no Blade may be taken without the spilling of blood - most often

the blood of others. The lady Sofaltis has been taken, but not without cost to the enemy."

"How can you be certain she was taken rather than slain, Kylin?" Duke Rilfe asked, seeking assurance and not argument. "That blood-may well be hers."

"If the blood was hers, her body would be beside it," the young Fighter answered bluntly, his eyes darkening in the torchlight. "What reason would they have for taking her body and hiding it? The Law allows those who have mysteriously disappeared to be declared dead, so what would be gained? No, her disappearance is for a reason other than death, and may even have been meant to suggest that she'd run off on her own."

"Which is a possibility," Traixe put in, disliking having to say it, but needing to have it said. "If she felt she couldn't live with what was happening no matter which way it went, she might well have decided that complete withdrawal was her only option. She was fond of looking at things tactically."

"As may be," Kylin said with a nod, refusing to allow Traixe's sourness to touch him. "There's nothing to say she didn't decide to leave on her own, and if she had it would scarcely be beyond her to arrange a pool of blood for everyone to grieve over. She would not, however, have left that medallion, not even if she had no intentions of rejoining her Company. I've known enough Blades to know that she would keep it even if it were packed away never to be taken out again. The fact that it was left behind means it wasn't left by her choice."

"And the fact that there was no blood on it should also mean the blood isn't hers," Traixe pounced, now more eager than sour. "She wouldn't have given up the medallion willingly, and if it was taken from her body after she was dead there would be some trace on it. The only thing I don't understand is why it was left in the first place."

"It may not have been left on purpose," Kylin said, looking around again. "Since the chain was broken and we can see the blood that was spilled, I think we're safe in assuming there was a struggle of some kind. We all agree that whoever did the bleeding didn't survive, so there have to be others involved. If the others came after the struggle, they might not have known about the medallion-and wouldn't have been able to see it in the dark. I seriously doubt that they took the risk of lighting a torch."

"But-how could they have captured Sofaltis?" Duke Rilfe demanded, finally having mastered the shock he'd been given. "If she killed the first to attack her, how could latecomers catch her unawares?"

"I've been asking myself the same thing," Kytin muttered, beginning to prowl around the area. He was so intent he never noticed the stares he was being given by House Guard and fighter alike. The clothing he wore proclaimed him as something a good deal less than a fighting man, but those who looked at him were no longer at all eager to test the contention. The way he moved and spoke - and the expression in those eyes -

"There!" he said suddenly, freezing in place as his nostrils flared. "I could have sworn- Traixe, come over here. And pay attention to odors while you're doing it."

The older Fighter raised his brows questioningly, but followed the suggestion without hesitation. Suggestion. Only right then did it occur to him that this was the man who was meant to be heir to his lord, and they were only then seeing the truth of him. Obviously not a man to suggest, clearly a noble born, a Fighter and leader, so much like his lord had been at that age -

"Of course!" Traixe burst out suddenly, having caught the faintest trace of an odor, undoubtedly the same Lord Kylin had caught not two feet away. "Swamp mist! They must have had a cloth saturated with it."

"Swamp mist?" Duke Rilfe echoed with a frown, making his sniffing way over to the other two men. "I've never heard of swamp mist, and don't smell a thing."

"The traces of it are almost gone, but you'd know it if you'd ever come across it before," Kylin answered, rubbing his face with a hand as he looked around again.

"It's a liquid rather than a vapor, but it's called swamp mist because it smells something like the swamps to be found in the south-west.

In my father's Duchy, it's used by the healers on those who are badly wounded or hurt and need serious work done on them. It knocks them out so completely, they don't feel a thing."

"No one who has ever fought in the west can mistake that smell," Traixe put in in agreement. "Healers elsewhere don't seem to be as partial to its use. But even if you've never had it used on you, you remember how the healing tents there usually reeked of the stuff. It was enough to turn a man dizzy just passing by."

"Duke Rilfe, I need to speak with you," Kylin said suddenly, those eyes having shifted color again. "And privately, if you please."

Duke Rilfe gazed briefly at the young man fortune had brought to him, then nodded and turned to lead the way back into the castle. Traixe paused only long enough to take Sofaltis' medallion and order his men to a complete search of the castle, and then he had rejoined them. So as not to miss what young Kylin has in mind, the Duke thought, smiling to himself despite the pain of loss he still felt. And I find myself believing Kylin will get her back, he couldn't help adding. It was difficult seeing the fool Kylin and remembering Kylin the King's Fighter, but the fool was gone now and the King's Fighter had taken over. He'd been right to drop the pretense, and the results of his actions would prove if he was right in assuming command. At another time the Duke would have resented so peremptory a takeover, but just then he was too weary and heartsick.

The Duke's guests had all retired to their accommodations out of respect for their host's distress, which meant Duke Rilfe had no need of enduring commiseration from anyone but Sir Fonid and the household staff. They, however, had the good sense to do no more than speak briefly before bowing themselves out of his path, which meant he reached his study in a less enraged frame of mind than would otherwise have been true. His grief was already beginning to turn to outrage and fury, burning away the debilitation weighing heavily on his mind.

"Very well, young Kylin, you now have the privacy you requested," the Duke said briskly once Traixe had closed the door behind them, turning to face the King's Fighter. "What plan do you have, and how may we help you with it?"

"I have more of a suspicion than a plan, my Lord," Kylin answered, impressed with how quickly the Duke had recovered his self-possession. This was a man fully as capable as his father, and one easily admired. "I take it Lord Traixe is completely in your confidence, and privy even to family matters?"

"If he weren't, he probably would have spitted "Lord Kylin" at first glance," the Duke came back, aware of the way Traixe was chuckling. "Say what you will, it won't be anything he isn't already aware of."

"That makes it easier," Kylin said, turning to look at Traixe. "When was the last time the exit tunnels were checked? Were there any signs of activity that shouldn't have been there?"

"The exit tunnels are stone-braced, and therefore need only occasional checking," Traixe answered slowly, no longer amused. "The last time I saw them was with Lord Rymar, Evon keep him. And Evon

take me for not thinking of them myself! How else could those attackers from "yesterday have gotten into the castle?"

"Without the help of the traitor in our household, they could only have come through the gate as delivery men or laborers," Duke Rilfe said, frowning as he looked at the other two. "We discussed the point this morning, Traixe, and never even considered the tunnels for the simple reason that no one but we two know of them. How could the traitor have found out about them?"

"The information doesn't necessarily have to have come from this Duchy, my lord," Kylin said, beginning to move around the room as his mind worked. "Anyone finding out about the exit tunnels would also find out that all the castles have them, and then it would only be a matter of locating their entrances here in the castle. I not only believe your attackers from yesterday were brought in through one of them, I also believe Sofaltis has already been taken out of the castle in the same way. I'd like your permission for Lord Traixe and myself to have a look at them."

"Damn that son of chaos, why would he have his minions kidnap my daughter?" Duke Rilfe shouted, his fists clenched in fury, his eyes blazing. "I can understand killing her, but why would he have her taken? What does he mean to do with her? Evon help her, what will he do to her?"

"Absolutely nothing, if I have any say in the matter," Kylin answered so flatly that Duke Rilfe's gaze snapped to him, then nearly flinched away again. His own fury, though louder, was nothing compared to what the younger man showed in his eyes, and for the second time Duke Rilfe felt heartened. If it were possible to save Sofaltis, the man she was promised to would get it done.

"Traixe, take him now, and quickly," Duke Rilfe said, drained of the anger as suddenly as it had come. The worst of it was the feeling of helplessness, and he turned away from the two men already heading for the door, needing to sit quietly for a while with a cup of wine beside him. The last words between him and Sofaltis had been ones of anger, and if she never returned he would remember that to the end of his days. He lowered himself slowly into a chair as he was left alone, feeling older than he ever had, wearier than he'd been when he'd lost his beloved Araisia. At least Araisia had gone Home to Evon, not into the clutches of an inhuman, uncaring -

Duke Rilfe's hands had closed convulsively on the chair arms, an unconscious attempt to choke the life from his distant, backstabbing enemy. After a moment he deliberately relaxed again, smiling faintly at the resolve that had come to him. So Nimram, working behind dupes and hirelings, considered himself safe, did he? Well, he had finally overstepped himself with this latest outrage, and would discover that personally if Sofaltis failed to return unharmed. Rilfe, Duke of Gensea, of the House of Kienne, would protect the lives of his two youngest daughters by personally ending that of His Holiness Nimram I. He'd hardly be likely to survive the doing, but for so sweet an end he was more than willing to give up his life. Duke Rilfe, smiling with pleasure, settled back in his chair and reached for the bell cord to summon his servants.

"I think we can save ourselves some legwork," Traixe said softly to Kylin as soon as they'd left the Duke's study.

"Let's stop at my apartments for a moment or two, and I'll explain."

"Let's save even more time and stop at my apartments/ Kylin countered, already beginning to lead the way in that direction. "If we find anything worth following up on I want to be able to do it, so I'm going to change out of these boots now. Their interesting color aside, if I don't get out of them soon I'll be mincing around for the rest of my life."

Traixe chuckled at the expression Kylin flashed him, then followed without argument to the destination

already started for. Once inside with lamps lit and a hasty look around to be sure they were alone, Traixe settled himself in a chair while Kylin began digging through the luggage the servants had been forbidden to touch.

"There are six tunnels, and four of them can be eliminated immediately, I think," Traixe began, watching Kylin's search with only half an eye. "One can be reached only through the main entrance hall, one from the stables, one from the Duke's apartments, and one from the family wing. With the number of people always around three of those, and the Duke's possible presence at any time near the fourth, I think the tunnel being used is one of the remaining two."

"Then we'll check those two first," Kylin agreed, throwing around prettily-colored silk and usable leather alike. "If we don't find what we're looking for, we can always go on to the others - Ah! Here they are."

"I never thought I'd find brown a more attractive color than red," Traixe observed with a chuckle, then grew serious again. "If I were to guess, Lord Kylin, I'd say you had a very special reason for all this hurry you're exhibiting. Would you care to share that reason with a simple Fighter?"

"Lord Traixe, if the day ever comes that I consider you nothing more than a simple Fighter, I'll be the one who's simple," Kylin returned, glancing to the other man as he began pulling off the boots he wore. "Something you said about the swamp mist started me thinking, and that's why I'm convinced we have no time to lose. Tell me what sort of men you think are the ones who took Sofaltis. Fighters and Blades?"

"No, certainly not," Traixe answered, frowning as he tried to follow the question to the conclusion it was headed toward. "Fighters and Blades are followers of Evon, and these have to be fanatics bowing to Grail. Most probably they're farmers or hunters or possibly servants."

"Who are almost completely unskilled with weapons," Kylin agreed, his hands still moving. "Are men like those likely to want Sofaltis awake and aware before they get her to where they're going? They know she's a Blade, remember, and they won't want to take any chances. Won't they feel that with the swamp mist they don't have to take any chances? All they have to do is keep her mostly under until they've reached their destination."

"But they can't do that," Traixe protested, straightening in his chair. "Prolonged use of the mist builds up a tolerance, and then it doesn't work any -"

"Exactly," Kylin said grimly, standing up to stamp on his brown boots the rest of the way. "Healers never notice that odor around healing tents that you mentioned earlier, the one that gets you dizzy just from passing by. If enough time goes by that the mist is completely out of a man's system it will work again, but not until then. If those people have no real experience with the mist and are just using it as a handy tool, the girl will come out of it when they're least expecting it, and probably come out fighting. How likely are they to have left her any weapons? How likely are they not to have knives at the very least of their own?"

"We have to find which way they went as soon as possible," Traixe said as he also stood, his grimness a match to Kylin's. "How many of my men do you want to take?"

"I'll move faster and more quietly if I'm alone," Kylin answered, already leading the way back toward the door. "We don't want them knowing they're being followed, or they might decide they'd prefer losing their captive permanently to letting her be rescued. Which way do we go first?"

"This way," Traixe said immediately, and began leading off.

"This is it," Kylin said as soon as they stepped into the tunnel, the second they'd checked, its entrance located in a dark, unused passage near the kitchens. Behind a section of dusty wall-hanging the stone had

swung in smoothly and noiselessly, the torches they held showing an equally smooth floor angling clearly downward.

"How can you be so sure?" Traixe asked, keeping his voice low as he pushed the entrance stone closed behind them. "There's nothing here to suggest anyone's been this way since the last time I was."

"Not even footprints in the dust, because there is no dust," Kylin pointed out, raising his torch to see as far as possible down the tunnel. "The first tunnel had dust and footprints both, but only a single set that was scuffed. Someone had been in it and then had tried to disguise his presence, but since it was only a single someone he didn't try too hard. Here all the dust has been swept clean."

"To hide the exact number of feet that have been through it," Traixe said in disgust as he looked around. "And I never even thought to check them. When this is all over, the first thing I'm going to do is give the Duke my resignation."

"What for?" Kylin asked, turning to look directly at the other man. "For protecting the locations of the other tunnels?"

"Now what are you talking about?" Traixe demanded, returning Kylin's stare with confusion. "If they know about two of the tunnels, it stands to reason they know about them all."

"They may know there are other tunnels, but they don't necessarily have to know where they are," Kylin explained, his tone not in the least condescending, Traixe couldn't help noticing. "You said the last time you checked the tunnels, it was with Lord Rymar. Did you check all of the tunnels with him?"

"Why - no," Traixe answered, abruptly aware of the fact that the young Fighter seemed to know the answers to the questions he asked before he asked them. "The only tunnels we were able to look at were this one and the one you and I looked at a few minutes ago. The others have to be inspected in the middle of the night, when no one is around to notice what's being done. Their locations are in public areas, and - Evon broil it!"

"Exactly," Kylin said, seeing that Traixe understood. "Whoever knew about the tunnels watched to see the areas you and Lord Rymar disappeared into together, then searched the areas once you had left. That gave them the locations of two of the tunnels, and I wouldn't be surprised if they were watching and hoping you would check the others when you found these had been used. There are any number of reasons why they might want to know all the locations, and every one of them means trouble for Duke Rilfe. If I were you, I would guard him very carefully from now on."

"My fighters already have orders not to leave anyone alone with him. not even his servants," Traixe said, his jaw tightening. "As soon as it was clear Sofaltis was actually kidnapped, it was also clear Nimram's plans were changing from their usual mode. As soon as we're through here, I'll be going back to him."

Kylin nodded with satisfaction, then turned to lead the way down the tunnel. There was ample headroom, but only width enough for one man to walk along comfortably. If two had needed to go shoulder to shoulder, both would have had to move partially sideways. The tunnel, dry and sturdily rock-braced throughout, had been swept its entire length, and when the two men reached the end of it they examined the heavy door that would look like no more than rock from the outside.

"It seems our traitor hasn't yet made this an open invitation to anyone who wants entry," Traixe said, pushing at the metal barred door with a shoulder just to be sure. "He probably didn't care to have anyone showing up at the wrong time and giving everything away - which was what most likely happened yesterday with the two kitchen workers. That they were killed rather than knocked on the head or tied up means they got a look at the leader and knew him. I'd have given two fingers of my left hand to have

found one of those two still alive."

"Maybe we'll have better luck with the ones who took the girl," Kylin said, settling his torch into a wall brace before turning to the door bar. "I've had occasion to ask a few pointed questions in my time, and you'd be surprised at how eager most people get to answer them."

Traixe smiled as he stepped back from the door, giving Kylin the room he needed. He'd heard more than a few stories about the questioning methods used by King's Fighters, and wouldn't have cared to be subjected to them himself. As long as they could later show that the man they questioned was one of those breaking the Law, they could do anything they pleased - and did. Most of the time just being face to face with King's Fighters made a man babble his head off - to be sure they didn't find it necessary to remove it in some other, far less pleasant, way.

Once the bar was slid free of its seating, the two men put shoulders to the rock door and pushed. It opened slowly but easily, letting them out into a dark, starlit night, somewhere below the castle in the empty, boulder-strewn area to one side of the road. Kylin stepped back inside for his torch, then the two men separated to examine the ground of the area, neither one having much hope of finding anything. Most of the area was too rocky to take any decent ground-trace, but if they could just find something -

"Lord Kylin, over here," Traixe called softly after several silent moments, a restrained excitement in his voice. Kylin turned to see his dark form folded into a crouch, his torch flame moving slightly to the urgings of the gentle night-breeze, and quickly went to join him.

"Look at that," Traixe said, pointing to the piece of ground he crouched over. "There was a wagon standing here on this grassy patch, and those rocks over there would have blocked sight of it from the road. But look at that track."

Kylin crouched across from the other man and added the light of his own torch, but it wasn't really necessary. Even the single torch showed the track clearly, a track that shouldn't have been anywhere near as obvious.

"All I can think of is that the metal bracing has come away from the wheel, Kylin said, putting his fingers to the odd-looking gouge in the ground. "If the girl is in a wagon leaving a track like that, a babe in arms would have no trouble following. I'm wondering if this was a lucky accident - or done deliberately to draw pursuit in the wrong direction."

"It could be either," Traixe said, no longer quite as pleased with his discovery. "Are you going to follow it or ignore it?"

"I can't afford to ignore it," Kylin said, straightening as Traixe did. "If it's a gift sent by Evon, it's there to be taken advantage of. If it's a trap set by our enemy, I may still be able to make it work for us. Let's get back to the castle.

"I'll need my horse, some provisions, and your orders to get me through the gate."

"Even a track like that won't be easy to follow at night," Traixe said as he began moving back toward the still-open door. "You may not be saving any time leaving before sunup."

"Whatever ground I cover will be that much less of a lead they have," Kylin disagreed with a headshake, his mind clearly made up. "They'll be expecting any pursuit to wait until morning, so I have to be better off starting right now. If it's a false trail, I may be able to discover that sooner."

Traixe knew from long association with nobility that any further argument would be a waste of breath, so

he sighed and didn't bother. He also admitted to himself that the young Fighter might be right - which he profoundly hoped would prove to be the case.

Not quite an hour later, Kylin leaned down from his horse to examine the road where he'd come to a halt, not far from a stand of boulders. The lamp he held was the sort used in stables, a heavy candle enclosed all around by metal and glass, easy to carry without losing the flame, and providing an adequate amount of light. With its help the young Fighter could just see the distinctive wagon track where it joined the road, coming from the field of boulders and stones to the right.

"And taking off down the road at a good speed," he muttered to himself as he walked his horse forward. "If they were only a decoy, would they be in that much of a hurry?"

His horse snorted and shook its head, and he had to smile at the unexpected answer. It was the answer he wanted to be true, but it didn't necessarily have to be. Decoys would know that they couldn't afford to be caught, so they would hardly be taking their time. The only faint hope he had was that a decoy would be trying to leave a clear, easy trail to follow, at least at first, and so shouldn't be hurrying quite that much.

"Well, I'll be finding out eventually," he muttered again, straightening in the saddle. It was going to be a long night and longer day tomorrow unless the trail suddenly disappeared, and it had only just occurred to him that he hadn't changed out of the Flower clothing he'd been wearing. If he'd noticed sooner he would have done something about it, but he wasn't about to turn back just for that. Once he had the answers he was after, there would be time for unimportant side issues. He put his heels to his horse's sides, and moved off down the road at the pace to which he meant to keep.

The wagon provided a terrible ride, and Merrol was more affected by it than any of the others. After two nights and almost two full days, with only the second of those nights given over to rest, he was beginning to believe he would be violently ill before the trip was finally over. The other two had suggested they leave him behind at an inn, but he refused to allow that. He was the one who had been given the deeply satisfying task of taking the girl to His Holiness, and he wasn't about to let the task be completed without him. He had the sensitivity of a civilized man and that sensitivity was being abused, but he was willing to face anything just so long as the insult given him was repaid many times over.

"And this illness is your fault as well, you trollop," he murmured with all the spite he felt, looking down at the girl who lay senseless in the blankets beyond his folded legs. "If that awful liquid wasn't necessary to keep you under control, I would not have needed to breathe those traces of it. I've been nauseated ever since, and you'll pay for that, too."

Which he would be sure to see to. Without knowing what His Holiness intended for the girl he hadn't dared do as he liked with her, but he'd still been able to return some measure of the humiliation she had given to him. He had been sent to her as her father's messenger, and although it had been his intention to lead her into a trap where she might be taken, she hadn't known that. In the spirit of generosity he had attempted to correct her in regard to the unsuitability of the clothing she wore, and she had held him up to ridicule before those insufferably arrogant fighters assigned as her bodyguard. They had laughed at him, at him, and he had had no recourse then but to accept the ridicule.

"But I've made up for that, haven't I, girl?" he whispered, reaching over to the blanket covering her, just as he had any number of times in the past two days. "You made a joke of nakedness, but how amusing would you find it now?"

Removal of the blanket bared the girl's body again, offering sight of it to him as well as inviting his touch. Inviting, oh, yes indeed, it was inviting, an unexpected smoothness that had been hidden beneath harsh leathers. His palm slid up from the flatness of her belly to the mound of her well-formed breast, and the

sensations brought to him by the kneading of his fingers were almost enough to overcome his illness. How soft that breast was to begin with, and how quickly the large nipple hardened under his hand. This time she moaned as well, moving sluggishly as though in protest, and he smiled as he continued to squeeze and caress her.

"You dislike being touched so, my lady?" he whispered, the dimness of the wagon interior no barrier to his sight of her. "What a pity you find yourself displeased, but consider the future before voicing that displeasure. His Holiness will have no use for your body, but his gratitude for my invaluable assistance in bringing you to him will surely allow me what he has no interest in. You will be fully awake when you serve me, girl, and only then will you learn the true meaning of displeasure. By that time, however, the lesson will do you no good at all."

The girl moaned again and moved about under his touch, as helpless to refuse it as he had been to refuse her insult. It gave him great pleasure to finally see a response in her, but that very response meant she would soon need that liquid put to her face again. As soon as she was given water to drink and thin cereal to swallow. Eating and drinking and then that liquid. Merrol knew he should summon one of the others to see to her, but the illness was rising in him quickly again, too quickly to consider anything but himself. He was going to upchuck, he knew he was, and he began scrambling toward the front of the wagon, intent on nothing but bending over the side of the seat.

I couldn't remember ever having been in a river of confusion before, and didn't even know how long I'd been in it that time. I was lying on something that seemed to be moving, always moving, and harder than what I considered comfortable. My head hurt a little, and I felt dizzy when I could feel anything at all, and the smell all around me was almost completely overpowering. Almost completely. Almost. Every once in a while it faded, and when it came back it wasn't as strong as it had been. The confusion persisted, but the smell wasn't as strong.

And then came another fading time, when I felt a blanket under my back, and light came from somewhere to hurt my eyes, and then there were fingers touching my flesh. Pudgy, repulsive fingers, I thought, trying to remember, disliking the childish groping of the touch. It's not the first time, I thought, moving around on that blanket, not the first time he's dared to touch me. Dared? Why was it a matter of dared? I usually enjoyed the touch of men, why didn't I like this one?

I moved around again, hearing whispered words I didn't understand, but suddenly my heart was beating faster. I had to get out of there, I remembered thinking that before too, but couldn't quite remember why. I could barely move and felt really odd, but the urge to leave was becoming overwhelming. I struggled to open my eyes, had to blink back blurriness when I did, then suddenly found myself sitting up. That hadn't been hard at all, the sitting part, not as hard as I'd thought it would be, but I had to crawl toward the light on hands and knees because of the blurriness. Light meant out so that's where I had to go, even if it was harder than sitting up and crawling.

And it was harder. When I reached the place the light was coming from, I found wood and heavy cloth in my way. It's a wagon, I thought, the blurriness and confusion clearing just a little, but still leaving me feeling as though I moved through a dream. I could see a road disappearing behind the dream wagon I rode in, and knew I needed to be down on that road. I had to climb down from the back of that wagon, down to the road, down to where it was moving, down away from where I was-

Hitting hard, dusty ground seemed to wake me up, the pain bringing back awareness instead of taking it away. I lay there unmoving for a moment, a receding creak of wheels in my ears, believing I was back in mounted weapons training and had just done something stupid, and then I remembered I was escaping. Escaping from what I still couldn't recall, but I knew I hadn't intended simply falling out of the wagon. I groaned as I stirred on the dusty road, trying to tell myself that out was out no matter how I'd gotten that

way, but there seemed to be something wrong with that line of logic. I

couldn't quite figure out what, but there was definitely something wrong with it.

Wrong or not, the lowering sun was in my slitted eyes, and years of training had taught me that the first thing you did after falling down was get up again. As soon as possible. I turned to my belly then pushed up to my hands and knees, knelt like that for a moment with my head hanging, then somehow managed to get to my feet. I felt horribly weak and light-headed, as though I'd been sick or wounded, but I couldn't remember being either.

I started walking on the dusty road, blinked when I saw a wagon far ahead disappearing from sight around a bend, only then realizing I was walking the wrong way. It was something of an effort to turn around without falling down again, and once I'd done it I felt terribly proud. I'd escaped from wherever it was I had to escape from, and now I was walking the road I'd earlier only been looking at. I was proud of what I'd accomplished, wasn't hurting much at all, and was delightfully comfortable even in the warmth of the afternoon. My leathers had never felt so cool and comfortable, and I began humming to the birds in the trees all around as I walked.

Time receded behind steps and humming, steps and no humming, steps with a thickening fog rolling in. I thought it was strange that a fog should appear right in the middle of a sunny afternoon, but the fog didn't seem to mind at all. It just rolled right along at me, then over me, then nothing.

Kylin was moving along the road at a good clip, his sword loose in its scabbard, a dark eagerness in his light eyes. After all that time of following he was convinced the wagon leaving the odd track was no decoy, and he knew he wasn't more than an hour or so behind it. If they hadn't changed horses just before dawn of the first day he would have had them sooner - or if he hadn't had to rest his own mount the night before. He himself had slept because he'd had nothing better to do, not because he was so spent he was close to exhaustion. As a King's Fighter he'd more than once spent day after night after day in the saddle, riding mounts in relays, staying awake by sheer determination, and then fighting at the end of it. Hopefully he would soon be in another fight, one he'd been anticipating for the last few hours.

His mind had turned so deeply into the problem of how he might get to the girl before the men with her knew he was there, that his eyes registered movement on the road ahead before he was aware of it. He came out of plotting and planning to blink at the distant sight, wondering what it could possibly be. Whatever it was it was mostly light-colored, like a slim bear with its pelt gone. Walked upright like a bear did at times, but didn't seem as steady on its feet. It was coming right down the middle of the road, too, just as though -

Kylin pulled back on his reins so hard his mount nearly reared in protest, but nevertheless slowed its pace to the walk its rider was insisting on. Its numb, stunned rider. Kylin had seen more things than most men of his years, but never, ever, had he seen anything to match the sight in front of him then. He walked his horse at it slowly, distantly realizing that his speculation on what lay under Sofaltis' leathers had been very nearly on the mark, so bemused that he didn't even think to look around for the wagon and its men.

She was free, she was all but strolling along, and she seemed completely unhurt. Not to mention the fact that she was also stark naked.

Kylin grinned wide at the sight, belatedly remembering to glance around but still keeping most of his attention on the girl. The surprising part was that she was up and moving at all that soon, much sooner than he would have expected her to be. And obviously sooner than her captors had expected. He knew he'd better get her off the road until she was back to herself again, and that fairly quickly. If the enemy showed up and there was a fight, in her condition she'd probably try to get into it - bare-handed.

He began chuckling as he pulled his horse to a halt and dismounted, reaching behind the saddle for one of the blankets rolled there. He couldn't wait to see the girl's face when she discovered she'd been wandering along the road, happy as a cloud, without a stitch on. He knew any number of Blades - mostly male, of course, but the principle should be the same - and if any of them had been turned loose naked to trip gaily through the countryside, they would be shouting for blood five minutes after they came out of it. He would have to watch her carefully, sit on her if necessary -

He turned back with the blanket toward the figure that had been strolling to him, and discovered it was no longer strolling. The girl was now sitting on the road about fifteen feet away, waving one arm as though trying to chase something away from her. The motion wasn't violent, just faintly annoyed, and even as he watched she gave up on it with a shrug and lay down on the road as if it were her bed. Even from where he stood Kylin could tell she was out again, so he sighed and took the reins of his mount to lead it closer.

"Well, old horse, it looks like we won't be having her company for a while after all," he said, ready to laugh at himself for feeling disappointed. "Once she wakes up again she ought to be completely out of it, and then we'll be able to talk to her. Talk to her. I hadn't thought of that. Evon broil it, what are we going to tell her?"

His horse snorted and shook its head, leaving that entirely up to him, much too smart to get involved in a mess like that. What had Traixe said to him, about how quickly she would refuse to marry Kylin if she wasn't convinced she was keeping her father from dishonor? He knew it was true, even though he wished it wasn't, and it looked as if he was going to have to go right back to the part he had so happily abandoned.

"Even though it's going to be damned hard explaining what I'm doing here," he muttered, going to one knee beside the girl to spread the blanket he would wrap her in. "If I'd changed clothes before leaving the castle I'd have to tell you the truth, but I didn't think it was important enough to stop for."

She stirred very faintly when he put his arms under her to lift her onto the blanket, and once he put her down on it he couldn't keep his hand from going to smooth her hair.

"I'll have to speak to the King about passing a law against women like you," he murmured, looking down at her unresponsive face. "You're not beautiful enough to make me feel like this, so it simply isn't fair. Do you realize I came away from the castle in such a rush, that I never got that woman Traixe promised me?"

The girl lay unmoving on the blanket, aware of nothing, but Kylin wasn't quite that fortunate. He was very aware of what was so close to him, and the situation had become a good deal more desperate. The woman was his and he was determined to have her, but how in hell was he supposed to accomplish that while staying in character? He would have to think of something, would think of something by the time she woke., or that would be the end of the role. It never occurred to him that he might have her right then, at the side of the road behind some bushes, with none, including her, being the wiser. He insisted on his women being alive, and at the moment she wasn't.

"We'll find a cave like the one I slept in last night, and then we'll work on the problem," he told the girl as he covered her with the blanket, then began gathering her up. "You're going to enjoy yourself with me, and then you're going to marry me, and we'll both be very happy. You have my word on that, my girl, and I've never yet broken my word."

Her head rolled against his shoulder as he stood with her in his arms, and he smilingly took that as complete agreement.

## Chapter Seven

I awoke to a dim light feeling fairly comfortable, wondering why I was expecting to be uncomfortable. It was a strange thing to be expecting, as strange as thinking the air would smell odd, even though it didn't. And nothing was moving, even though I felt it ought to be moving. I put a hand to my head as I shifted around in the blankets, knowing at least that was right, trying to figure out -

Blankets? Right? How could blankets be right? What in broiling hell had hap-

I sat up so fast everything around me swung dizzily, finally remembering what had happened on the battlements. I'd been taken, Evon broil it, like the greenest recruit, and they'd used whatever had knocked me out to keep me under. I could remember bits and snatches of almost waking up, and a dream about escaping, but where the hell was I right then? It looked an awful lot like a cave, with a very low fire near its mouth and a stable lamp between me and the fire. Beyond the cave mouth was darkness, an after-sundown darkness, with no sign of that wagon. Had I escaped after all, or was that simply a rest stop for the night? I had to find out fast, before -

"Oh, excellent, you've finally awakened!" a voice said from the cave mouth I was no longer looking at, the last voice in the whole, entire world I'd expected to hear. "You must be absolutely famished, my dear, I know I would be. I'll have the Fire built up in a moment, and then I'll rewarm the rabbit left from my own meal."

I turned my head very slowly, trying to convince myself that if anything was a dream that had to be it, but it didn't work. The Flower was there at the cave mouth, having come in with a heavy armload of wood, and was already turning toward the fire. How he could possibly be there I couldn't imagine, but I was certainly going to find out.

"Where in Evon's steel-lined hells did you come from?" I demanded, aware of the outrage in my voice but helpless to do anything about it. "And where could you possibly have gotten rabbit for a meal? Did a family of them come up to you and drop dead at your feet?"

"Certainly not," he answered in injured tones, keeping his head down as he began feeding the fire. "As a boy I was as well-schooled in rabbit-catching and such as my brothers, even though I've always found the doing rather repellent. Now, however, the repellent has - become the necessary, therefore do we have rabbit for supper."

"Old rabbit, would be my guess," I muttered, still more than annoyed, then raised my voice again. "Okay, you've explained the meal. Now how about explaining what you're doing here."

"That, my lady, should be obvious," he said, his tone also suggesting how obvious the answer was. "You are, after all, my lady, are you not? Was I to allow scoundrels to run off with you and do nothing about it? When we discovered what seemed to be your trail, I naturally followed at once. The effort was somewhat rigorous for a civilized man like myself, but it allowed me to be there when I was most needed."

"When you were most needed," I echoed, only then noticing how well-worn his finery was. "Are you trying to tell me you rescued me? You?"

"Well-ah-not quite that," he admitted, glancing up at me as he reached for a leather-wrapped something I hadn't seen on the far side of the fire. "I was on the road, still riding in pursuit, when I suddenly found that part of what I was in pursuit of was coming toward me from the very direction in which I rode. Apparently you had somehow managed to escape your captors, and were walking back the way you had been brought."

"Walking back," I repeated, the phrase triggering memories I'd thought were from a dream. "I seem to remember walking after - getting - out of a wagon, and it was a very pleasant walk. I think I was humming."

"You may well have been," he agreed, using a branch to put what came out of the leather pack into the building fire. "I had the distinct impression you weren't aware of me, however, and before I could reach you you had stretched out right there on the road to sleep. I wrapped you in a blanket as quickly as I could, then found this cave for us."

"Wrapped me in a blanket," I said, distantly wondering if I were fated to start every speech from then on by repeating what had been said to me. That might have been my first concern - if I didn't have another to push it out of place. "Why-why did you have to wrap me in a blanket?"

"For a rather-distressing-reason," he said, keeping his eyes on the rabbit rather than raising them to me. "I do hope you will forgive me for being unable to put this more delicately, my lady, but you were rather - extensively unclad, and under the circumstances I thought it best-"

He broke off at the sound I voiced, a sound that even I couldn't completely interpret. I suppose part of it was some sort of laughter, due to the fact that I'd almost repeated the phrase, "extensively unclad." Only a Flower would apologize for not being able to put it more delicately, and I was, trying to see if there was a more delicate way of saying I was stark naked. Because that's what I must have been.

Stark naked. And in front of Him.

"My lady, are you all right?" he asked, his eyes undoubtedly on me, his "concern" clear in his voice. I had to guess about where his eyes were because I was no longer looking at him; I had turned my head away, my own eyes were closed, and my hands were tight on the blanket over me, holding it up to my chin.

Which was absolutely stupid. For some idiotic reason I suddenly felt as though I'd never been naked before, as though I had never shared my nakedness with my Fistmates or any other men. And then it came to me that it wasn't the concept of "men" that was bothering me, it was "man." One particular man who wasn't fully a man, but who had chased after me as though he were. I was terribly, horribly embarrassed, and more uncomfortable than I could in any way understand.

"Oh, yes, I'm absolutely fine and dandy," I said after a minute, forcing myself to open my eyes. "I must walk naked down a road six or seven times every year. Nothing to it. What happened to my clothes?"

"I've really no idea," he said, and then I heard the sound of steps as he moved away from the fire. "If they'd been anywhere about, I would certainly have recovered them for you. Here, you may begin your meal with this, and if you should want more I'll be glad to put it in the fire for you."

By then he was standing over me with the branch and rabbit, and I had to admit I was considerably more hungry than embarrassed. I held the blanket over me with one hand as I took the branch with the other, and then I was tearing at the meat with my teeth while he walked to the other side of me and bent down. He straightened with a small waterskin which he also brought over, and then he was sitting down on the stone beside me.

"My lady, I really must have a serious word with you," he said, his entire expression already looking serious. "I clearly noted your embarrassment of a moment ago, and I cannot allow you to be distressed in such a way. That you stood before me unclad is of no moment at all, not in any manner at all. We are betrothed, and as soon as we return to your father's castle, you will become my wife. Such things as nakedness are commonplace between husband and wife, and therefore should bring you nothing of embarrassment."

"If it's all that commonplace, then it's your turn to indulge," I said around a mouthful of rabbit, resenting his entire attitude. I didn't need his comments about an embarrassment I couldn't even understand the reason for feeling, and I certainly didn't need him discussing again something he would or wouldn't "allow." He was acting as though I really did belong to him, and that was too ridiculous for words.

"You needn't try hiding your upset with flippancy," he came back, actually trying to look at me sternly. "You are a woman with a woman's sensibilities, and modesty in its proper place is nothing to be ashamed of. I'm well aware of the fact that I'm a virtual stranger to you, but I would have you remember my betrothal rights. Nothing improper occurred between us, and I want you to understand that."

"Apparently I understand more than you do," I said, in no mood to dance delicately around the issue. "You're taking our proposed marriage as something guaranteed to happen, and that's your biggest mistake. I haven't yet agreed to marry you, and probably won't."

"But, my lady, we are betrothed," he said, having the nerve to speak slowly and gently to me, as though explaining something to a child. "Betrothal rights are mine, including acceptance or refusal of the match. I have so far voiced no refusal, and the Law allows none to you. Your father had not only agreed to the match but had insisted on it, and now must stand by his word."

"I can't see any problem in that," I said with a shrug, still chewing. "If my father gave his word, let him marry you. I won't be treated as though I were less than a slave, not even by the King's Law."

"My lady, the Law treats you as what you are," he said, still with that clenched-teeth-making patience. "You are a woman, and not entitled to the rights earned by men. The right of refusal is mine, and I have not as yet decided whether I will exercise that right."

If there had been any handy weapon around at all, he would have learned something about the rights some women had. I was so angry I was on the verge of forgetting about what was left of the rabbit on the warming stick, but then I really heard the last thing he'd said.

"What do you mean, you haven't yet decided whether or not you'll refuse?" I asked, feeling the first, faint stirrings of hope. "I thought you were, as Traixe put it, "taken" with me. Has Evon's luck made you "take" it back?"

"In full fact, I continue to find you as unexplainably attractive as I did," he answered, this time with noticeable stiffness as he straightened where he sat. "That this feeling has never before been mine does not mean it's shallow and fleeting. No, my hesitation comes from another source entirely."

"Ah, so now we've found hesitation," I pounced, feeling better and better. "You know that old saying, don't you: he who hesitates does better to refrain? That sounds like good advice to me."

"At this juncture I have little interest in advice," he came back almost snappishly, his light eyes looking annoyed. "My dresser, Jestrion, attempted to give me advice concerning females before I left home, and although he has as little experience with them as I, his were the words which raised my doubts. Because of him, I now find myself hesitant. Would you care for more of the rabbit?"

"No," I answered, putting aside emptied stick and emptied bones to reach for the waterskin. "What I want is to hear about these doubts. If they have any substance, I'll tell you immediately."

Or sooner, I added to myself as I raised the waterskin, not about to let that priceless opportunity pass by. No matter what he said I should be able to confirm the worst aspects of it, and maybe even make them seem even more terrible. Just before I blocked out sight of his face with the waterskin I thought I saw amusement in his eyes, but his next words proved I must have been mistaken.

"Your graciousness is not unexpected, my lady," he said gravely, and I lowered the waterskin to see that he wasn't looking at me any longer. "My doubts are - personal ones, and certainly cast no reflection on you. Jestrion insisted I would find no pleasure with a female, in fact it would be exactly the opposite. If this were to prove true then I, in turn, would be able to give no pleasure to you, which would hardly be honorable or fair. Under such a circumstance, I could do no other thing than voice my refusal to the marriage and depart forever."

He ended his speech with his head hanging, obviously already more than half convinced that his fears were not unfounded. It wasn't quite fair to encourage him in those fears, but defense of self comes before fairness in those who intend surviving.

"In marriage, a husband is required to satisfy his wife," I agreed with him soberly, making sure my tone shared the gravity he'd been showing. "So you have no experience with women at all, no experience with how difficult it is to satisfy a partner. Even many - more enthusiastic - men find the accomplishment beyond them. For a virgin to expect to outdo them..."

I let the words trail off as I shook my head, projecting enough doubt to emasculate a satyr. Virgin or not, he had one infallible way of knowing whether or not he was interested. If all that doubt turned him incapable of any interest at all, he should have no choice but to draw the conclusions I wanted him to. My hopes were very high as I put the waterskin aside, and then he sighed.

"Yes, my lack of experience is what causes my hesitation," he said, sounding completely depressed as he still avoided my eye. "How can I know what success or failure would be mine without ever having tried the thing? I've heard men discussing the matter, of course, speaking as they seldom if ever speak before women, and without exception they all found such - delight in it. I would like to believe that I, too, would experience delight but how am I to know?"

"Well, one thing you can't do is believe everything you hear," I said, looking for defeat rather than depression. "Since men are supposed to enjoy themselves with women, a lot of them insist they have when they're talking to other men. The truth of the matter is that they haven't enjoyed themselves, and weren't able to satisfy the woman involved, either. I learned these things from my Fistmates in our Sword Company, so you know they have to be true. With odds like that against you, you'd be best off forgetting the whole thing - before you experience the agony of failure."

"The agony of failure," he repeated, rubbing his face with one hand as he stared down at his folded legs, his voice faintly muffled. "Yes, I've heard tell of that agony, and certainly wouldn't care to experience it. I am, however, in an extremely untenable position in that I must learn the truth in order to see where honor lies. It would be greatly distressing to learn of my lacks only after the ceremony was completed."

"Distressing isn't the word I would use," I said in a mutter, then went on, "Well, if you feel that way about it, there's only one thing you can do. As soon as we get back to the city, you'll have to patronize a night house. That will settle the question with no two ways about it."

"A night house," he echoed, finally looking up to stare at me blankly. He seemed to have caught the repeating disease I'd been suffering from, but apparently wasn't aware of it. As a matter of fact he didn't seem aware of much, as though he hadn't the faintest idea of how to answer my suggestion and was concerned with nothing but thinking furiously. I thought I might know what was bothering him, so I smiled at him to add to it.

"Yes, I'm afraid failure in a night house would become rather widely known," I said, using faint compassion to disguise the twisting of the knife. "You could spare yourself that by simply accepting the most likely results without torturing yourself, and give my father another reason for your refusal. I'm sure

he would accept just about anything as a reason, as would I..."

"But, my dear, I couldn't possibly use a night house to settle the question," he said suddenly, something oddly like inspiration causing the outburst. "I find no interest in those women under any circumstances, so how might failure with them have meaning? My sole interest is in you, and as you are to be my wife, how might the matter be settled with another?"

He stared at me with the triumph of logic crowning him, but all I could do was stare back with the most terrible feeling creeping over me. He couldn't be suggesting what it sounded like, he just couldn't, not when I'd been so close to talking him into forgetting the marriage entirely!

"If you're trying to say you want to try it with me, you can forget it," I told him flatly, discovering that I was almost back to the point of clutching the blanket to me. "The decision about who I share a bed with has always been mine, and I intend seeing that it always will be. If you're asking to have your name put on the list, the answer is: not even at the bottom."

"Well, I certainly wouldn't dream of trying to coerce you," he answered, the triumph now muted by an agreeableness I didn't care for, his light eyes casually hooded. "If you insist on waiting for our wedding night, I would hardly be so boorish as to deny you that. That is the time consummation will be most necessary and binding, and even if I should discover a great dislike for the act, my duty in that respect will already have been done. It will, of course, be far too late to consider your feelings or what so passionless a marriage would be for you..."

"The consummation!" I said as I sat straighter, suddenly remembering something important. "If I insist to everyone that you weren't capable of consummating the marriage, they'll have to have it annulled! Now, why didn't I think of that sooner?"

"Possibly, my lady, and I hope you will forgive the indelicacy, because you have no means of proving such a charge," he murmured, this time rubbing at his face with two fingers. "A sheltered maiden, previously uninvolved with the world, would certainly not find it the same, but a Blade of a Sword Company - Or, forgive me, have I assumed a condition which simply isn't so?"

He waited politely for the answer to his question, his brows raised just a little, knowing damned well I had no other answer. You might be able to find virgins in a Sword Company, but it wouldn't be wise putting gold or silver or even copper on the possibility.

"And so, you see, our wedding night is certain to be a resounding success no matter what occurs," he said, and I swear it was nearly a purr. "If I were to discover a great dislike beforehand it would be possible for me to act honorably, but afterward -"

He spread his hands with very heavy, very innocent regret, his resignation about as believable as the sigh following his shrug. He had his mind set on trying what the big boys did, and whatever his real reason was, he didn't seem ready to back down. I didn't believe for a moment that it was a question of honor, and he had managed to get me good and mad.

"Well, then, my only other option is to see to it that there is no wedding night," I said, lying back to get comfortable in the blankets. "I flatly refuse to marry you, and nothing, including the Law, can force me to it."

"In a manner of speaking, that's true," he said, for an instant looking frustrated and annoyed before he forced those emotions away again. "It upsets me to believe that a man's daughter would betray him so, leaving him prey to those who would see him brought down, but apparently it's so. Perhaps I'm fortunate in that I will likely never have such a daughter of my own."

"I'm not betraying my father!" I protested, rising to one elbow while he rose to his feet. "I never agreed to this or any other marriage, and he had no right to assume I would agree! He never asked me!"

If I expected a response to my contention, I didn't get one. Without a word he circled my blankets, picked up the warming stick and bones I'd left, then headed back toward the fire.

He could have said that most daughters don't need to be asked, that they simply do as they're told because they're female and have nothing better to do with their lives, but he didn't. That would have given me the chance to point out that I did have something better to do with my life, which would have brought us back to the point we'd just left.

I lay back in the blankets again with unfinished arguments gnawing at me, the one with the Flower - and the one with my father. What bothered me most was wondering if Traixe was right and my father did intend ordering me to walk away from the marriage; if that turned out to be so, what was I going to do? Walking away under those circumstances would be betraying him, but staying would be a betrayal of myself. I still couldn't decide what I would do, but I could see I was passing up the possibility of avoiding that particular decision. It would be horribly distasteful, but I had to go through with it.

"All right, you win," I said, staring up at the cave ceiling. "Let's see how great a distaste we can find in you - assuming we can first find interest enough for a beginning. But don't expect me to enjoy any of it. I've never been partial to rape."

There was silence from his part of the cave for a moment, and then he was crouching beside my blankets.

"My lady, it was not my intention to bring you distress," he said softly and seriously, and oddly enough I almost believed him. "I have no wish to force myself on you, merely do I seek to still the doubts within me. I would make a poor husband indeed if I gave no thought to the woman who will be my wife, and you must not become upset over this doing. My betrothal rights allow it to me, and therefore also to you."

"I'd like to see how far you'd get if those rights didn't extend to me," I retorted, still really annoyed as I looked up at his hulking form. "And if you were all that concerned about me, you'd walk away from this marriage without the experimentation, which, I'm sure you know as well as I do, is completely unnecessary."

"Hardly unnecessary," he said with a faint smile, and then had the nerve to reach down and take my hand in both of his. "A man who is named heir to a Duke must have heirs of his own, and there continues to be but a single way of achieving that. Surely it will be to the benefit of us both to know that such achievement will be possible - and, hopefully, extremely pleasant."

He actually grinned before kissing my hand, then straightened as I snatched it back to rub it vigorously on the blanket. When I looked up again he was on his way back to the fire, totally unconcerned with how I'd reacted to his supposedly gallant gesture. He was so absolutely and completely strange, easily the strangest male I had ever met, and the way he kept assuming that our marriage was definitely going to be was beginning to really disturb me. I didn't want to marry anyone, most especially not him, but his attitude was beginning to make me feel I'd have no more choice in the matter than a chain child. I didn't enjoy feeling like that, and as I moved around in annoyance in the blankets, decided I'd have to do something about it.

I watched him putter about a bit around the fire that was beginning to die down again, but instead of adding more of the wood he'd brought in, he left it to go to a large stock of mossy vines piled near the cave wall on the other side of the floor. It didn't take long before a generous amount of the vines had been brought to the right of my blankets, and then he was arranging his own blankets on top of the vines, just as he had obviously done with mine to make them so comfortable. I didn't like how close he was

putting his bed to mine, literally arranging things to make one large bed, but considering what he intended trying I couldn't very well argue the point.

When the bed-making was completed to his satisfaction and he had taken off his fancy swordbelt, he turned to the stable lamp that was giving off more light than the remains of the fire, and blew it out. That plunged us into almost pitch darkness, the remains of the fire making him no more than an ill-defined, looming shadow.

"Why did you do that?" I asked, this time watching what I could see of him groping his way back to his blankets. "Without the lamp and the fire, we might as well be wearing blindfolds."

"I'm afraid I must admit that the darkness is for me," he said, sounding somewhat apologetic but already beginning to take his clothes off, starting with his boots.

"Now that the time has come to learn the truth, my hesitancy seems to have increased. I hope such apprehensions are normal."

"You can hardly expect me to know that from first-hand experience," I said, rolling to my right and bracing up on my elbow and hand. "All I can tell you is that most of the men I've had sex with seemed completely confident and unworried. The ones who weren't didn't make much of a showing."

He made a noncommittal sound in response to my not-so-subtle jabbing, but still continued on with shucking his clothes. If nothing else he certainly was determined, and under other circumstances I might have complimented him on how difficult he was to discourage. Under those circumstances, though, I would be doing everything but complimenting him, if you considered doing nothing as part of doing everything. Most men, I'd been told, consider an unresponsive partner almost as bad as being thrown into an ice-cold river. I'd never before had occasion to test the contention, but that seemed like an excellent opportunity for it.

The dark form beside me was finally out of its clothes, and then it turned in my direction.

"We may now begin," he announced, just as though he were discussing a meal or a race - or maybe even a fight. "I'm not totally without knowledge of what's necessary, as Strangis and Frask, the fighters who accompanied me on the journey here, felt it necessary to inform me of certain of the basics. The first thing I'm to do is take you in my arms."

"Well, well, love-making through instruction," I drawled with as much amusement as I could manage, purposely staying right where I was. "And to make it even better, instruction from fighters. Have you ever heard what Blades say about fighters?"

"I'm fairly sure we shouldn't be in the midst of a discussion right now," he said, his voice the least bit strained as a wide shadow-hand began reaching toward me.

"Discussion is a distraction, and..."

"As far as Blades are concerned, fighters do most of their practicing with each other," I went on, happily ignoring what he'd said. "Considering the fact that fighters, unlike Blades, are all male, that makes their advice somewhat questionable. Listening to an ordinary fighter is almost as bad as asking a King's Fighter."

"Almost as bad?" he said, pausing with his dark bar of an arm poised over me. "Why would asking a King's Fighter be worse?"

"You didn't know about King's Fighters?" I asked with a snicker, hopefully demoralizing him even more

by hinting that those who didn't know were distinctly inferior. "They need the King's permission to wipe their noses, because independent thinking is entirely beyond them. If one of them ever actually manages to find his way to a night house, even the slaves try to run. I've heard it said many times that you'll never find a King's Fighter with only one hand. One would get tired too quickly, and they didn't mean that in reference to weapons."

I couldn't help laughing at that, remembering how long ago I'd first heard it from a Blade of my Company, but suddenly my laughter was interrupted. The arm hovering over me was abruptly around me instead, and I found myself being pulled up against a large male body.

"That's quite amusing," the Flower said, and I could almost have sworn he was taking my remarks personally. "Isn't it fortunate, then, that I didn't consult a King's Fighter. Now that I have you in my arms, I'm to kiss you."

To be entirely accurate he only had me in one arm just then, but he took care of that by sliding the other under me before lowering his head. What he didn't take care of was the blanket between us, but I wasn't about to point that out to him. Even in that deep a darkness he had excellent aim, his lips coming down right on top of mine, but after a moment or two he raised his head again.

"Perhaps I'm mistaken, but shouldn't there be some response to the kiss from you?" he asked, his voice almost more annoyed than questioning. "I'm certain I was told something about a response."

"You mean you were told to expect a response during rape?" I asked in turn, trying to keep the satisfaction out of my voice. "I suppose that's logical since the advice came from fighters; they usually can't get a woman any other way. But I thought you said this was your experiment? And I thought you also understood I have no interest in it?"

"From what I was told you must have an interest in it, or I might as well end my efforts now," he returned, the annoyance somehow hardening his voice. "Is that what you want? To put all effort aside until our wedding night?"

"None of this was my idea, you mistake of Evon," I growled, moving against the arms he still had around me. "If I can't get interested it's not my fault, it's yours. Or didn't your very capable teachers tell that to their little virgin? Unless you expect me to do the raping, raising my interest is your job. If you're not up to it, shame on you."

As a reason for my lack of response that wasn't half bad, and it kept him quiet for a moment as he thought about it. I had to make his failure no one's fault but his own, nothing that I contributed to, or else he'd never voice his refusal to the marriage once we got back. For that same moment of his silence I thought he had decided to give up, but apparently Evon's luck was shining elsewhere.

"It seems I owe you an apology, my lady," he said at last, his voice not only back to where it had been, but smooth as steel on top of that. "I was indeed told that eliciting a response from a female was mine to do, but the matter had slipped my mind. Perhaps we'd best begin with that."

He released me enough to let me lie back flat on the blankets, then his reaching hand found the one still covering me and threw it aside. Rather than having forgotten about that blanket it seemed as though he'd been waiting for the proper time to remember it, and for some reason that very simple, very familiar gesture made me gasp.

"Now, now, my lady," he scolded gently when I tried to go after my cover, pressing me just as gently back down again. "You don't want me thinking you're not trying, do you? You're clothed in darkness, so the cover isn't necessary. Now let me see, what was the first thing I was supposed to do? Oh, yes..."

This time his lips came to my body and throat, warm, soft lips that lingered only briefly before moving on. Losing my cover like that had upset me, as much as if someone had taken my mail just before battle, and now his kissing was making it worse. It wasn't as if I had any real need of the cover, or that I thought I might respond to him; it was just that I didn't like having all that done to me - when I didn't want it done - by someone like him -

"My dear lady, you really must relax those muscles," he murmured, kissing my face and ear before returning to my throat. "You surely can't be frightened of me?"

"Afraid of you?" I scoffed, moving my face to keep him away from it. "If there's anything I'm afraid of, it's dying of boredom or old age. Or maybe both. Can't you hurry it up a little?"

"I've been told that hurrying never pays," he said in that same murmur, and then his hand began to stroke my left side. "If you're not afraid of me, prove it by kissing me."

"But I don't want to k-" I began, then lost the rest of the protest when his lips covered mine. I tried to turn my face away again but somehow the fingers of his left hand had become entangled in my hair, and I couldn't move my head. At the same time his right hand slid over my breast, feeling nothing like the soft, pudgy hand I could just remember from somewhere, even though I'd expected it to feel the same. By what was probably pure accident his fingers moved in that special way I'd only felt once or twice before, and suddenly I found that I was actually kissing him back! A Flower, and I was kissing him!

The thought made me frantic enough to begin struggling, but the heat flashing through me was very distracting. I couldn't quite remember how long it had been since I'd last had a man, but it had obviously been much too long. My right hand pushed at the chest it rested on and my left went to the fingers on my breast, but neither effort did what I wanted it to. The lips on mine kept coaxing me for even more response, and the hand left my breast to slide down between my thighs- I moaned at what that touch did to me and tried to gasp, and then suddenly I could.

"My poor lady, has my clumsiness upset you?" he asked, the words so soft they felt like caresses instead. "You must bear with me, my sweet lady, for I attempt no more than what you asked of me. If you haven't the strength to accept it, you need only say so and I'll certainly stop."

"Me, not have the strength to stand anything you can do?" I panted, holding tight to his arm to keep from shivering. "That'll be the day. Just remember when none of this works out that I didn't do any thing to interfere with the experiment."

"I'll be sure to remember that," he said, sounding as though he wanted to chuckle. "And what do you think of this particular technique? I'm told by Frask that most men find it extremely effective."

The only answer I could give him was another gasp, the moan only just letting itself be swallowed. I couldn't understand why I was reacting that way, as though I were being touched by a real man, but as upsetting as the thought of his being a Flower was, it wasn't enough to turn me disinterested again. In spite of everything I was nearly on fire, and I didn't realize that my hand was moving from his arm to his shoulder and back again, until he did chuckle.

"Yes, you definitely aren't doing anything to interfere with the experiment," he murmured, beginning to kiss me again. "Shall we see where we might go to from here?"

He couldn't have been expecting an answer in words, as he immediately saw to it that I couldn't give one. I kept trying to remember that I wasn't supposed to respond to him, and I actually did hold out longer than I thought was humanly possible. After that I discovered I was feeling rather than thinking, and what I was feeling couldn't be stood any longer. I clawed at his back with my nails until he'd entered me, and

then it was nothing but sensation without end.

Kylin lay in the blankets, very satisfyingly exhausted, his arms still around the sleeping girl. No, not "the girl," he thought, Sofaltis, the woman who would soon be his wife. She'd been as wild and responsive as he'd expected her to be, as deeply satisfying a mate as he could have hoped for - once he'd gotten around her understandable reluctance. He chuckled softly and leaned down to put his lips to the forehead he could only see as a dark shadow, wishing he could have built up the fire instead of letting it die, and also have left the stable lamp lit. He had wanted to see her as he made love to her, but that way she would have been able to see him as well - without his artfully made clothing. She had been suspicious and difficult enough without that, and it had kept him from needing to explain where the fat had gone and the muscle had come from.

He grinned into the darkness at that, remembering how she had almost outmaneuvered him, coming up with that suggestion about a night house. He'd had to do some fast thinking to counter her, and had almost lost it again when she'd gotten him mad. He'd heard those comments about King's Fighters before from Blades, but those other times he'd been lucky enough to have the Blades be men - and he hadn't had any interest in making love to them. Once that charade was over and she was his wife, he'd have to remind her about what she'd said - and tell her what he would do about it if she ever said it again -

Sofaltis stirred in his arms and made a soft, sleepy sound, then snuggled up to him to get more comfortable. Awake, she probably would have denied vehemently that she was the snuggling sort, but that was the way Kylin liked her best. He tightened his arms around her just a little, knowing he would have to come up with something good if he was to have any hope of enjoying her again, and closed his eyes to get some sleep of his own.

## Chapter Eight

I came out of what felt like a very long, very refreshing sleep and stretched, then lay still in the blankets for a moment - until I remembered what had happened the night before. I sat up fast then, looking around the cave by the early morning light streaming in through the entrance, but the Flower was nowhere to be seen. Flower. I lay back and put my hand over my eyes, trying not to groan in too loud a voice. I wanted to believe I'd imagined the whole thing, but I was very much afraid I hadn't. If that was what all virgin Flowers were like, I couldn't understand why night houses didn't have them in chains, offering their use to the highest bidders. Possibly later, if I could do it anonymously, I'd make the suggestion myself -

"Ah, good morning, my lady," a sober, too-familiar voice said, bringing me back to a world I really didn't want to be in. "I trust you slept well. Would you care for something to break your fast before we begin the day's journey?"

"I find I have very little appetite this morning," I answered, moving my hand so that I might see him. "I may be mistaken, but you don't look to have much of one yourself. What's the matter, couldn't you sleep after all that activity?"

"Please, my lady, I would prefer that you didn't mock me," he said, turning his head away with the same sober air I'd noticed a moment earlier. "I'm well aware of the fact that you upheld your end of the bargain, but I - couldn't quite manage what was required for too long a time. I think - perhaps - that if it should happen again - my course will be clear -"

His sigh of disappointment was so unexpected I sat up and blinked, wondering what he could possibly be talking about. The night before had been well beyond anything I might have imagined, and his staying power had been little short of incredible - oh. So that was it. He didn't know the difference between staying power and being unable to finish what he'd started, so he was seriously considering giving up on

the idea of marriage! Suddenly the new day became much brighter for me, and I discovered an interest in continuing on with life.

"How terrible it must have been for you," I commiserated, trying my best to match his sigh as I sat up. "Even though you ignored my warning, I'm sorry you had to go through that. We'll talk about it again later, and maybe by then you'll understand why trying it a second time will only bring you greater disappointment. Right now I think I will have something to eat - as soon as you give me what there is to wear."

"But - my dear lady Sofaltis - I thought you understood," he said, looking back at me with surprise. "You already have all there is to wear. I left your father's castle in such haste, that the only clothing I brought with me is what I have on my back. Surely you don't believe I would have stayed in these filthy rags had I had any choice in the matter."

"No, I don't suppose you would have," I gruded, realizing he had to be telling the truth. "But that doesn't do anything to solve my problem. If you think I'm going to continue walking around naked, you're out of your mind."

"I certainly would not expect any such thing," he answered, huffy and just short of being insulted. "You'll remain wrapped in that blanket, I'll hold you in front of me on my horse, and before you know it you'll be home. I'll fetch what's left of the rabbit."

"You do that," I muttered under my breath as he turned and went back outside, then looked down in disgust at what my wardrobe would consist of for the next couple of days. The dimness of the cave made it difficult to tell, but the blanket seemed to be an unrelieved brown, and too close to fighter brown for me to like it even a little. No clothes, no weapons, no horse - and my only companion a Flower who didn't know the difference between success and failure. If I managed to get home without going stark, raving mad, I'd find whoever was responsible for putting me into that mess, and explain very slowly exactly how I felt about it. Very slowly, with the help of my boot knife.

Needless to say, the dim day that had suddenly turned beautiful had dimmed again, but I still ate what was left of the rabbit before we went out of the cave. The sun shone down on a horse almost completely packed for travel, the only thing left unpacked being the blanket I'd been lying on. Lord Kylin the Flower followed me out of the cave folding that, knowing damned well I couldn't do it. I was having enough trouble keeping my own blanket around me and off the ground to have any hands free for folding, and in the mood I was in even someone who could actually use the sword the Flower wore would have hesitated over asking for my help.

While I'd been eating the rabbit I'd been told "our" horse had been kept the night in the next cave over, and had already been watered and allowed to graze that morning before I awoke. I know I said something complimentary about all that work having been done so early; although I couldn't remember what it was, my companion developed a pleased look that didn't fade.

Once outside, my other blanket was tied behind the saddle, and then the Flower mounted "our" horse. I was already wondering how I would get up there without losing my wardrobe, when my companion rode close and reached down to me.

"And now for you, my lady," he said, and then there were two arms wrapped around me and lifting! I barely had time for a yelp before I was settled sideways on the saddle in front of him, his right arm circling my back, his left hand using the reins to calm the dancing of our mount. His chuckling seemed to indicate amusement at my reaction, but amusement wasn't what I was feeling.

"How in Evon's sharpest hell did you do that?" I demanded, looking directly at him.

"I've known men who couldn't take me off my feet when they stood facing me! I'm not small and I'm not light, so I'd like to know how you did that!"

"Have - ah - there really been those who had difficulty in lifting you?" he asked, too occupied with getting us moving in the proper direction to meet my eye.

"Forgive me for saying so, but I find that difficult to believe. I experienced a good deal more hardship yesterday, when I needed to lift your unconscious body. Ah, and there's the road."

There, also, was a very convenient end to the answering of my question, which I couldn't help noticing hadn't been answered at all. I looked ahead through the trees to where the road could be seen, no longer pressing the point but not about to forget about it. Something very strange was going on, and I was determined to discover what.

Considering the double burden our mount carried, our progress along the road wasn't terribly swift. Hours of plodding went by with not enough miles being put behind us, and to add to that there wasn't a single sign of an inn. When I asked my companion about the last inn he'd passed coming from the castle, he made some vague reference to one he'd seen halfway through the first day of travel. It would have helped if that was the highway I'd taken from the north; then I would have known what was where. Since it wasn't I had no idea what was ahead, and my companion's reassurances weren't reassuring me.

It wasn't far from noon when he turned off the road to the left, into a pleasant, pretty meadow with a thick stand of trees on the far side of it. I had brought my arms out from under the blanket to keep from sweltering, but that was the only positive thing I'd been able to accomplish. My thoughts had pushed and shoved at the mystery surrounding my companion, but I couldn't get around the fact that I knew too little. He was "taken" with me when he shouldn't have been, he had chased after me when he shouldn't have, he was a good deal better in bed than any virgin had the right to be, and he was a lot stronger than average. That had to make him the strangest Flower who ever lived, or someone who was only pretending to be a Flower. I couldn't see what he would get out of a pretense like that, unless -

Unless he was in league with my father's enemies.

How did I know he'd just happened along, right after I'd escaped from the ones who had taken me? Wasn't that the least little bit farfetched? I knew for certain that we were moving south, so that should mean he really was taking me home. Did he intend pressing for rescuer's rights, along with demanding an immediate wedding ceremony? The very next day he'd be my father's heir, with nothing standing between him and the Duchy but my father's life. Was he really the son of Duke Trame of Arthil, or was he someone else entirely?

"This seems an adequate spot to leave you for a short while," his voice came suddenly, almost startling me. "I'll take myself into the woods there, and hopefully find something we may lunch on. The horse will remain with you, to rest and graze while I hunt."

"So you're going to hunt," I observed, looking around to see that we'd nearly reached the stand of trees. All the way to the right and beyond, through a place where the trees thinned a little, I could see what was probably a farmhouse. The trees stretched on a good distance before it became open spaces again, and someone with a bow like the one tied to the left of the saddle would likely find any number of luncheon targets.

"Well, what I mean to do is attempt to hunt," he answered with apology oozing out of every word as he pulled our mount to a halt. "It's been some years since the last time I did so, but the episode with the rabbits has given me encouragement. I'll wager I return with birds at the very least."

"Your enthusiasm and belief are positively uplifting," I told him with a smile, watching as he dismounted from behind me. "But you must be stiff from having my weight leaning against your legs for all those hours, and my hunting skills are a good deal more recently practiced. Your tunic is long enough to cover most of me, so if you'll lend it to me for a while I'll do the hunting. If anything happens to show, "there won't be anyone about to shock but the animals."

"You want me to lend you my tunic," he said with an odd expression as he looked up at me, making no effort to help me down from the saddle. "But if I do, what will I wear?"

"Are you afraid of freezing to death?" I asked with a snort, having already noticed the fresh sweat-stains on the tunic in question. "Or are you too modest to show what you have hidden underneath? If it's modesty that's bothering you, I'll lend you my blanket and promise not to peek. And you really ought to give that sword to someone who knows how to use it."

"My dear lady, this is all quite out of the question," he protested, then moved forward fast to catch me when I deliberately began sliding myself out of the saddle. "And you should have waited for me to assist you to the ground, I - am the man of our party, and I mean to act like it. I find I've had my fill of being cared for in life, and will from now on be the master of my own fate!"

The dedicated and determined look on his face would have been amusing enough to smile at - if it didn't mean he'd just refused to do everything I'd asked. I'd been wondering why there hadn't been anything for me to wear, and now it seemed I knew: as long as I was wrapped in a blanket, I couldn't take off on my own - or adequately use a weapon.

"Well, then, how about simply lending me the tunic?" I asked, just to test my theory a bit further. "Baring your chest should be a manly enough thing to do, even if you are nothing but flab under there. And if you're all that interested in further experimentation, maybe I ought to say, "I will if you will."

I gave him the sort of grin night house girls are taught, just to see what would happen, and was immediately pleased I was watching him so carefully. His light gaze flickered down to where my hands moved the blanket teasingly, no more than normal interest showing briefly, and then he was suddenly stiffening in very obvious embarrassment.

"My lady, please, this is the middle of the day!" he protested, and if he could have I think he would have blushed. "What's more, anyone could come along to see us! Just because a thing is proper between a man and his betrothed, doesn't mean it's proper everywhere and at any time. You will remain in that blanket and I will retain my tunic, and we'll have no more talk of such a nature."

His huffing was really very well done, but unfortunately for him I now knew better than to believe it. What I needed to do was get my hands on his sword, and then there would be no problem with the tunic. It would be stained red and have a tear in it, but that couldn't be considered a problem.

"You're absolutely right about there being too much talk," I said with a smile, opening the blanket and letting it fall artfully to the grass on either side of me. "What we really want is less air and more action. See, I've started us off. Now it's your turn, and I promise it won't hurt. You can trust me to be gentle."

By then I was already advancing on him, my hands out toward his swordbelt, just as though I had no interest in it other than as something to be gotten out of our way as soon as possible. His eyes went briefly startled just before he began backing away, but the startlement had more annoyance in it than desperation, and his retreat seemed more reluctant than determined. To add to it, he hadn't even tried turning away in real embarrassment. I'd been looked at by men before, and if he wasn't enjoying what he was seeing, I'd eat my boots - as soon as I got them back.

"Really, my lady, I must protest!" he tried as he backed, holding one hand up as though to keep me away. "You know how unsure of myself I am, I couldn't possibly bring myself to - to - in broad daylight - and -"

I was sure he was just about to plead the disability of an old battle wound, but he never got the chance. Without any previous warning that we weren't alone, four men burst out of the trees not far from us and came running toward us, shouting and waving their swords. From their ragged and filthy appearance they had to be bandits, and I had already reached for my hilt before remembering I didn't have one! Having no other choice I turned to the Flower, intending to take his weapon whether he liked it or not, and only then discovered I was far too late.

For a Flower, his reflexes were excellent. He must have drawn the instant he saw the attackers, and with four of them he wasn't waiting for them to get to him. The shouting they were doing was supposed to intimidate their intended victims, but my shy, delicate companion was moving toward them instead of away, and the way he held his sword in his fist didn't seem to indicate he was after conversation. The first of the four, without realizing it, had pulled out slightly ahead of the others, and when gentle Lord Kylin the Flower reached him, my companion blocked a thrust then cut him down without even slowing.

"Baste and broil it!" I muttered under my breath as the following three slowed and stopped, no longer quite as eager to reach their "victim." I'd never expected to see the day when I stood around doing nothing while my enemy hogged all the fun for himself, but there I was! And not only weaponless but naked! The three had sent a lot of attention in my direction when they'd first come charging out, but right then they were too busy thinking about their lives to do anything but back away with swords held out in front of them. Seeing that I began to move forward, heading for the bandit on the ground. Even if his clothes turned out to be too grimy to put on, a little dirt never hurt a sword.

And then I heard the sound of hooves behind me, combined with a wild and mocking yell. I threw a quick look over my shoulder then dived to my left, just in time to avoid the arm of the bandit who was leaning down from the saddle of our horse, trying to scoop me up off the ground as he galloped past. I cursed my reflexes even as I rolled, realizing too late that I should have let him capture me just long enough for me to get my hands on his dagger. I came to a stop in the grass and twisted around - soon enough to see my clever companion give up on chasing the horse and its rider into the woods. And while he'd had his attention elsewhere, the three he'd had right in front of him had gathered up the remains of their dead fourth and were also disappearing into the woods!

"Wonderful," I muttered as I climbed to my feet. "Just wonderful." Then, when the great warrior and his sword had gotten close enough to hear, added, "That has to be the most slipshod defense I've ever seen in my entire life. You had them, and you let them get away! Why didn't you add me and your purse into the bargain just to make it perfect?"

"I was about to charge the first three when the last of them started after you!" he protested, and this time his skin did darken just a little. "If you hadn't jumped when you did, my purse would have been the only thing left out here! And if that horse had been carrying double again, I would have reached it before it reached the woods."

"

"Would have, could have, should have."

"I said, making it sound the way armsmasters usually did. "If words like that had edges and points, every fool on two feet would be Evon himself." Next time leave the heroics to someone who has already passed the bumbling stage."

"I would have, but there wasn't anyone like that around," he came back, straightening as he looked down at me. "You know what they say about Blades - you can trust your back to one, and never have to worry. They don't have enough skill for backstabbing."

"And how would you know what they say about Blades?" I returned immediately, delighted that he'd fallen into my trap, "You, the delicate, sheltered virgin who can barely handle himself in a conversation - and who swings a sword like the captain of a Company. And don't look now, but you've lost your cultured accent."

I was in a foul enough mood not to care what his reaction to the revelation would be, but I couldn't help noticing how odd that reaction was. Rather than showing guilt he groaned, and then he got mad.

"Damn those fools and their weak-kneed attacks," he growled, turning to glare at the woods as he wiped his blade on his once-pretty trousers, then sheathed it with a slam, "if they'd minded their own business and stayed where they belonged, this wouldn't have happened."

"It was about to happen anyway," I told his back, even more annoyed by his oddness. "I'm not quite as stupid as you apparently think I am. Who are you, and what do you expect to get out of all this?"

"Who am I," he echoed, turning back to look at me with thoughtfulness rather than anger, not far from a sigh. "I'm exactly who I said I was, Kylin of Arthil, and what I expect to get out of this is a wife - preferably one who's still in one piece. Or have you forgotten we're betrothed?"

"Back in the Silver Gleaming, they say I never forget anything," I remarked, folding my arms. "Like the fact that Kylin of Arthil is supposed to be a Flower. And was a Flower, until just a few minutes ago. Would you like to explain where that fits in?"

"Not particularly," he answered, looking like he meant it, then put his hands out palms up and toward me. "All right, don't start getting ready to attack, I was only joking. The truth of the matter is I can't tell you about everything that's involved, but I can tell you this: my masquerade was for the purpose of protecting someone very close to you. No one was supposed to know the truth until after the ceremony was over, but you're not the only one who's found out. All we can do now is get back to your father's castle as fast as possible, then go on with the marriage immediately and hope everything turns out all right."

"Oh, is that all we can do," I said with raised brows, then looked him up and down before deliberately turning my back. "It's really odd, but I can think of quite a number of other things, and frankly, any one of them is more appealing than - Evon dip and pepper them! They've even taken my blanket!"

"What's the matter, are you afraid you'll freeze?" the idiot asked from behind me as I glared around at the empty grass. "If you'd kept the thing around you instead of trying to be provocative, you might not have lost it."

"If not for your nonsense in pretending to be a Flower, I wouldn't have had to try being provocative," I came back, turning again to give him the complete benefit of my glare. "And if I recall correctly, you're also the legendary hero who even let a dead bandit get away from him. What do you expect me to do now, O great one? Walk back to my father's castle naked?"

"That might not be a bad idea," he said, folding his arms as he let those light eyes move slowly over me. "I'm one of those who usually enjoy sight of the countryside, but nothing's so perfect that it can't use a little dressing up - or, in this case, undressing. Once we put enough distance between us and those bandits, we'll also be able to put your suggestion of less talk and more action into practice. And don't forget - you promised to be gentle with me."

His faint grin was as bold and forward as someone else's laughter would have been, as far from the horrified innocence of his Flower character as it was possible to get. My hands curled to fists at my sides as my cheeks warmed and I felt the urge to pull a cover over me again, and I still couldn't understand why it was happening. Whether or not he was Kylin of Arthil, he was certainly no friend to me and mine, no matter what new story he had suddenly come up with. Of course his masquerade had been for the benefit of someone close to me, and of course there was nothing better for me to do than marry him immediately. Well, whether he knew it or not, there was a way I could find answers I liked a bit better.

"If you're that much in need of gentle handling, you'll have to pay for it," I said, hopefully showing nothing of what I was planning. "Despite your obviously twisted sense of humor, I have the feeling you're no longer desperate to hang onto that tunic. Hand it over, or negotiations concerning gentleness are finished before they get started."

"I can see I'm going to have to spend some time teaching you how to ask politely for the things you want," he said, still amused but already reaching down to open his swordbelt. "An occasional "please" and "thank you" will do wonders, something you'll learn as the years go by."

As the years went by with him, he meant. I folded my arms and said nothing as he dropped that red swordbelt to the grass at his feet, part of his attention on the woods to be sure the bandits weren't waiting to come racing out again as soon as he was partially disarmed. I pretended to be watching the woods too, but what I was really waiting for was the time his tunic was pulled completely over his head. That was when I intended showing him exactly how many years we would have together - or possibly minutes, which might be a more accurate measurement. However long it turned out to be, though, he definitely would not be enjoying it.

A delicately jeweled belt with pouch and sheathed dagger was also around his waist, and as soon as that was off he reached for the bottom of the tunic. Raising it showed me why he'd been so desperate earlier to protect his virtue- despite the convincing suggestion of the pleated cloth, there wasn't an ounce of fat on the body it covered. The tunic went up higher, showing more of the same - and then it was over his face, the moment I'd been waiting for. Without the least hesitation, I jumped for the sword lying unguarded in the grass.

I had gone to one knee and actually had my hand around the awful silver hilt, beginning to draw the blade free, when two arms wrapped around me from behind. If I'd been standing I would have been able to kick back, but down in a position like that I was virtually helpless. His right hand went to my right wrist and his left hand to the sword, and then it was gone out of my grasp as though a priest of Dagir had waved his wand.

"I can also see we're going to have to have a long talk about touching things that don't belong to us," he said, straightening away from me with both sword and swordbelt in his hand. "I told you before that this weapon is mine, and I'm keeping it whether or not you think I can use it. You're lucky I hurried getting that tunic off, to be sure those bandits didn't decide to attack again. If I'd had to do more to get my sword back than simply taking it away from you, you wouldn't have enjoyed it."

Lucky, I thought in disgust as I rose to my feet, rubbing at my right arm. I hadn't had one bit of decent luck since I'd gotten my father's letter, and if he was stupid enough to think I was enjoying I myself, he was completely beyond hope. The only bit of luck involved was that he didn't seem to know why I'd been trying for the sword. That would have been enough to give me another chance at it - if I hadn't suddenly become sick and tired of playing games.

"Long talks bore me," was all I said as I went toward the tunic he'd dropped in the grass and retrieved it. I didn't think it necessary to add that what I usually did with an enemy had nothing to do with talk. The

tunic was more than well-worn and was still damp with his sweat, but I pulled it on anyway, then tugged the sleeves up. If my arms and hands were completely lost in the thing, my legs weren't, but it still fit well enough to be an adequate, if rather hot, covering. Once it was on and adjusted as well as it ever would be, I turned and started walking toward the road.

"Hey, where do you think you're going!" I heard from behind me, and the next moment a big hand had closed around my arm, bringing me to a halt. "This isn't the time or the place for wandering off."

"You won't often find me engaged in wandering," I answered, pulling my arm out of his grip before looking up into his face. "I'm in a hurry to get home, so I'm heading back to the road. When I reach that inn you can't quite remember the location of, I ought to be able to get some decent clothes and a horse. I hope you don't freeze without the tunic."

Once again I started off, certain I'd made it clear I had no interest in his company, but keeping me company wasn't what he had in mind. The next instant his hand was on my arm again, and this time I found I couldn't pull away.

"That inn is much too far away to do either of us any good," he said, a casual statement as he began forcing me with him through the grass, parallel to the trees now on our left. "When we first rode into this meadow I saw a farmhouse off to the right, beyond those trees. We'll try that first, and leave the inn as a last resort."

"You can do it any way you please," I said, trying to free my arm from a hand that circled it completely, "I'll be taking the road, and when I want your opinions I'll ask for them. Now, let go of me!"

"I'll let go of you as soon as you promise to behave yourself," he said, paying more attention to the woods than to what he dragged along with him. If you feel the need to sulk over not getting your way with the sword, you won't be doing it on the road. There's no way of knowing who you'll meet on that road, and being disarmed and on foot will either end you up back with those people you walked away from, or taken by some enterprising band to be sold eventually as a slave. And even if you managed to avoid all that, I still have what gold there is. How did you expect to get clothes and a horse at an inn without gold?"

"That's my business!" I snapped, mad enough to really begin struggling: The nerve of him, an enemy, trying to tell me what to do! I was being pulled along by the left arm, which meant his sword was slung on the far side of him, but that also meant my right arm was free. The day I let an enemy give me orders would be the day I put on skirts and stayed in them, and I happened to hate skirts. Instead of continuing to pull back I ran a few steps forward, then pivoted to throw my fist into him where it would do the most damage.

If that blow had landed right it would have been all over for him for quite some time, but his reflexes were better than just about any I'd ever seen. His leg came up even as he twisted to the left, and my fist slammed into a rock-hard thigh instead of the portion of his anatomy I'd been aiming for. The next instant I was being whirled the rest of the way around to complete the circle, and an enormous whack to the backside sent me sprawling face forward into the grass. I managed not to yelp at the stinging slap that had landed mostly on bare flesh, but when I turned in the grass to glare at the outrageous beast, I found he'd beaten me to that as well.

"Now I know why you're having so much trouble behaving yourself," he said in a growl, fists on his hips as he stared down at me. "It's obvious no one's taken the trouble to teach you how it's done, but that's all over with. From now on the job is mine, and I'll see that it's done right. I said we're going that way, and if you don't like the idea you can tell me about it later - in words. If you try jumping at me again, you'll

regret it more than you do right now. Let's go."

If he had stood there and simply ordered me to my feet, I would have stayed where I was until Evon's razor-edged hell turned dull and crumbling. He seemed to know that, though, which was undoubtedly why he came forward with the last of his words to put a fist in my hair. That took me to my feet without giving me a choice in the matter, and then I was being pushed ahead of him, in the direction he wanted to go. As I stumbled forward I cursed everything I could think of for making him so big, a circumstance which put me at a complete disadvantage. If I'd been armed his size would have made very little difference, as I had experience countering greater strength and longer reach; without weapons, however, I had almost no chance at all against him, and would have to wait. Just until I did have a weapon in my hand, I promised myself grimly, rubbing briefly at the sting in my bottom.

The walk was not a short one, and once we left the heat and brightness of the meadow to move through the cooler shade of the thinned-out trees, my feet began protesting the lack of boots. I wasn't used to going barefoot like a carefree country child, and the fact that I disliked it was considerably less important than the fact that it hurt. Twigs and stones and sharp objects from the trees we moved under slowed my pace to one careful step at a time, and that, unfortunately, brought me to the notice of my gallant companion.

"Wait a minute," he said from where he walked behind me, putting a hand to my shoulder. "The farmhouse is well in sight, and the trees are too far apart in this area for us to need to worry about an ambush. Let's make this a little faster and easier."

With that he leaned down and picked me up, acting as though it took no more effort than lifting the empty tunic would have! I clutched at his neck convulsively, totally unused to that sort of handling, but once it was clear he wasn't about to immediately drop me again, I loosened my hold and glared at the face that was now so close.

"I don't need any favors from you," I grated, hating the gentle, easy way he held me. "If you want me to move faster I'll do it, and without any help from you. You know damned well if you'd asked I would have refused, so put me down right now!"

"That's why I didn't ask," he returned, ignoring everything else as he moved along. "I don't want you crippled, so until we can find you something for your feet, we'll do it this way."

End of conversation. I would have enjoyed asking what he had in mind that he needed me uncrippled for, but he probably would have lied and it didn't matter in any event. He would not find me cooperating with anything he intended, not when it was my family who would suffer if I did. He could carry me to Evon's Realm and back, and even that would not change my mind.

It took a while to get close enough to the farmhouse to really see it, and by then there was very little doubt that it was empty. There were still a few chickens scratching around in the yard, but one of the barn doors stood open and the house was beginning to need whitewashing even though its own door was solidly closed. The supposed Kylin of Arthil finally put me down, then loosened his sword in its scabbard.

"You stay here while I look around inside," he said, briefly eyeing the barn. "If anyone shows up call me fast, but otherwise don't move from that spot. With the way your feet are you won't get very far, and you won't like it if I have to come after you."

He said his piece, then drew his sword and moved toward the house, not even bothering to glance in my direction. It apparently made no difference to him how furious he got me, or that I didn't need him to point out how little distance I could cover on foot. He had done such a good job that I was hoping hard

we'd stumbled on the home camp of those bandits and that they would attack as soon as he opened the door, but no such luck. He kicked the door open then jumped inside without anything happening, and the following lack of the sound of steel on steel told me nothing probably would. I waited a moment until my hopes were completely dashed, then took myself inside out of the sun.

As soon as my eyes had adjusted to the inner dimness, I was able to tell that the former occupants of the house had moved away rather than been chased off. The empty wooden floor of the room showed traces of where a table and chairs had stood, and the hearth had been cleaned of the remnants of the last fire it had held. I moved to the window in the right-hand wall, unlatched it, then threw it wide to allow in fresh air rather than the stale stuff the room was too full of. With that done I turned back to find I was being regarded with something less than friendliness.

"I always knew Sword Companies didn't do much of a job teaching their Blades how to take orders," my sweet companion remarked from the doorway to the next room, resheathing his sword. "You're living proof of that."

"Fighters who couldn't quite make the grade usually look at it like that," I remarked back, totally unimpressed with his annoyance. "To be a Blade you need to be able to think for yourself, to know the difference between times it's necessary to follow orders, and times when it isn't. I know the difference."

"I can see that," he said, the dryness of his tone suggesting disagreement rather than concurrence. "When I give the orders, you don't find any need to obey them even if disobeying puts your life in danger. We're going to have some trouble over that, aren't we?"

His question was closer to being a statement, showing he had slightly more intelligence than I'd given him credit for, but the way he was looking at me didn't quite have the effect he was obviously hoping for. It wasn't difficult seeing he was very used to having his orders obeyed, that hardness in his light eyes undoubtedly helping to make it happen, but I was too used to the displeasure of dangerous men to take much notice of it any longer.

"I don't intend having trouble over anything," I answered with a shrug, then sat down on the floor and leaned back against the log wall under the window. "As I said before, you're free to do as you like. Just let me know when you discover we should have taken to the road after all. I want the chance to say, "I told you so." "

"I hate disappointing you, but you won't be getting that chance," he came back, moving into the middle of the room. "This house will give us a place to stay for the night, and those chickens outside will give us something to eat. I found some leather in the next room, probably left behind because it was badly tanned, but the bottoms of your feet won't know the difference. And on top of all the rest we'll have the chance to talk here, something I think we need more than food and shelter."

The look in his eyes had turned odd, but he was gone from the room before I could decide just what the oddness entailed. I couldn't imagine what he wanted to talk about, unless he intended being silly enough to threaten me. That would be just like the cowardly vermin he and his associates were, but if they were expecting to get anywhere with the tactic they were in for disappointment.

He was back in just a few minutes with a double armload of the chopped wood I'd seen stacked at the side of the house, and part of the load went into the hearth to be lit by the flame-starter in his belt pouch. I certainly expected to be given chores of my own to do, and was surprised when I didn't have to bother refusing. It occurred to me that in his place I wouldn't have been too eager to eat anything I'd had a chance at, and he was most likely looking at it in the same way. He went outside again once the fire was well started, and this time stayed out there for quite a while.

I didn't realize I'd fallen asleep until my eyes opened again, showing me that darkness had come. I was stretched out on my left side on the floor, and the brightness of the fire in the hearth was enough to make me look away. I sat up rubbing the back of my neck, wondering what could have caused me to drop off like that, as though I were exhausted after hours and hours of fighting. I couldn't remember being more than very faintly weary, so it didn't make any sense.

"In case you're wondering, you still have to have traces of the swamp mist in you,I" I was told, the words soft and easy. "You'll know it's completely gone when you can sit down for a few minutes without falling asleep."

I looked over to the left of the hearth from where his voice had come, and saw him sitting down leaning against the wall, the very edge of the fireglow touching him. So that was the name of what had been used to put me out, swamp mist, and wasn't it pure coincidence that he happened to know.

"You have to be hungry after not eating all day," he said, moving slowly where he sat so as not to jostle whatever it was I could just see in his lap. "Cat, here, and I have already had our meal, so what's left is yours. Wait just a minute and I'll get it."

"Don't bother," I said before he could coax the cat he'd mentioned out of his lap.

"If I want something to eat, I'll get it for myself."

I leaned back against the wall again, finding it not difficult at all putting off the thought of eating. I wouldn't have taken anything from him even if I'd been starving, but I wasn't even really hungry. I decided I was feeling a little too vague to be hungry, and let it go at that.

"All right, so our talk gets to come first," he said with a sigh, lifting the cat out of his lap before rising and walking over to sit again beside me to my right. "I doubt if anyone can say we've been blending beautifully since the first time we met, and it doesn't make much sense to let it go on like this. I think we ought to try to be friends."

"And I think I'd rather pick my own friends," I answered, not bothering to look at him. "I'm a big girl now, and I've even learned to tell the difference between people I like and those I don't. Guess which category you fall into."

"How many tries do I get?" he asked, sounding the least bit tired. "Look, I know I was hard on you this afternoon, but you have to understand that it's my responsibility to get you safely home. If I'd let you half-cripple me because your mood had soured, I'd hardly have been in a position to do what I had to. Are you going to hold that against me for the rest of our lives?"

"Possibly for the rest of yours," I allowed, watching the flames jump in the hearth. "I expect mine to be a good deal longer - starting from the minute I get my hands on a weapon."

"I don't believe I could have been disappointed at the thought of having a shy and gentle woman for a wife," he muttered, stirring where he sat. "I can tell you right now that your attitude is going to dim the golden glow of our marriage even before it's properly begun. How can I make you happy, if all you're interested in is coming after me with a sword in your hand and blood in your eye?"

"You can manage it by standing still," I answered with satisfaction, feeling the pleasure of it in my imagination. "And you can also stop worrying about something that will never happen. I wouldn't marry you even if you decided to cut me down right now."

"Something like that would take the attraction out of our wedding night," he said, his tone having gone dry

again. "It might make for a more pleasant time in later years, but at the moment the idea doesn't have much appeal. And that would be a good argument for my having lost interest in our betrothal. Why would you think I'd want to end our betrothal?"

I felt enough annoyance at that to turn my head to look at him, and found a very bland expression looking back at me out of the dimness. It was clear he had a reason for wanting me alive, but I didn't yet know what it was.

"What you want doesn't particularly matter," I said, disliking the way those eyes gazed directly at me. "What I want is more to the point, and I think I've made myself clear about that. If you ever find anyone crazy enough to marry you, you can be certain it won't be me."

"You seem to have a lot of trouble remembering that you're promised to me," he observed, reaching out a big hand to brush a strand of hair from my shoulder. "Your father personally registered the match at Court, which means he's responsible for producing my bride. If you refuse to go through with it, he's the one who will have to face the consequences."

"I can face my own consequences!" I snapped, immediately even angrier as I tried to knock his hand away and missed when he moved it fast out of my reach. "If I go to the King and tell him I'm the one who refuses the match, he'll have to leave my father alone."

"The Law won't allow King Klieant to leave your father alone," he retorted, leaning away from the wall. "The Laws were established in the first place to keep peace among the nobility, since the breaking of a Ducal betrothal contract has been known to lead to war between the duchies. Even if my father doesn't press the matter, your father will spend years paying off the fines involved, and that could very well be the least of it. Most women aren't like you, Sofaltis, so there's no provision made for refusal on the part of the bride. If the wedding doesn't take place, no one but your father will be blamed."

"But that's not fair!" I shouted, throwing myself to my feet to stride to the fire. "It's my life and my decision, and

I'll make the King see that even if I have to cut down every half-baked Fighter who tries to keep me from Kim!"

I stood in front of the hearth with my arms wrapped around me, not against an outer chill but an inner one. I couldn't be so completely trapped, I just couldn't be, it simply wasn't fair! The man was an enemy, for Evon's sake! The Law couldn't still demand that I marry him!

"It might have been your decision if you'd been born a peasant," his voice came from behind me, unbelievably sounding sympathetic and compassionate. "As someone who was nobly born, you have no more choice than the rest of us. I agree that it isn't fair, but it's already done and nothing can change that. And it could have been considerably worse. You might have been bound to someone who had no interest in you as an individual at all. I may not look like the best of all possible mates right now, but I can certainly assure you my interest isn't in any way lacking."

His hands came to my arms at that, stroking gently over the tunic sleeves, just as though he were telling the truth. It would have helped if he really was a friend rather than an enemy, but other than that it made no difference at all. If I didn't cooperate, my father would be dishonored and ruined, something he'd made very clear.

"If you're trying to make me believe I'm the only thing you're interested in, you're wasting your time," I said, acting as though I didn't notice his hands on me. "If not for what comes along with me, your interest would undoubtedly be as intense as most men's toward a female Blade. And if you want to discuss

convenient memory lapses, let's talk about yours in relation to me. How much good will being my father's heir do you if you have to put up with the sort of married life I'm prepared to supply? And not only prepared, but eager and willing?"

"What sort would that be?" he asked, his voice now wary and his hands stilled. "I'm prepared to concede you quite a lot of freedom, but there are certain things..."

"Concede me?" I said with a short laugh, stepping away from his hands and then turning to face him. "See what I mean about your memory lapses? Why would I need any freedom conceded to me, when I already have it all? I can make you the biggest laughingstock in the entire Kingdom, and have fun every minute I'm doing it. You won't have to worry about turning your back on me, because I won't wait for your back to be turned. Every bit of it will be right out in the open, where you - and everyone else - can see it."

"Now let's take it easy and discuss this calmly," he said in response to my growing enthusiasm, trying not to sound as worried as he undoubtedly was. "You're talking about doing "everything" out in the open, but you know and I know there are quite a lot of things you couldn't do without disgracing your family as well as me. Since you'd never disgrace your family, there aren't..."

"Is that so?" I interrupted again, folding my arms and smiling happily as I looked up at him. "You think I'd worry about disgracing a family that was going to have you at its head? I think the first thing I'll do is ride around to visit the Counts and Barons - and challenge their chief Fighters after insulting them personally. And of course I'll have very public arrangements made with every night house in Gensea, to be sure the ones I choose as my favorites will be available when I want them. Drinking contests at the taverns, riding out with the City Guard when there's nothing more interesting to do, maybe even starting my own Sword Company..."

"You can't possibly believe I'd stand still for all that," he finally got out with a laugh of incredulity, a small change from the blank disbelief he'd been showing. "Any man who did stand for it would be an idiot, and I may be a lot of things but that's not one of them."

"How would you stop me?" I asked, still smiling pleasantly. "Blade to blade in formal challenge? I'd be a widow so fast it would make your head spin - right off your shoulders into the dirt. What's the matter? Aren't you still hot and eager to make me your wife?"

To say his expression had gone peculiar would be to understate abysmally, and I wondered why I hadn't thought of that before. Show him the Blade as well as the woman, Traixe had said, and I'd forgotten all about it. If he was the only one who could call the whole thing off, it was obviously my job to see that he did - no matter what those behind him wanted him to do instead.

"Sofaltis, I really don't know what to say," he managed after a moment, the peculiar expression still with him. "I

don't know why you're so dead set against being my wife, but it must have something to do with the way all this started. Don't you see you're blaming me for something that wasn't my fault? If it had been up to me I would have told you everything, but the choice wasn't mine. Others had the final word, and you're holding it against me. You mentioned fairness before; is that what you call fair?"

Those light eyes were directly on me, open and frank and oddly vulnerable. If I hadn't known better I would have almost believed him, would have almost been ashamed of myself for not giving him any chance at all. The only thing that ruined it for him was that I knew who those "others" were, and I have very little sympathy for people who are enemies to me and mine.

"That's funny, but I can't quite see them," I said, looking him up and down in the firelight and even trying to peer behind him. "I wonder where they can be."

"They?" he repeated, back to looking blank as he glanced down at himself. "What are you talking about? What is it you're looking for?"

"I'm looking for the chains and the marks of the torture they used to force you into going along with them," I answered, standing still again as soon as he went for it. "Since I can't seem to find any, I have to conclude that they're very persuasive - or you're awfully easy to talk into things. For your sake, I hope you're just as easy to talk out of them - and that is what I call fair, as in warning."

"You know, I'm discovering there's a limit to any man's patience," he said, his skin having darkened enough to notice even in the firelight. "You're not hearing anything I say, and not because you can't but because you won't. I've tried to be understanding and reasonable, but your stubbornness goes well beyond reason. Maybe I ought to simply say you'll do as you're told, and leave it at that."

"You can leave it anywhere you please," I said with a snort, still not terribly impressed. "For myself, I'll be taking it - as far as I like. You can either kill me now, back out of the marriage as soon as we return, or go through with it and live a life you can't even begin to imagine. The Law says the choice is yours and I'd never break the Law, so have fun making your choice."

"Who do you think you are, Evon's twin sister?" he asked with exasperation, folding his arms as he stared down at me. "You make it sound as if you think you're the best Blade ever to have lived, and for some reason I tend to doubt that."

"I'm good enough to take you," I came back, meeting his gaze with an evil grin. "And if you were that unsure about it, you wouldn't have been so careful to "doubt" me while I was unarmed. How - discreet - of you."

"Why, you little twerp!" he growled, straightening as he unfolded his arms. "You'll never see the day I back down from a runt who's half mouth and all ego! Even if you had Evon to stand behind, I could-"

He broke it off abruptly, just short of the challenge I'd really been trying hard for, and put a hand to his face. He muttered something into that hand, then took it away as he shook his head.

"You almost made me do it," he said, this time staring at me accusingly. "All I wanted to do was settle things peaceably, and you almost pushed me into a fight. What am I going to do with you?"

"Absolutely nothing," I answered, staying with the ob-noxiousness that seemed to bother him so much. "Especially once I'm armed again. By then I don't doubt you'll be even more interested in peace. Where did you say that chicken was?"

Things had begun working out so well that my appetite had suddenly returned. The man in front of me was just short of being furious, and by the time I finished with him he'd be so ready to challenge me that nothing would stop him. I'd be sure that happened in front of enough witnesses to prove I wasn't to blame, and that would be the end of my problems.

"The chicken's over there, in the corner of the hearth," he said in a continuing growl, pointing behind me and to my right. "You'll forgive me, I think, if I don't wish you a hearty appetite."

With that he turned and stomped off, and that was it for the rest of the night.

## **Chapter Nine**

By the time it was light enough out to see things easily, Kylin had sufficient chicken cooked and wrapped to last them for a short while, and had made a crude pair of sandals for the girl. He had just enough leather left over for a second pair, which would hopefully, along with the first pair, get them back to her father's castle. If he had to carry her again he would, but if he had the choice it would be to leave her on her own two feet.

"To keep from getting knocked off my own feet," he muttered to the cat that rubbed at his ankles, then he crouched to scratch at a light gray head. The cat was gray, the new day was starting off gray, and what sleep he'd managed to get the night before had been filled with eyes of gray. He stared out the open door without really seeing the yard, patiently waiting for the swamp mist to let the girl wake up, not so patiently trying to understand why things refused to work out right between them. She had spent the night sleeping not five feet away from him, and all he'd been able to do was dream about her.

His sigh was easily the tenth that morning, and if he'd been aware of it he would have felt disturbed. He'd never had so much trouble with a woman before, and if she kept on pushing at him the way she'd been doing, he'd end up jumping into something they'd both regret. All he wanted to do was hold her in his arms and let her know she'd never be sorry she had to marry him, but all she wanted was to start a fight. He was more than half tempted to let her do just that, and then finish it in a way she would not soon forget. She was all but begging for it, and if he had any brains at all he'd-

No. That was one thing he refused to do. She was the woman who would become his wife, and if it made her happy to believe she could best him with swords, let her keep on believing it. She was so damned unhappy about everything else he could almost feel her pain, and if he hadn't already given his word to go through with becoming Duke Rilfe's heir, he would probably get her home and then go back to being a King's Fighter. She could be so bright and alive, shining with Evon's glow - until he mentioned anything at all about the marriage. If just once she would smile at him when she wasn't threatening him with something -

"Don't you have anything better to do with your time than play with a cat?" her voice came suddenly from behind him, still sounding half asleep. "Like waking me up to let me know the new day has started?"

"We have a lot of walking ahead of us today," he answered without turning, still stroking the cat. "We'll cover more distance if you start out well rested rather than tired. We can leave as soon as you get your new sandals on."

"Then I guess we can leave," she said, not quite swallowing a yawn. "I found them where you left them, and I suppose they'll have to do. As adequate footgear, I'll grant they're better than nothing."

But not much beyond that, he finished for her in his mind as he straightened and turned. She stood just a few steps beyond the cabin's bedchamber, trying to stretch the sleep out of her body, the movement making the tunic ride up even higher on her thighs. It occurred to him to wonder if she were deliberately provoking him, and the hell of it was she very well could be. She didn't seem to understand that if he wanted to, he could carry her back into the bedchamber to the abandoned grass-filled pad she'd slept on, and then take complete satisfaction from her. To her that would be attack calling for immediate and honorable challenge, an excellent reason for starting another, more deadly fight. To everyone else it would be no more than his due under betrothal rights and her duty to provide, but he had no doubt she would not be looking at it like that.

"I'll get our provisions," he said, leaving the doorway to walk to the hearth. He'd wrapped the chicken in an improvised bag made from some sacking he'd found in the barn, the ends tied in a sling that went over his left shoulder. He'd doused the fire he'd built once he was through with it and had closed the window they'd opened the day before, and that left nothing to do but shut the door behind them. The girl stepped

outside ahead of him, and then the last of it was done.

"At least these 'sandals' will make walking back through the woods easier," the girl grudging, raising one foot to give critical inspection to what she wore. "As long as it's only things on the ground that need to be worried about."

Kylin knew the girl meant the whole top of her foot was uncovered except for the binding thongs, but he hadn't been able to do any better than that. There had only been enough leather to make doubled pads for the bottoms of her feet, the thongs slid through slits cut in the bottom layer. The sandals would last until the slits tore themselves completely open, and after that it just might be possible to cut new slits without having to use the last of the leather now tucked into the back of his belt.

"I did the best I could," he said, glancing around at the grayish day to feel less like an absolute failure. "Next time arrange to be found by a cobbler."

"Look, I didn't mean to make you feel -" she began, a blurting that had gotten away from her. She cut it off before it grew into a real, live apology, and was immediately back to the attitude that reminded him so much of the fighter who had challenged him at the inn where he'd met his father. "There are some people who are always doing the best they can. Unfortunately for those around them, that's never quite good enough. I'm assuming I get to lead out again."

She started off in the direction they'd come from, and for an instant he was too startled to stop her. He'd had the suspicion that she was giving him a hard time on purpose rather than because she had the nature of a mountain witch, and her near slip had confirmed it. She seemed to feel she had to oppose him, and if he could just find out why, he might be able to do something about it.

"You're half right," he said in answer, catching up in two strides to take her by the shoulders and turn her. "You do get to go first, but that's the way you'll be going. See that track out there? It goes in the same direction as the road, but won't be as hard on your sandals - or as easy to watch by the people who misplaced something."

"Or as likely to come anywhere near that inn I wanted," she said, looking up at him stubbornly. "My sandals and I are willing to take our chances on the road."

"My boots and I aren't," he came back, not far from grinning. "Since we three are bigger than you three, we'll take the track."

The look she gave him would have put a basilisk to shame, and when she spat on the ground just in front of his feet he was surprised the ground didn't immediately dissolve. The gesture was one he'd seen before any number of times, and usually called for a very specific response to the insult. Rather than following protocol and drawing on her, though, he chose a gesture of his own that was, in that instance, a good deal more satisfying. Turning her again in the proper direction, he sent her off with a smack to the backside not much more gentle than the one he'd given her the day before. He really did want to get along with her, but letting her insult him like that wasn't the way he could accept getting it done.

The girl snarled and grumbled, muttering things under her breath, but the track was what she followed. Kylin had been disgusted with himself for letting the horse get taken, but the extra time walking would give him with Sofaltis just might turn out to be the best of it. She wasn't likely to tell him what was bothering her if he came right out and asked, so he was going to have to try coaxing it out of her in bits and pieces. So far he knew she was completely against marrying him, but would do it for her father's sake just the way he'd been assured she would. What he needed to know was why she was so solidly against him, and what he could do to change her mind.

The track ran mostly in the open, around trees rather than through stands of them, and seemed to have been made by a wagon or wagons taking the same route a number of times. Kylin stayed alert for any sign of the bandits they'd had trouble with the day before, but the hours passed and there was no sign of them. There was also no sign of the sun, which couldn't seem to break through the thickening gray piled low in the skies. It wasn't quite as hot as it had been, but the air was heavy with a threat of rain.

They stopped at what felt like noon to eat the chicken he was carrying, but there hadn't been any way to bring water. They would either have to find a brook, or take advantage of the rain when it finally came down, but that still left them with a rather dry meal. The girl sat in the grass looking at everything but him, her long legs bent to the left, the food he'd given her accepted silently and reluctantly. She was making it plain she had nothing to say to him, and that that turn of events was entirely his fault. For his own part Kylin had never realized before how good women were at doing things like that, and discovered he was enjoying himself despite the heavy quiet.

After the meal they continued on, and the clear space around the track began to grow narrower. The woods to either side were also beginning to be more tangled, as though no one had ever forced a way deeper through them. Kylin found himself watching even more carefully for what might come out of those woods, and when a wide gap appeared to the left he discovered he wasn't the only one alert and watching. The breeze had grown strong enough to let him know what lay through the gap, and just as he said, "Water," and pointed, the girl half turned to do exactly the same.

For an instant they were smiling at each other sheepishly, amused that they'd said the same thing at the same time, but then that old curtain came down over the girl, separating her from Kylin more completely than a stone wall would have done. She turned without another word and started for the gap, and he had no choice but to follow the same way, wishing it was no more than a stone wall between them. The way he felt right then, he could have torn it down with his bare hands.

The gap in the woods was less obvious from the inside, but the faint trail was clear enough to follow and led to a swiftly running spring. Whoever had made the wagon track had probably made the gap as well, to mark out the place where water might be found. The girl glanced around before going to her knees near the water, and once she had drunk her fill Kylin knelt in the dimness to do the same. He was just rising from the clear, cold water when a sound came from the brush to his right. It was no more than a brief, frantic rustle that stopped almost as quickly as it had started, but Kylin's sword whispered from its scabbard even as the girl froze.

"Move slowly back behind me," Kylin said softly without taking his eyes from the place the sound had come, at the same time going toward it. He didn't know Sofaltis hadn't obeyed him until he moved a section of the brush aside with his blade, and heard the sound of softly indrawn breath.

"It's a fawn," she said in what was nearly a whisper, no more than a foot away on his right. "Its hind leg is caught, and it can't get loose."

Which, of course, was something he'd already been able to see for himself. The fawn had probably been drinking at the spring with its mother, and when he and the girl had startled them with their approach, the little thing, in its haste to get away, had gotten tangled.

"Don't touch it, or its mother might not take it back," Kylin said, and not until the words were out did he realize that Sofaltis had again said the same thing at the same time as he. This time they laughed straight out, softly so as not to startle the fawn, but heartily enough to cheer Kyün considerably. Things seemed to be looking up, and since he had the small, trapped animal to thank for that, it was only fair that he return the favor.

Moving carefully closer and crouching, the big Fighter could see that it was a rope of thorns keeping the fawn where it trembled in fear. He reached forward slowly with his sword, holding the point well down against the possibility of sudden, frantic struggle, and severed the vine to the right of the small leg with a quick stroke. Logically that should have freed the leg and the fawn with it, but logic had chosen that time to spread its hands in mystified loss.

"Why isn't the stupid thing letting go?" Sofaltis asked in a murmur of annoyance, leaning nearer over his right shoulder. "I can't see-oh, now I can. It's wrapped around itself right above the hoof, hanging on with teeth. If you cut the other side that loop will still be on the fawn, but at least the little beast will be free."

Kylin knew it was possible to handle it that way, freeing the fawn while leaving the loop of thorns around its leg, but he didn't care for the solution. If the fawn couldn't work the loop off before its leg began growing, the thorns would bury themselves deeper and deeper, causing constant pain, probable crippling, and eventually a death not quick enough to be kind. No, he couldn't very well do it that way, so that left only one other option.

Instead of answering the girl, Kylin rested his sword on the ground and leaned forward slowly and carefully with his left hand. The thorns on the vine were very much like the teeth Sofaltis had named them, and their short but very sharp points helped to keep the tangled vine wrapped tight. Kylin edged two fingers inside the loop where the thorns seemed smaller and tried to coax the cut end loose, but although some of the thorns disengaged and the vine slid a little, it still refused to come free. He tugged again, trying to move nothing but his fingers - and inadvertently tightened the loop around the slender leg it held captive.

The fawn had, until then, been standing rigidly with the uncontrolled quiver of terror all through it, but the sensation of pain was just too much for it. It exploded into the struggle of desperation, pulling with all its small amount of strength, and an instant later was free and racing off deeper into the woods. Kylin had tried jerking back at the first indication of movement and had managed to do so, and was therefore surprised at the abrupt pain in his left hand.

"Now that's more like it," Sofaltis announced in normal tones, satisfaction in her voice as she began to turn to him after watching the fawn out of sight. "Free again and able to run with the wind, not caught in a trap like - For Evon's sake, what happened to your hand?"

"The thorns must have caught me when the vine whipped back," Kylin said as he resheathed his sword after straightening, his bloody left hand held out in front of him. "It's not too bad, and it isn't my sword hand, after all..."

"So let's ignore it until you bleed to death," the girl finished for him in disgust, looking up from his hand into his eyes. "For your information your life is mine to take, and I won't be cheated out of it by some thorns. Get back to the spring so I can take care of it."

The order carried a kind of refusal to be ignored that surprised Kylin, but the satisfaction he felt outweighed the surprise by quite a bit. For the first time the girl seemed to be seeing him as an actual human being, and the loss of blood was a small price to pay for so large a step. Rather than grinning the way he wanted to, he gave a small, indifferent shrug and turned back to the brook.

The first touch of the very cold water on the thorn gouges was something Kylin was braced for, but he was still glad when the hand finally went numb. The skin of his palm had been shredded open rather than simply pierced, and if it had been his sword hand he would have had something of a problem. Sofaltis waited until the blood flow was nearly stopped, then began ripping and tearing at the tunic she wore. She had obviously noticed the extra drapes and folds of the garment, and was intent on removing the top

layer of cloth. When she had two wide strips and one narrow one, she gestured to his hand.

"Bring it out of there now and let the water drip off," she directed, folding one of the wide strips into a squarish pad, the inner surface of the cloth now out. "It would help to have something cleaner, but this will have to do."

When the pad was all folded she used the bottom of it to lightly pat the hand dry, then turned it over and placed it against the wound. The second wide strip followed the first and was coiled around the pad and hand, and then the narrow strip was used to tie it all on. Kylin felt as though he had a major wound rather than a few simple scratches under all that bandaging, but he wasn't about to complain.

"It's a good thing for me I'm traveling with someone who knows what she's doing," he remarked, supposedly adjusting the bandage but in reality watching the girl. "Most women seem to be raised to pass out at the sight of blood. Thank you."

He looked directly at her then, catching the very end of the expression that had been on her face. Without thinking she had begun showing pleased satisfaction over what he'd said, her features becoming younger and more open than he'd yet seen them, and then she seemed to remember who she was smiling at.

"You can keep your thanks for when I have a weapon in my hand again," she said, and if her tone wasn't hostile, it was, at the very least, cool. "That's the time you'll need to remind me you actually have a better side to your nature. Right now we still have a trail to follow."

Her turning away marked an end to the conversation, and Kylin followed feeling more confused than ever. Why in Evon's name would she appear surprised that he had a better side? She'd even seemed reluctant to admit to seeing something like that, and he couldn't understand why she would feel that way. Didn't everyone have better sides? Shouldn't a woman who was going to have to marry a man be pleased to discover he wasn't a thorough rogue? The girl was definitely unhappy rather than pleased, and Kylin was completely at a loss.

The trail continued on its way through the tangle, and although there were occasional sounds in the brush, nothing came charging out looking for a meal. Kylin kept a good portion of his attention alert against the possibility, but the rest of it was very much centered on the girl who walked in front of him. She, in turn, seemed to be preoccupied rather than simply silent, bothered by something and enmeshed in thinking about it. The big Fighter would have enjoyed knowing what was absorbing her attention, but was realistic enough to realize there wasn't much chance of that.

With both of them so wrapped up in other concerns, the beginning of the rainstorm caught the two almost completely by surprise. Neither had noticed how the gray skies had lowered and darkened, and the first raindrops were almost light enough to be ignored. The following drops, however, were not the same, and the prospect of a refreshing shower abruptly became the promise of a drenching downpour. Kylin and Sofaltis stopped to look quickly about themselves, and then the Fighter touched the girl's arm.

"There's a small opening in the brush a short way back," Kylin said over the strengthening rain, gesturing behind him. "We've got to try to find it."

"Why the rush?" the girl asked, suddenly deciding to pretend the drops weren't bothering her in the least. "If this is the first time you've been caught out in the rain, you have a surprise coming. Only leather does badly in it, and we aren't wearing leather."

"You mean you don't know?" Kylin responded immediately, trying to widen his eyes at her despite the rain. "If we stay out in this too long we'll shrink. I've seen it happen to friends of mine. One minute they

were my size, and the next-

His right palm indicated a distance waist-high from the ground, and when he shook his head with a tragic sigh a laugh forced its way out of the girl. Kylin could see she hadn't wanted to laugh, but when his grin joined in she laughed again, as tickled over the nonsense as he'd hoped she'd be. They laughed together for a moment, and then the girl noticed that the strength of the rain was increasing.

"Maybe we'd better find that opening of yours after all," she said, raising her voice to be heard over the rain noise as she swept sodden hair back out of her face with a hand. "If any rain is going to end up shrinking someone, this one looks like it's it."

"And I'd really hate being that small," Kylin agreed with another grin, taking the girl's arm. "It's this way."

They hurried through the growing downpour, trying to find what he'd only half-seen, and almost went past it because of their obstructed vision. At the last instant Kylin turned his head to look back, saw the narrow opening, guided the girl to it by the arm he held, then urged her in first. She had to go down on all fours to crawl through, but once Kylin had done the same he found the resulting tunnel through the heavy brush just a little wider than he'd expected. The two couldn't comfortably crawl side by side, but they would have been able to if the need had arisen.

Inside the bush tunnel the light dimmed considerably, especially since it went back into the woods before angling left and then stopping. Kylin had been half-anticipating meeting whatever had made that bush-den, and when they reached the end of it to find it empty, he allowed himself a silent sigh. Arguing over a shelter with its rightful inhabitant in such narrow confines could have proven tricky, especially with the girl crawling ahead of him. Thank Evon it had turned out to be unnecessary.

"You know, this isn't bad at all," the girl observed, beginning to make herself comfortable where the tunnel ended. "Dry shelter protected by all that undergrowth, abandoned but clean - all we're missing is a front yard with a well."

"If you accept your wells upside down, going back out from under the trees will supply the need," Kylin said, moving up closer to where she rested on her right side. "If it doesn't stop raining by dark, we'll spend the night here."

"If it doesn't stop raining by dark, we'll be spending a cold and soggy night here," she observed, lowering her head to examine the sodden tunic plastered to her. "Leather may not do well in the rain, but it lets you have more than five minutes out in it before it starts giving you trouble."

"But leather also resists being wrung dry," Kylin pointed out, coming even with where the girl lay. "Take the tunic off and squeeze the water out of it, and maybe by dark it will have dried."

"And if it hasn't, I can spend the night freezing," the girl said sourly, using her left hand to try squeezing the very bottom of the tunic. "Even in the north, I never really had to worry about freezing."

"You still don't have to worry about it," Kylin murmured, putting his arm about the girl as he leaned closer. "I'll make sure you don't freeze."

Her head snapped up and she parted her lips to say something, but Kylin's kiss ended whatever it would have been even before it started. He hadn't meant to do that, hadn't intended pushing the newborn warmth Sofaltis was beginning to show, but he couldn't help himself. The wet tunic was outlining every curve and rise of her, and his mind kept shouting that that woman was his. He'd wanted her from the very first moment he'd seen her, and having had her once had only fed his desire, not sated it. Her lips were so soft and warm under his, the memory of rain still on them, and although she'd begun by struggling in his

arms her lips weren't struggling. They were returning what they were being given, and the realization of that sent the heat racing all through his blood.

"Tisah," he murmured to the lids closed over her eyes, his hand in her hair as his lips continued to touch her. "My great-aunt's name was Sofaltis, and my great-uncle called her Tisah. I think I've decided to do the same."

"No - please - don't," she whispered with eyes still closed, trying to find the struggling she'd earlier lost. She wasn't referring to the name he'd chosen for her, and they both knew it.

"I won't hurt you," he crooned as though she were as young, innocent and afraid as she sounded, his right hand sliding down and under that very wet tunic. "I'd never hurt you, and I mean to prove it every day for the rest of our lives. You won't regret any of this, Tisah, that I promise."

She moaned and tossed her head as though she were in pain, but there were no more words from her. Her flesh was damp but so very soft, and Kylin nearly moaned himself at the feel of it. She was his, his! - and in just another few moments he would prove it to her. Right then he was savoring what his palm and lips touched, the movement of her against him, the feel of having his arms around her. It seemed as though he'd waited forever to experience that, and he wasn't going to ruin it all by rushing. He wanted to rush, by Evon's Silver Blade he wanted to rush, but instead he took her lips again fiercely, his hand this time going to that warmth between her thighs. Her gasp also brought her hands to his back, and then Kylin knew he was truly Home.

## Chapter Ten

The sound of birds woke me, and although I was very comfortable I couldn't at first remember where I was. It was dim there, the air had an after-rain freshness, a hard, warm body pressed lightly against my back, while a big arm circled my waist-

If there had been more headroom I would have sat bolt upright, thanks to the sudden return of memory. Without it all I did was stiffen, silently cursing myself for the biggest damned fool alive. The day before I'd not only let him touch me I'd cooperated, for Evon's sake, just as though he weren't an enemy to my family! I'd actually wanted him to touch me, and when he had I'd enjoyed it!

I closed my eyes again and just lay still, remembering with a good deal of bitterness how I'd assured my father that I wasn't the sort to fall prey to the first attractive man likely to come along. I was strong, and independent, and a Blade, and something like that would never happen to me. I couldn't quite understand why it had happened, unless it had been caused by the memory of the first time he'd made love to me. The big fool was unexpectedly good, and I wasn't used to denying myself the good ones, and he'd gone out of his way to make me laugh, and he hadn't even cursed the fawn when he'd gotten hurt freeing it -

But none of that changed the fact that he was my enemy.

I stirred a little under the arm around my waist, feeling annoyance begin to push its way in beside the upset. Now that I was thinking about it, I could suddenly see another possible reason for the way I'd behaved: his constant references to our "upcoming marriage." No matter what I'd said, he'd continued insisting that we were going to be married, and the attitude must have affected my judgment. I didn't want to marry him - or anybody - but the corner I'd been pushed into was telling me I'd have no choice - that he would be my husband - with a husband's rights - so I'd better get used to it -

"Son of a garbage eater!" I muttered under my breath, really getting angry. Wasn't that typical of a cowardly, enemy, coming at you from behind! He was using everything he could to defeat me, even my own mind, but it wasn't going to happen. It was time I started fighting back, and in the same way I was

being attacked. If he wanted to play the game of hints and assuming and taking-for-granted, there was a dandy version of it I could use...

"Well, good morning," I heard from behind me in a murmur, and the arm around my waist was suddenly more than simply there. "I'd say it was a lovely morning, the beginning of a really pretty day. What say we give it a proper greeting?"

His lips came to my right shoulder with that, showing he was telling more than asking, already well into the prerogatives of a husband. If he hadn't been an enemy I would have been more than interested, but he was so I couldn't afford to let myself be drawn in. I had no experience in dealing with husbands, but associating with men on an almost constant basis gives a woman very useful insights.

"Well, if you really want to," I gruded without turning to him, heavy reluctance and disinterest in my sigh of resignation. His hand, which had begun stroking my middle just below my breasts paused, and there was a moment of silence.

"After all that activity yesterday afternoon and last night, I expected more enthusiasm," he said then, his tone tinged with confusion and showing less assurance. "Are you trying to say you don't want me to make love to you?"

"I'm not silly enough to believe I can stop you," I said with another sigh, unhappy but resigned. "What difference does what I want make?"

"It makes a lot of difference," he returned, stung enough to use the arm that had been around me to shift me to my back. "You sound as though you expect to be raped and that bothers me, especially since what I best remember from yesterday is eager response."

"Well, of course I responded," I said with a small laugh, looking up into his sober face. "Once a woman has a certain amount of experience, she'll respond whether she wants to or not. The reaction becomes automatic, and she has very little control over it even if she turns out to be disappointed later."

"Disappointed?" he repeated, expressionlessly picking up on the word I'd wanted him to. "You didn't enjoy what we had together?"

"Oh, it wasn't that I didn't enjoy it," I hastened to assure him, putting one hand to his wide, bare chest in an effort to take the sting out of the bitter truth I was being forced to speak. "You have to remember how many men I've tried over the years, and some of them were so - really good - that it's hard for other men to - come up to the standards they set - Oh, dear, I don't think I'm saying this right..."

"No, it's all right," he muttered, no longer quite looking at me. "You can't be blamed for not-"

His words died out as his thoughts turned inward, the idea of having fallen short of the mark affecting his assurance the way I'd hoped it would. Women have one great benefit over men in that they don't need belief and self-assurance in order to perform; men, however, can't do without it. Laughter and ridicule won't stop a confident man any longer than it takes to get you out of your leathers, but understanding pity and commiseration can be devastating. Big, strong Kylin had gotten a taste of that, and suddenly his interest in proper new-day greetings wasn't as strong as it had been.

Very thoughtfully I refrained from interrupting his brooding, and when he came out of it after a minute or two the original subject was well behind us. It suddenly became a good idea to get back on the road as quickly as possible, and - although I was quietly sympathetic I didn't argue. Kylin of Arthil refused to let himself be pushed around as easily as other men, but when it came to being manipulated he seemed to have no resistance at all.

We got ourselves out from under the bushes before trying to - get back into clothing and such, which was then accompanied with Kylin's attention some place other than on me. The tunic I'd had from him had dried during the night, which meant I had no more to do than slip it on, then tie my improvised sandals. Surprisingly enough, even with trousers, and boots, and dagger and pouch belt, and swordbelt, my companion was dressed almost as quickly as I was. We then shared what was left of the chicken for breakfast, searched for and found a leaf-pocket of rainwater to wash the meal down, and then continued on our way.

The trail we were following didn't narrow again, and we continued on for hours with me, at least, hoping it would take us some place sooner rather than later. I used the silence of the hours for thinking purposes, but all that came out of the effort was added frustration. Making my enemy doubt himself was useful for keeping his hands off me while we traveled, but I wasn't foolish enough to believe it would affect his decision concerning our marriage. It wasn't me he primarily wanted, after all, so the plans he and his cohorts had made would stand. They had my father and me neatly boxed in, they thought, but there had to be a way out of the trap. Hours of thinking continued to leave me without the least idea as to where the key to freedom lay, but that didn't mean there wasn't any - or that I was ready to give up.

Midday came and we stopped to rest a while, but after no more than a few minutes we were walking again. Without food and water we couldn't afford to waste any time, especially since the tangle of woods all around wasn't offering us the option of hunting. We had to walk until we dropped, and then we had to walk some more. Otherwise we'd die there, walled off from what we needed to survive by ages-old vines and bushes and trees. Following the trail had turned out to be a very bad idea, and I no longer thought taking it was some complex enemy ploy. My companion also seemed disturbed over the impenetrability of the forest, and wasn't trying to waste time by dragging his feet.

The minutes and hours continued to go by without doing anything more than making me thirstier, and then we came on a change so abrupt, it was almost as though someone had posted a sign. The trail itself didn't widen, but suddenly, practically between one step and the next, the woods were no longer a mass of tangles. The vines seemed to be cleared away as far in as we could see on both sides, just as though gardening ladies had been by not too long ago.

"Thank Evon," my companion said fervently, pausing with me to look around. "If we've reached the point of farthest penetration by hunters, hopefully their village won't be too much longer down the road. Let's see if we can get there before this heat flattens us."

"You think there's a village ahead of us?" I asked, hurrying to catch up with the broader strides he was already taking. "Were you expecting it to be there?"

"I was hoping it would be there," he corrected, now watching the woods more carefully than he'd been doing. "It seemed to be a safe guess that the holding we found was established with a link back to its starting point - that it was an attempt at expansion rather than the urge to be alone - which made this trail safer for our purposes than the main road. If it had turned out I was wrong, we would have had to backtrack without the supplies we'd started with."

"Getting back to that spring wouldn't have been all that hard," I decided, not having considered the option sooner. "If we couldn't catch something to eat there, we'd deserve to starve. And then we'd have no choice but to find that outlaw camp and do a little raiding - which is something I wish I'd thought of sooner. It would have saved us this walk."

"By getting us killed?" he asked, but there was true amusement behind the words, and then he sobered again. "You know, I don't think any woman I ever met would have kept on walking without a single complaint, or would have passed up the chance of reminding me that going this way was something I'd

insisted on. You seem to be the answer to fifty man's prayers to Evon, and I wish I could have-

He broke off in the middle and simply went back to watching the woods, leaving me wishing I was in front of a practice pole with a sword in my hands. How dare he make me feel guilty for what I'd done to him that morning? And without even realizing he was doing it. He was an enemy, wasn't he? Then why should his compliments make me feel glad, and his belief that he hadn't satisfied me make me want to admit I'd been lying? It wasn't right and it wasn't sane, but my fingernails in my palms was the only thing that me quiet. For someone playing deep, nasty games he was so horribly open, and easy to hurt! Why did he have to pretending he was nice?

The best thing about my thoughts after that was that they kept me from remembering how thirsty I was. It took me a while to make myself understand that an enemy couldn't be nice, but after that it was a little easier burying the guilt. I'd never minded cutting down someone who was trying to do the same to me, but drawing blood from a helpless, unarmed victim is more than I have the stomach for. If that's what it took to be a successful Ducal heir, maybe I didn't have the makings of one after all.

We trudged on up the trail, seeing the woods thin more and more as we went, and then we came to the place where the forest disappeared into stumps. I knew it had to be the place the villagers had taken building logs from and was about to say something about how much closer we had to be, when Kylin stopped short beside me. I looked up to see that his attention was on what appeared to be a knot of people a short distance away, and then all thoughts of trees and the nearness of the village were gone from me. The main knot of people ahead were all in long skirts and huddled together, and those around them wore trousers and were carrying what couldn't be anything other than quarterstaves.

"I think you'd better wait here," my companion muttered, his eyes still on the scene ahead, his right hand already reaching over to loosen his sword. "If that turns out to be something other than what it looks like, I'll call you."

And then he was striding off without waiting for an answer, confidently expecting me to do exactly as I'd been told, silly enough to think I'd believe those men weren't attacking those women in some way. As I immediately followed after, I knew I'd have to revise my previous opinions of his intelligence. If the man really thought I was going to stay behind and do nothing to help, he wasn't stupid, he had mush for brains and was entirely beyond hope.

The closer I got, the easier it was to see that the women who were huddled together were really frightened. The men around them, only six to their ten or more, were laughing as they looked at their intended victims, but it wasn't clear what they were going to make them victims of. Kylin was about Five steps ahead of me, moving quickly but quietly, and suddenly one of the women stepped out away from the huddle to face one of the men.

"I can't believe you're doing this," she said, her voice carrying easily, a mixture of anger and fear in it. "These women haven't hurt you in any way, so how can you..."

"It ain't us as had the hurt, so that makes it worse," the man directly before her interrupted, a deep satisfaction of sorts in him. "All of you done bad by Grail, an" that's what makes you sinful. Th" priest says sinners deserve what they get and get what they deserve, "n we're here't"make it so."

"How can refusing to listen to this new priest be sinful in the eyes of Grail?" the woman asked in confusion, her voice now unsteady. "Just because they want to keep on doing things the way the old priest said was proper, doesn't mean they..."

"The old priest din't know the right way, but this'n do," the man broke in again, having no interest in listening to anything he didn't want to hear. "The priest says you all gotta be punished, "specially you, an"

then there won't be no more who try th' same. We's workin' fr the priest, so we's gonna go Home in Glory when we go, that's what he says. Now we's gonna get't it."

The man brought his quarterstaff up to hold it in both hands, and the woman stepped back without taking her eyes from him, knowing well enough that he now stood at the ready. Some of the others behind her began whimpering, all of them trying to huddle into each other, but the "it" they were supposed to get started with suddenly faced an unexpected delay.

"You men step away from those women, or you'll be going Home a lot sooner than you were planning on," my companion announced from where he'd stopped, about six feet behind the nearest man. "And if you think there'll be anything glorious about it, take my word for it: there won't be."

The women looked up as the men whirled around to face the newcomer, snarls covering male faces, hope covering female ones. They all saw that Kylin stood with his sword in his fist, point down but ready to be brought up, body loose and easy and set to move in any way it had to, no sign of tension at the numbers to be faced alone. The man who had done all the talking, unshaven and dirty and slow-looking, glanced around to see that his new opponent was alone, let that fact sink in, then jumped forward to end the challenge as fast as possible.

There have been endless arguments on the subject of a man with a sword facing a man with a quarterstaff, the point of contention being, of course, which one would win. Those who argue always seem to assume true skill on the part of both fighters, which usually means those backing the quarter-staff insist that the swordsman doesn't have a chance. The staff has longer reach, two ends that are equally effective, and most often is made of ironwood, which a sword won't split. A capable quarterstaff user should be able to take a capable swordsman with only a little effort - but the key word there is "capable."

The man jumping at Kylin was about as far from capable as you can get while still being alive. His hands began lifting his staff even as he moved, but what he did was raise it all the way to his left and then swing it down fast, almost as though he thought he was holding a cudgel instead of a staff. Kylin ducked under the attack with no effort whatsoever, a brief hesitation at first showing he didn't really believe the stupidity of what was happening, and then his own weapon swung toward the extended body of the fool who had left himself wide open. Homespun does very little to stop the advance of quickly moving steel, which means the fool screamed once before following his swing away and toward the ground.

The remaining men shouted and howled at having lost their leader that quickly and easily, but instead of being smart and giving up on something that had become a bad idea, they proved they were even shorter on brains than the first man had been. They all began charging toward Kylin, their staffs raised and swinging, and then followed after him as he backed away to give himself adequate fighting room. If they had formed a circle they very well might have had him, but a semi-circle was as close as they came, and they followed along as though they were on a string.

Which, of course, gave me time and room to move forward fast to the late fool on the ground, and appropriate his staff for my own use. I wasn't the best ever trained with a quarter-staff, but I knew how to use one and the feel of a weapon in my hands again was like rain after a drought. The staff was smooth-grained and heavy, just the way it should be, far too good a weapon for the fool who had been carrying it. I let my palms slide over its surface in what was almost a caress, and then I turned to those who were looking for a fight.

My former road companion was doing more ducking and jumping than standing and fighting, but only because there were four of them. If he had kept at it long enough he might have been able to take every one of them, but there was also the possibility that one of the four could have gotten lucky. With me behind them, however, the possibility was no longer in sight, which the first of them discovered when I

tapped him on the shoulder with the tip of my staff. He whirled toward me with his weapon in both hands, frowned when he saw who it was who had challenged him, and might have turned back to his original fight if I hadn't used my staff to rap him sharply on the left shin. He howled with the pain of the blow, getting mad at the same time, but he also committed the stupidity I was expecting. He lowered his staff in reflex reaction to the blow that had reached him, leaving his head open and unprotected by either end of his weapon. Flicking my left arm forward I rapped him hard on the head, and that was the end of his anger and his efforts.

My first opponent was only just folding to the ground when one of the remaining three turned and saw what was going on, and decided I would be easier to deal with than the man with the sword. He must have thought I'd come up from behind and gotten his friend that way, and it took a minute or two before he learned better. He actually turned out to know something about the weapon he held, and I had to do some fast swinging, blocking and moving of my own to keep from getting flattened. After the minute or two I feinted at his head, did it again, then swung the tail of my staff into his groin, nearly lifting him off the ground with the force of the blow. He choked as his arms and legs turned to water, and my head-blow must have come as a great relief to him. No longer feeling the pain, he crumpled into a heap and lay still.

I turned then to see how the last two were doing against Kylin, and discovered that they weren't, at least not any longer. While my attention had been diverted they had both ended up on the ground, and were lying unmoving with bloody wounds in very unhealthy spots. Their former opponent was between them and the site of my own battle, as though he'd been on his way to me when the action had abruptly ended, and even as I looked around he completed the journey.

"I'm not going to waste any more breath making polite, roundabout comments on the way you take orders," he said when he reached me, his voice low but a definite growl, his angry eyes matching. "The next time you ignore a direct order you're in trouble, and you won't be able to say you weren't warned. You're just lucky you weren't hurt, or I wouldn't be waiting for next time."

The only thing that kept me from telling him off then and there was the fact that I couldn't decide which of his imbecilic comments I wanted to tear apart first. I stood there spluttering in outrage, my right hand a fist around the staff as he wiped his sword on his trousers before resheathing it, and men we were surrounded by a horde of laughing, gratefully relieved women who kept me from showing an idiot what real staff-work was like.

"You two were absolutely wonderful," the woman who had spoken to the attackers said from the middle of the women all around us, as happy as they were but slightly calmer about it. "I don't know where you came from, but I don't doubt that Evon guided you in this direction. Thank you, thank you both."

"Believe me, it was our pleasure," the idiot answered, daring to smile at the woman as he said it. "Trash like that is always in need of sweeping up. Can you tell us what they were after?"

"Apparently they were after us," the woman said, losing a good deal of her happiness. She wore a long print dress much like those worn by the other women, but the way she spoke showed she wasn't entirely village-born and bred. Although the gray in her hair said she was into her fifth under-decade, she appeared strong and better kept than a village woman would be expected to be. She wasn't my size but was fairly tall, had dark hair and eyes, and a plain but very alive face. "Our village has recently been blessed with the arrival of a new priest of Grail," the woman went on, her words quieting the other women as well. "Our old priest was a man who was loved as well as liked, and many of us were shocked when he was told he had to leave here. Some tried arguing the point but he didn't; all he did was pack the little he had and then he left. He obeyed the demands of his order without question, and we were left with his replacement."

The woman made a face when she said that, and although the others didn't go quite so far as to do the same, they all looked as though they wanted to.

"The new priest was not only younger, he was also filled with an arrogance unusual to those who serve Grail," the woman said, gesturing with one hand as she tried to clarify the picture her words evoked. "He made no effort to get to know the people of the village individually, but instead called everyone to a meeting and announced the changes he was there to make in everyone's lives. I don't think we have the time to list all those changes now, and they aren't the main point anyway. The point is that the changes weren't suggestions - they were orders, and everyone was to obey without question.

"Needless to say, not everyone went along with obeying," the woman said with a sigh. "Many of the people felt that the changes were an affront to Grail and his teachings, decided that the new priest was either insane or just plain mistaken, and tried to go on with their lives the way they'd been before the man got here. No more than a day or two went by, and then those who had refused to obey the new priest began having - accidents. Or they were attacked by the trash every village has a few members of, and were badly beaten. In one or two instances it was the family of the man who suffered, like the family of our blacksmith. His wife had gone out herb and berry gathering with two of her friends, three men came across them, the friends got away - by the time help reached her, the three men had already-hurt her badly-

The woman fell silent for a moment, to quiet the choking fury rising in her, I thought, and then she took a deep breath and went on.

"The new priest gloatingly told everyone that the people who had been having trouble were having it because they refused to obey the demands of Grail. Most of those who had defied the priest were suddenly afraid that that was so, and began changing their lives the way they'd been told to do. Some of the men, though, supported by their families and wives, still refused to go along, saying they didn't believe Grail had had anything to do with what had been happening! The priest was furious, but there was nothing he could do to change their minds, not when his threats didn't work. That was a week or two ago, and with the peace and quiet we've been having we thought the trouble was all over with. And then this morning the priest sent messages to all of us, asking us to meet him here to discuss the problem of "returning lost sheep to the flock," as he put it. He wanted to appeal to us for our help, his message said, but when we got here there was no sign of him. What we found in his place, you already know."

"And enjoyed dealing with," I said, leaning on the staff I still held. "I have the distinct impression, though, that you aren't just another part of the victim group. You thanked Evon, as I recall, and the leader of that pack said something about the proposed punishment being "especially" for you. What did he mean?"

"He meant that my punishment was going to be a special message for my father," she answered, annoyance beginning to rise in her dark eyes. "I'm Indris, and my father is a priest of Evon who came here to live with me a few years ago. I was a Blade when I was young, but I left that life to marry and settle here with my husband. He died a few years ago, and shortly after that my father came to live with me. He's never tried preaching in this village, and he got along well with the old priest of Grail. The new one wants him out, but he's refused to go. This was obviously supposed to give him reason for going."

"If he's anything like a priest of Evon I know, it would have given him reason to do something else entirely," I remarked, then looked around at the women. "Is there anyone here who doesn't believe their village will be much better off without this new priest and his new ideas?"

"Of course not," the woman Indris said while the others shifted in upset. "But the people here believe that to do anything to him would be terrible sacrilege. They don't want him, but they can't bring themselves to raise a hand against him."

"As long as my hand is now available, they don't have to," I said, straightening where I stood. "If what he says goes counter to all of Grail's teachings, then he can't be considered anything but a pestilence that needs eradicating. Let's all pay him a visit, and let him know what we learned from these helpers of his. Right after that I'll send him on his way."

"I think someone else should get to do the sending," a voice said, a male voice that hadn't spoken for the last couple of minutes. "To keep me from feeling unneeded, you understand."

"But you are unneeded," I came back, turning my head to the fool who now stood a good deal closer on my left. "If you don't believe it, step out with me away from these people and I'll prove it."

"I'm too hot, tired, hungry and thirsty for games," he returned, giving me a pleasant smile. "We'll go on to the village, take care of putting out the rest of the trash, then sit down with a cup of brew and discuss anything you like."

I was about to point out that a discussion wasn't what I had in mind, when I realized something really infuriating. My right hand had automatically begun lifting the staff, but begun was as far as I got. Another hand was on it from behind me, a much stronger hand that was holding it down. I'd let the woman's story distract me enough to give my enemy a chance to get a grip on the staff, and I'd had enough experience with him to know that that meant the weapon was no longer mine. I wanted to tell him how much I despised him, but the woman Indris was suddenly right near me, her hand reaching for my arm.

"What's wrong with me - of course you two must be tired and hungry," she said, closing her hand on my arm in a gentle but firm way. "You save our lives, and all we do in return is stand around bending your ears without once offering any sort of hospitality. I know my father will want you to be our guests, and I certainly do. Just come with us; the village isn't far."

Her grip on me began urging me along, the other women adding their agreement and encouragement, and there was really no reason to stand there arguing the possession of something I'd already lost. After no more than the briefest hesitation I let go of the staff and simply went with them, taking along no more than a truth I finally understood completely. No enemy can ever be nice, no matter how they twist things to make it seem otherwise.

It took only a few minutes to walk to the village, and all the way there Indris refused to let the conversation die, using the willing cooperation of the other women in an attempt to lighten my mood. They didn't know what trouble there was between their rescuers, but they seemed determined to try smoothing it over. I let their words simply float around me as I walked, hating the man I'd briefly fought beside, wishing the attackers had managed to do for him instead of the other way around. It was more than clear that he was afraid of me, afraid to let me get permanent possession of a weapon he knew damned well I would not hesitate to use on him. I'd been a mindless fool not to use the weapon while I had it, and would be sure not to be that stupid a second time.

The village we came to was bigger than I expected it to be, and when someone mentioned its name, Binder's Down, I suddenly knew where I was. The city of Gensea was about half a day's ride to the south, and the villagers were my father's people. We drew stares as we walked up the main dirt street past the store, the tavern and the smithy, and then we drew more hurrying men than stares. Questions demanding answers flew in our direction, replies were quickly given, and once the whole story was out, we found ourselves in the midst of a furious mob instead of a simple group of people.

"It's more'n time something was done!" one man shouted to the rest, his hand a fist in the air. "Are we gonna wait until the small children are attacked next? Are we men, or are we spineless cattle?"

"How c'n you talk about doin' somethin' to a Servant o' blessed Grail?" another man demanded in turn,

as angry as the first but considerably more upset. "We don't want our village damned to th' end o' eternity! We can't do nothin' more'n ask th' priest to leave."

"And if he won't go?" a third voice demanded, and then Kylin of Arthil was making his way toward the muttering men. "If he refuses to go, all you'll have to look forward to is more of the same. Is this what you people really want?"

"You c'n afford't" talk," the second man came back, glaring at the stranger who was mixing into village business. "You don't live here, an' it won't be you 'n yours who're damned. An' a follower o' Evon don't have no right talkin' 't' them who follow Grail."

"Why shouldn't those who follow Grail have the same rights as those who follow Evon?" Kylin countered, looking around as he spoke. "If a priest of Evon arranged what this so-called priest of Grail did, he'd never live long enough to decide he'd made a mistake. And would a real priest of Grail ever have done this? Doesn't this insanity go against everything Servants have ever taught before? You know your religion better than I do. Is sending men to attack helpless women something you've been taught to do by every priest you've had?"

"It never happened before this new one came," the first man spoke up, looking around at his fellow villagers. "I know it and you know it, and there ain't nobody who can say different. What I say is that he ain't no real priest of Grail, and we gotta get rid of him."

"You gonna take a chance o' bein' damned forever, Aik?" the second man asked the first, looking more as though he wanted to be convinced rather than wanting to argue. "You go against th' priest, that's wh't c'n happen."

"If he's here talking for Grail, Limis, it don't matter none if I am damned," the first man answered, looking straight at his friend. "If Grail ain't Grail no more, I don't want nothing to do with what he changed to. And if he ain't no real priest of Grail, leaving him here has gotta be the sin and blasphemy. I'm going, and it don't matter to me none if you come or stay."

The man Aik turned away then, but he didn't walk away alone. Most of the other men followed him without hesitation, and one of them was his friend Limis. Kylin graciously let them move ahead and then followed after, willing to let them see to their own affairs as long as they could. I took my own turn at following with Indris beside me, and the rest of the crowd came behind us.

Grail's House had obviously been the modest construction it was in most villages, but as we came up to it I was able to see signs of rebuilding and enlarging going on. The new priest apparently wanted more in the way of comforts than his predecessor had required, and was having his followers make the necessary changes.

Five men glanced up from the work they were doing, none of them looking particularly pleased to be in the middle of something like that, and then they were stepping back and away, either making themselves a part of the crowd or quickly getting out of its way.

"Priest, you come out here and talk to us," the man Aik called, stopping about four feet away from the front door of the House. "We gotta come in there after you, you ain't gonna like it."

There was silence for a moment as everyone waited for an answer to the challenge, and then a figure appeared in the open doorway. He was tall and slender, not yet into his third under-decade, and his blond hair was so stylishly proper that it would have looked out of place above an ordinary Servant's habit. His habit, however, although it was still brown, seemed to be made out of a lot better material than sacking, and the red cord around his waist had to be mostly silk. He looked arrogantly around at the men

who confronted him, then took one step out into the street.

"How dare you address a priest of Grail that way?" he hissed, his fury lashing out so sharply that a number of the men took an involuntary step backwards. "I answer only to Grail, and it is you who must answer to me!"

"This time it's gonna work the other way around," Aik came back, calmer than the men behind him. "You sent trash after some of our women, and we ain't gonna stand still for it."

"I?" the priest said coldly in deep disapproval, his brows raised in distant questioning. "I did no such thing. If that's what you were told you were lied to, most likely by those whore-like women of yours. Only whores would speak against a priest of their religion, to keep him from helping their misguided men see the truth. Grail demands that you beat them for their filthy lies, and I demand the same!"

His ringing tones kept the men silent for a moment, during which time some of the women began whimpering. Their men weren't finding it possible to meet the priest's flashing eyes, and if that conversation went on much longer they would end up being victims again. That would have gotten me mad even if those weren't my father's people; since they were, I wasn't about to stand there and let it happen,

"I think we can all see there are filthy lies being spoken, but it isn't the women who are speaking them," I said in a voice loud enough to carry, then began making my way toward the front of the crowd. "Those men you sent named you, Priest, and you don't even have the courage to admit what you did. Doesn't Grail teach that if you're doing something you're ashamed to admit to, you shouldn't be doing it?"

The crowd was more than happy to get out of my way, so it wasn't long before I was standing next to the man Aik, directly in front of the fashion plate priest. His cold eyes took note of my unusual attire in a single glance, and then he sneered.

"How fitting for one whore to take the part of others," he said, disgust dripping from every word. "What more proof do you need than that, good men?"

"If what one is dressed in is proof of what they are, then what are you, Priest?" I came back immediately, my fists on my hips. "I'm dressed this way through no choice of my own, but you seem to be pleased with what you're wearing. Since when do priests of Grail dress like members of the nobility?"

"Priests of Grail have nothing to do with members of the accursed nobility!" the man hissed, his manner stiffening at the mutter that ran through the crowd of men. "We wear the habit that marks us as Grail's chosen Servants, Servants who are inviolate, Servants who..."

"Who hire bullies to beat up women?" I interrupted, not about to let up on the pressure. "There can't be any question that you were behind the attack, the messages that sent the women to that spot came from you. I've never before heard that Grail needed to force people into worshipping him, and I've never seen a priest of his that looked anything like you. Who are you, and why have you come here pretending to be the priest of a god who would never have the bad taste to accept anything like you?"

"How dare you?" the man thundered, outraged beyond bearing, but I'd already made the point I'd wanted to. The village men were seeing that what I'd said was true, that this wasn't a priest of their religion, and they therefore had no reason to be afraid of what they did to him. The man I'd baited was so enraged he didn't realize that, and with face twisted in fury raised his right arm to give me a backhanded slap. Stepping out of the way of the swing wouldn't have been hard - if there hadn't been so many people around and behind me, which there were. Knowing I was trapped I raised my own arms, intending to take most of the strength out of the blow that way, but none of it reached me. A big hand caught the arm

at the wrist, stopping it cold, and then there were words of matching coldness.

"Attacking women seems to be something you really like, you slime," Kylin said to him, the strength of his grip forcing a gasp out of the man he held. "If you're that eager to hit someone, why don't you try me instead?"

The supposed priest looked up into the face of the man who held him with fear in his eyes, and that was the final thing the villagers needed to see. Not only were priests of Grail forbidden to be violent, it was almost universally accepted that they were without fear of violence to their own persons. To accept pain on Grail's behalf was a high blessing for them, and no true priest would have acted the way that man did. With a growl the crowd of men pulled him out of the grip that held him, and carried him off up the street with them. His screaming protests went ignored and unanswered, and in just a couple of minutes there were only three of us left standing in front of Grail's House.

"So much for that," Indris said with satisfaction, just short of brushing her hands together. "Now we can finally get to the hospitality you two have more than earned. My house is this way."

Again she took my arm in a comradely way, glancing over her shoulder with a smile to include Kylin in on the invitation. I walked along with her without doing any of my own looking back, more than unhappy over what had happened. I would have preferred getting hit to being saved by that - that - enemy, but it hadn't happened that way. I could see he was trying to push me off balance again, but this time I wasn't about to allow it.

The house we were led to was only two streets away, a neat, pleasant-looking place that stood alone surrounded by grass and a yellow fence. The surprisingly large house was white with blue trim, and Indris gestured to the fence that didn't quite go with the rest.

"My husband was an armorer," she said, explaining rather than excusing. "That fence let people know which house to come to when they reached the village, and they used to come from all over to buy his weapons or his panoplies. I know I should have had it repainted years ago, but I'm too much of a sentimental fool. Once it's repainted, the last vestige of him will be gone. Come on, it's not so hard on the eyes from the inside."

She smiled briefly and led the way through the fence to the house, climbing the three steps quickly and then walking in through the door. I followed right behind her, enjoying the dimness and faintly cooler air inside, and was led to a room to the right, just off the entrance hall. The room had an unlit hearth of stone against whitewashed walls, plain but neat and clean window curtains, two small, carved tables and one larger one, and half a dozen chairs standing here and there in the otherwise painfully bare room. Indris crossed to the largest of the tables, uncovered a pitcher and poured from it into two battered metal goblets, then came back to us with the cups in her hands.

"This is just to start you off," she said with a smile, handing each of us a cup. "Feel free to help yourselves to the rest of the brew in the pitcher; there's plenty more where that came from. I'm going to look for my father. I know he'll want to meet you, and while he's playing host I'll put a meal together for you. At the very least, you have to stay the night."

She patted my arm and nodded to her other guest, and then she was gone, leaving us atone in the room. I raised my cup and sipped at the brew I'd been given, wetting a throat and mouth that had been dry much too long, finding less pleasure in the effort than I'd been expecting from it. I was glad to have something to drink again, doubly glad that it was a very well-made brew with an excellently delicate flavor, but that was as far as gladness could take me. The minutes dragged by one after the other, stretching into a considerable chain, and then the silence was broken.

"This looks like a comfortable, nicely-made house," my "Companion remarked from behind my left shoulder, no more a casual comment. "Spending the night here should make up for the last couple of nights we've had to do without decent beds."

Since there was no answer called for, I didn't make one; all I did was stand there and sip my brew. In point of fact I might not have answered even if there had been one called for, not the way I was feeling.

"All right, I know you're upset with me again," he said with a sigh, giving up on his attempt at casual conversation. "You had a weapon and I took it away from you, and your opinion of me comes clear every time you look at me. All I want to do is ask you one question: if you were with someone who was interested in seeing the color of your blood, would you let them get their hands on a weapon and then let them keep it? You're not a sweet, shy, young thing who knows nothing about what to do. Can you blame me for wanting to stay in one unbroken piece?"

"Yes," I said without turning then fell silent again, the anger starting to well up inside me. How in hell he always made everything he did sound so logical and right was beyond me, but I wasn't about to accept it any longer. He was an enemy, my enemy, and that's what I had to keep firmly in mind.

He made a sound of annoyance and seemed about to add to what he'd already said, but wasn't given the chance. Just then there was some rather loud throat-clearing, and I turned to see a man in the doorway from the hall.

"My daughter tells me I owe you two a good deal of gratitude," he said, smiling as he came farther into the room. "Evon usually trusts his followers to be able to protect themselves, but he isn't above lending a hand every now and again when it's needed. I'm Veslin, and it's a pleasure to have you as guests beneath our roof."

The man approached us and offered his hand, first to Kylin and then to me. His hair and beard were completely white, the skin of his face outdoors-tanned, but his bearing was that of a man not far into his third under-decade, and his grip had the strength of a fighting man in his prime. His height was only a shade above mine and he was slender rather than muscular, but the look in his light, piercing eyes was so full of strength and assurance that he seemed almost larger than life. When his fingers closed around my forearm he smiled again in greeting, and I felt relief at the thought that I wasn't about to face that man in battle. If I'd had to I would have, but I felt no doubt that if I did, only Evon's intervention would have let me walk away again.

"It was our pleasure to be of help," Kylin said when Veslin turned away from me, apparently as impressed with the man as I was. "We lost our horse and possessions to outlaws and thought we'd never see civilization again, but things turned out right in spite of that. Can you tell us how far we are from the city of Gensea?"

"The city's only a little more than half a day's ride from here," Veslin answered while going toward the table with the pitcher and cups. "There are horses to be had for sale if you can afford it, or perhaps for loan if you can't. And I think the young lady could use some clothing, but my daughter will take care of that. If you like, I'll check around the village for something for you to wear."

"I'd like," Kylin answered with a grin as Veslin turned back to him holding brew of his own. "And I can afford to pay, so there shouldn't be a problem. I'll pay for the girl's clothes, too."

"That's between you and Indris," Veslin said with an answering grin and a headshake, tasting his brew. "She probably won't take even a copper, not the way she's feeling, but that's for her to decide. Her husband left her comfortable enough, and with my grandsons gone off to make names for themselves, she doesn't find much that needs to be bought. She's not one to be overly interested in frills for herself."

"It's my only failing," Indris' voice came as she entered the room, carrying two bowls of something that smelled really good. "Other than that, I'm just about the perfect woman. This stew is no more than a snack for you people, to keep you alive until we sit down to a full meal. If you like, you can spend the intervening time taking baths and getting into clean clothes."

The idea of bathing sounded better than the idea of eating, at least until I tasted the stew. Indris seemed to be one of those who used magic in her cooking, and even though missing one meal had hardly left me famished enough to eat anything not still moving, the generous helping of stew seemed to disappear too quickly. When I was through and had also finished a second cup of brew, Indris led me toward the back of the house while Veslin took Kylin in another direction. During the meal we'd learned that Indris had already sent one of the village children to get clothing that would fit Kylin, so he, too, could get straight to bathing. He and I hadn't exchanged another word during that time, which had added to my enjoyment of the snack.

Our destination turned out to be Indris' large kitchen, where a wooden tub had been permanently installed in the floor. Right then it was filled with water that had faint steam rising from it, and a nearby chair had a neatly folded white cloth resting on it. Indris gestured to the tub with a smile of amusement, so I lost no time untying my "sandals" and pulling off the tunic over my head. Right after that I was stepping into the deliciously warm water, not having consciously realized sooner how long it was since I had last been able to do that.

"I think that's what I like best about night houses," I said as I sat down, sighing with pleasure. "You can have sex just about anywhere, but only in night houses is a hot bath or two included in the price."

"I know what you mean," Indris said with a laugh, lifting the folded cloth from the chair and then sitting down with it. "It was one of the things I liked best about night houses myself. And I think I was right in my first guess about you. You're a Blade, aren't you."

It was definitely a statement rather than a question, and I smiled as I wet my chest and shoulders with the water.

"Yes, I'm a Blade," I agreed, nodding ruefully. "Obviously not a very successful one right now, but still a Blade - named Sofaltis."

"A Blade named Sofaltis traveling with a man who won't let her have a weapon," Indris amplified, the amusement gone from her. "At first I thought you might be his captive, but now I'm convinced your situation is more complicated than that. I - accidentally overheard him trying to apologize to you for taking the staff away. I was coming in to introduce my father, but when we heard what was going on between you, my father decided it would be best if he went in alone and introduced himself. Your big friend apparently wants to make peace, even though you're not interested in the same. I know I'm intruding in something that doesn't concern me, but - is there anything I can do to help?"

"Not unless you have a lot of influence with the King," I said, losing a good deal of the pleasure I'd had from the bath water. "I don't want to have anything to do with that man, but I'm not being given the choice. I'm a Blade who wants to stay a Blade, but I made the mistake of being born into the wrong family in the wrong order - at a very bad time. And don't believe he's as decent as he pretends to be. He may have other people fooled, but I can see right through him."

Which was as close as I could get to telling anyone the truth of what I'd discovered. Knowing the truth might put Indris and her father in danger, and I refused to do that to them. I was the only one who could find a final answer to my problem, but so far that answer was being very successful in hiding itself.

"You've been promised to him," Indris said after a brief hesitation, the confusion in her eyes clearing as

she understood the point. "You're a Blade, but you've still been promised to him. Is your father so unreasonable that you can't speak to him about how you feel?"

"Right now my father has even less choice than I do," I said with a sigh, feeling the walls of the trap rising up around me again. "He didn't know I was a Blade and by the time he found out it was too late, but it wouldn't have mattered even if he'd known. The Law refuses to accept the fact that any woman might have a mind of her own, so I'm not allowed a say in the matter. Damned if I don't have my say anyway, one way or the other."

"I see," she said, clearly having heard my last words even though I'd muttered them. "You're a Blade who's been promised in marriage, and you hate the idea so much you've decided to fight it along with everyone involved. That's why you refused to listen to that apology."

"That wasn't my only reason," I said, looking up at the flatness of her tone. She was staring at me with an expression I couldn't quite read, one that seemed to be filled with understanding but not agreement. "And you said you were a Blade yourself. You made your own choice about what to do with your life, but how would you have liked it if someone had tried forcing you into the choice? Would that have been fair just because you're a woman?"

"You might say I was forced into the choice," she came back, smiling faintly as she rose from the chair. "I didn't want to give up being a Blade any more than you do, but I was forced to change my mind. I'll pour us some tasil and then tell you what happened."

She went to the wide hearth and lifted a tasil pot that was sitting close enough to the fire to keep its contents warm, then poured the pale brown liquid into two cups. When she handed me one of the cups, I found that she'd gotten that perfect balance of really good tasil: light enough not to be bitter, heavy enough to have body and taste, it had also been made with the faintest hint of honey, an enhancement rather than an addition.

"That's much better," she said as she sat on the chair again, having tasted the tasil herself. "Stories come out more easily when you have something to wet the path of the words. As I began saying a minute ago, I was a Blade who felt the way you probably feel now: I'd earned something most women don't, enjoyed having and being that something, and had no intentions of giving it up. It didn't matter to me what other women did with their lives, I wasn't like other women so their standards didn't apply. And then I met Javin, who had been invited in by our Company captain, to make whatever might be needed by any of our Blades."

She sighed as she said that, sipping at her tasil, the look in her dark eyes having begun receding to another time and place.

"My sword had gotten badly nicked in the last fight we'd been in, and honing it had done more to weaken it than sharpen it up again," she continued. "I went to Javin's tent to see if he had anything I'd be willing to put in my scabbard, and found that his work was the best I'd ever seen. We dickered a while over the price of a sword, came to an agreement, and then Javin asked me to have the evening meal with him. I'd liked the looks of him right from the first, so thinking he had nothing but sex in mind I accepted his invitation."

"That meal was the first of many, but it didn't end with the sex I'd thought it would. I didn't understand why Javin hadn't made the suggestion, but since he took care of it a few nights later the point didn't seem important. Back then I didn't real understand how some men think, and maybe that was for the best. If I'd know what he had in mind, I probably would have run."

"It was the very day my sword was ready that he decided the time was right," she said, sighing deeply a

second time. "He arranged a special meal for us in a high-priced tavern in the good part of the city, paying for a private room, and when the meal was over he asked me to marry him. The first thing I did was laugh, thinking he was joking, but when I saw he was serious I immediately refused. I was a Blade, you understand, and even though I felt things for Javin that I'd never felt for any other man, all I wanted was to stay a Blade.

"Apparently Javin had been expecting that response, and had his arguments and explanations all ready. He told me that he hadn't invited me to bed those first couple of nights because he wanted to get to know me without sex getting in the way. Like a lot of men who had sex any time they wanted it, he was trying to find out if his interest went beyond rolling around in bed. Once he found it did, he didn't have to abstain any longer, and was at the point of wanting to marry me. I was upset but I refused him a second time, and that was when he explained why he thought I was wrong.

"He said he could understand my not wanting to give up what I'd earned, but if I looked at the question carefully I'd find that it was my duty to do it anyway. Special women show themselves to be special by what they accomplish, but they have to work so hard doing it that they don't want to give up what they've earned after they've earned it. That usually meant the women's abilities were lost through not being passed on to their children, leaving only the second-rate to pass on what little they had. It wasn't fair that a woman who was a Blade couldn't pass on her abilities while continuing to be a Blade the way men did, but it was women who were made to bear children and nothing could be done to change that. I had gotten what made me me from others who hadn't refused to pass on what they had, but I wasn't willing to do the same for those who were supposed to come after me. I'd had the opportunity to show what I could do, but if I refused to allow others the same chance there was nothing more anyone could say. He took me back to my barracks then, and for the next week didn't even try talking to me."

"Probably in an effort to increase the guilt he'd piled on you," I said, disliking the entire argument she'd been subjected to. "I wonder how fast he would have given up being an armorer if your positions had been reversed. I've noticed that when people talk about duty, they usually mean other people's duty, never their own."

"It so happens that was exactly the way I felt," she said, smiling now with increased amusement. "I thought he was trying to talk me into something he'd never do himself, and then I found out what he'd neglected to mention: he'd been a Fighter and a damned good one, but had given it up when his abilities as an armorer had been discovered. I heard two of the Company Blades talking about it, how hard it was supposed to have been getting him to give up using weapons in favor of making them, but they were damned glad it had been managed. The new abilities he exercised helped everyone rather than just himself and those few around him, and hearing that really did make me stop and think. The world wasn't a pleasant enough place to make many people want to sacrifice themselves for it, but maybe it was that unpleasant because so many had refused the sacrifice in the past. And then I asked myself just exactly what it was that I was being talked into giving up."

"Why - you were being talked into giving up your life and your freedom," I said, stumbling over the words her eyes had challenged me to supply. "You had earned the right to be a Blade, and should have been left to be that in peace. Instead you were being urged to trade freedom for the chains of marriage, the chains your ability had until then let you avoid. It simply wasn't fair."

"And fairness is important," she said with a nod, still smiling. "It didn't matter that I had to be better than the men around me in order to be a Blade in the first place, because it wasn't a matter of fairness - it was a matter of survival. But we were discussing what I was being asked to give up, and my view of it then doesn't quite match yours now. I wasn't really being asked to give up what I'd earned, because I'd already earned it and nothing could change that. If I'd stayed with my Company, I would have kept

active Blade status - until the day I lost it in a fight the permanent, final way. And as far as freedom goes - do you need to be in one special place doing one special thing in order to be free? If you're really free, you're free wherever you are and whatever you're doing. I discovered that I wanted to exercise my freedom with Javin, and never found myself regretting the decision."

"A decision that was still made by you," I said, finding that I didn't care to dwell on what she'd said. "It wasn't one made for you by others without once asking your opinion, making you feel like an unimportant, unconsulted slave. Paying back what you owe isn't quite as easy when you've been made to feel you don't owe anyone anything."

"I can see where that would make a difference," she granted, her gaze touched with a trace of sympathy. "Javin did his best to try forcing me into wanting to marry him, but if his plans hadn't worked he wouldn't have accepted an unwilling bride. Have you told your big friend anything at all about how you feel?"

"Until my throat was dry and raw with the effort," I said, nodding in disgust. "He has his own reasons for wanting to marry me, and couldn't care less that I'm unwilling. That's one of the reasons he's being very careful not to let me get my hands on a weapon. He knows what will happen if I do."

"You say he doesn't care that you're unwilling," she came back, considering the point with a frown. "I know this probably won't make much difference to you, but-have you considered the possibility that he can't give you up? He seemed to be trying awfully hard to smooth things over, which he wouldn't have done if he simply didn't care. Any man can take an unwilling bride, but to take an unwilling Blade? When he knows what she's capable of? Either he has to be completely insane - or so helplessly in love that no one can tell the difference. Which do you think it is?"

She was looking at me with her head to one side, the question hanging in the air between us, her faint smile doing nothing to help me think. It was preposterous suggesting that he might be in love with me, but what she'd said - Why was he insisting on going through with it all? Simply because he was an enemy? But being an enemy didn't mean he was stupid, and surely he knew how close I was getting to deciding to end my problems by ending him? If I killed him without witnesses around, it was conceivable I might get away with calling it an unfortunate accident, which would leave his people out in the cold - right along with his unmoving carcass. And if what I thought didn't matter to him, as it shouldn't have, why did he continue to insist that it did? In order to fool me? But if I wasn't being fooled, why didn't he stop? And why had he been so upset about not having satisfied me? Because he was pretending to be nice? But why pretend? Why, why, why, why, why?

"Maybe you'd better start washing now," Indris said, rising from the chair to take the cup I was simply holding and staring at. "That water cools rather quickly, and sitting in cold, dirty water isn't much fun."

"No, it isn't," I agreed, doing my best to push away the confusion of the thoughts rattling around in my head. It felt like I'd been sitting in cold, dirty water for quite some time, and it was going to take more than washing to get me out of it. It was going to take thinking, which I would get to as soon as I was out of that bath.

## **Chapter Eleven**

I spent the time until the meal was ready in a small sitting room not far from the kitchen, relaxing in a rocking chair and trying to wade through the mire in my mind. The only clothes Indris had had to give me was a long-skirted red print dress that no longer fit her, and although it wasn't quite as long on me it wasn't in any way short - or even close to the leathers I was used to wearing. I had been given a real pair of sandals to go along with it, but if I hadn't been so distracted its very full skirt and short sleeves would have driven me close to distraction.

I sat and rocked and tried to get my thoughts in order, but the more I thought the more confused I became. All those whys kept flying around, refusing to resolve themselves, until I was forced to ask myself some very pointed questions. Was Kylin my enemy and the enemy of my family? Yes. Did it really matter why he was doing what he seemed to be doing? No. Could it all be part of some devious plan he or his cohorts had come up with? Certainly. If I let any of it affect me, would that be disloyal to my family? Damned right it would be, so what difference did the rest of it make?

"It only makes a difference if you take up being stupid for a hobby," I muttered to myself, reaching for the cup of brew I'd been given to keep me company. "If what Indris said was true and he does have some unexpected feelings for you, that only makes things worse, not better. If he'd been prepared to give up his original plans and friends, he would have said so days ago to further his cause. That he didn't say so means he won't, so all you can do is go on doing what you've been doing."

A beautifully clear and concise conclusion, I thought as I took a swallow of the brew. It looks like I've just decided to continue going as crazy as I've been going, but of course I could be wrong. Maybe it means I'll be going even crazier.

"Damn it, it's him you've got to drive crazy," I muttered out loud again, realizing that craziness was something I seemed to be very well qualified to deal with, and then the rest of the thought clarified itself. "If you push him out of whatever he thinks he feels for you, he'll wake up to the danger he's in from an unhappy Blade and will probably get smart enough to walk away from the ungodly mess. If he doesn't, you can always fall back on that "accident" idea."

That suddenly seemed to make a lot of sense, but it didn't give me much time to put it into effect. We'd be leaving the village the following morning and would be at my father's castle not far past midday, so I'd have to -

"Indris asked me to tell you the food is ready, so why don't you come and join us now?" a voice interrupted my thinking, causing me to look up and see Veslin. He had opened the door and stepped into the room, and smiled when my eyes were on him. "I knocked before coming in, but when I didn't get an answer I thought you might have fallen asleep. Whatever it was you were so deep in must be fairly important."

"Fair to middling," I agreed as I rose from the chair, taking my cup of brew with me. "But I think I have it all straightened out now."

"Good," he said with a warmer smile, opening the door wider to give me room to follow him out. I could see he had changed clothes from earlier in the day, but was still wearing the same black and white combination he'd previously had on. "If you need a friendly ear or even an opinion on something, don't forget I'm here. Evon doesn't ask that we handle all our problems by ourselves, only the ones we must."

"I know that and I'll remember it," I said with a smile of my own, committing to nothing but remembering. The must of my problem was clear enough to me, and I didn't really want it any other way.

The large kitchen had had a table for eating at in it, but Indris had apparently decided her company deserved to eat in her father's dining hall. The room was tiny compared to my father's, of course, but for a house that size, bigger than what was usually found in a village, it was more than adequate. The board, of a size to fit the room, was being used double-sided, with chairs at each end and one in the middle of each of the long sides. Indris seemed to be adding the very last of the dishes as her father and I walked in, leaving Kylin to come up to us alone. He was now dressed in dark gray trousers and a tan shirt, both of homespun that had seen better days, but there were no ruffles or fancy folds that his brown boots had to work to overcome. With the new outfit, even his red swordbelt looked less ridiculous, and his silvered

hilt didn't look ridiculous at all.

"I think these last couple of days have spoiled me," he said with a smile, looking down at me with eyes brightened by lamplight. "I've spent these few hours we've been apart missing you, and I'm glad you're here now, especially in that dress. It really suits you."

"Not as well as leathers do," I answered, looking away from him and making sure he didn't take my hand the way he was trying to do. "As soon as I get home, I'll be changing back."

"No sense in standing around, let's sit down," Veslin said into the following silence, saving me from any more of what

I'd just had to listen to. I hated it when my enemy spoke that way, making me feel strange and stupid, distracting me from what I knew I had to do. Reacting to nonsense like that made me mad, which was a benefit any way you looked at it. When it comes to playing games with an enemy, mad is a thousand times better than stupid.

"Sofaltis, you sit here," Indris said from the chair in the middle of the near side of the board, watching calmly as we came toward her and pretending she hadn't heard anything of the recent exchange. "Kylin, the place opposite Sofaltis is yours, and father, yours is where it always is. Let's get to this food before it goes cold and tasteless." Veslin walked around to the right of my place to hold Iedris' chair while she sat, and I had to endure the same from man who was working hard not to be discouraged. Kylin the fact that I was ignoring him and his efforts, and another minute or so everyone was "seated. Veslin poured the wine while Indris started the food passing around, and happily the cooking was more than good enough to take my mind off everything else.

Our host and hostess carried most of the conversation during the meal, and after a short while it wasn't difficult seeing that they had decided to "help out" just a little. One or the other would ask Kylin a question, listen to his answer, and then try coaxing me into joining the discussion. The object of their solicitude did his own part in the effort, but I'd decided that vast disinterest in everything discussed was the most useful attitude I could have. Combined with distraction, it worked out very well.

"... and I can't understand what Prince Traffis expects to gain from starting that war," Indris said at one point, taking up a remark made by Veslin. "Even if he happens to defeat the King, no one will accept him as legitimate ruler. He'll have every noble and peasant against him, every hand that can hold a weapon. Without a single tie to any of the noble families and without a single friend, ending the first war will win him nothing but the start of a second."

"Only as long as he doesn't have any of those friends you just mentioned," Kylin said, continuing with his food even as he spoke. "If it turns out that he does have unexpected backing, there might not be enough people willing to start a second all-out war. The Kingdom will be occupied by his foreign troops, we'll have looting and rape and all kinds of brutalities to cope with, too many people will decide to change sides just to save their worthless necks, and no one will know who can be trusted. At that point, whatever officials are left just might decide to salvage what they can by acknowledging Traffis and asking him to curb his followers. Once something like that starts it's usually impossible to stop, and when the final dust clears Traffis will have the entire Kingdom."

"With only scattered pockets of resistance for his troops to handle whenever they please," Indris said with a nod, disgust in her tone. "Yes, I know it can happen that way just as it has in other places at other times, so we'll have to hope Traffis does prove to be all alone. What do you think, Sofaltis?"

"My Company didn't find his troops all that hard to handle," I said with a shrug, paying more attention to my wine than to what I was saying. "When I get back to the north, I'll make a special effort to see that

there are a lot fewer of them left to do any looting and raping afterward. If there is that sort of an afterward."

There was something of a silence after that, one I pretended I didn't notice, and then the man sitting across from me made a sound showing the annoyance he'd been holding in for most of the meal.

"Tisah, I really am getting tired of repeating myself," Kylin said, the annoyance sharp in his voice. "We've been over this and over it, but you still refuse to accept it like an adult. You won't be going back north to your Company, you'll be staying in the south and getting married. To me. Whether you admit it or not, that's the way it will be."

"What has the marriage got to do with anything?" I asked, leaning forward to look over the selection of small cakes standing on the table not far from me. "I may not have any choice about going through with it, but it's come to me that that makes no real difference at all. If I have to go through with the marriage I will, and then I'll just go back to my Company. That way no one can throw any fits."

Having mentioned fits, I couldn't help noticing that the man who was so anxious to marry me was about to have one of his own. His skin darkened as his fist closed tight around the copper goblet he held, and his words broke through the change of subject Indris had been hastily trying to make.

"The hell you'll be going back to your Company after the wedding," he growled, his light eyes darkening even as he stared at me. "I don't believe in absentee wives, especially not when it's a war they plan on being absent seeing to. You'll stay with your husband, just the way a wife is supposed to."

"Says who?" I countered, laughing at him over the rim of my cup. "If I'm not mistaken, the Law has nothing at all to say on the point so that means I can do as I please. Anyone trying to stop me will have only one way of doing it, and I think we all know how that anyone feels about the one way. I'm a Blade and I intend acting like one - any time I feel like it."

"The Law doesn't have to say anything about what a wife does," he countered, his left hand closed around the smaller bandage that now replaced the one I'd put on him the day before. "All wives do the same, which is what she and her husband decide she'll do. If you expect me to decide to let you ride off wherever you please, you'll find the fault in your reasoning when all that wine you've been swallowing wears off."

"It takes a lot more wine than this to get me drunk," I said, still purposely finding the conversation extremely amusing. "I know because I've been drunk, just as I've been a lot of other things Blades tend to be. If the Law says I have to marry you then I will, but after that the choice is mine. You won't have any trouble making the proper excuses, will you?"

The small, half-hidden smile I gave him added fuel to the fire just the way I expected it to, already digging away at the attraction he felt for the helpless little female he was so concerned about. If I killed the attraction and concern together I knew I'd have what I wanted and needed, but I had to be sure not to notice the hurt and confusion shadowed behind his annoyance and irritation. He was nothing but an enemy, and enemies deserved to be hurt and confused.

"I think it's time I showed our guests my study," Veslin said to Indris before my bristling antagonist could decide on what to argue about next, rising from his chair with his wine cup still in his hand. "You'll rejoin us later, of course."

"Certainly, father, as soon as I'm through with what needs taking care of," Indris answered with pleasantness and a nod, also rising from her chair. "No, no, Sofaitis, I won't hear of your helping me, especially since I know how much you'll enjoy seeing my father's study. You go along with the others,

and Ill join you,all later when I'm ready."

I hadn't wanted to go anywhere the argument would be able to continue, but the single delaying tactic I'd found it possible to think of had been shot down like a solitary, low-flying bird. It was either be rude to my hosts by simply walking out of the room and ignoring where they wanted me to go, or staying with it and bracing against the time I'd need to launch another attack. From Kylin's expression I knew beyond doubt that we would be into it again sooner or later, but I also knew that no matter how distasteful I found the situation, I had to stay with it. Walking away would probably ruin everything I'd done until then, and I had even less stomach for starting over.

"Well, if you're sure you don't need the help," I said to Indris, then turned to Veslin with a smile as I got to my feet. "I think my curiosity is aroused. Is your study the place this house's weapons are kept? I couldn't help noticing that for an armorer's house that a priest of Evon now lives in, there isn't much in the way of steel showing."

"My daughter and I have our personal weapons, but we've lost the habit of wearing them," Veslin answered, putting a hand out to me before beginning to lead the way out of the room. "Aside from that, whatever Javin completed before he died has long since been sold. Indris and I both felt that to keep his final efforts as some sort of tribute to his memory would have been not only unnecessary, but totally against that very same memory. No one who knew Javin will ever forget him, most especially not the woman who loved him and whom he loved, and his work was meant to be used, not hung on a wall somewhere like things that have no other, more important purpose. His weapons will save lives that inferior weapons would have lost, and that's the only tribute to his memory he would have wanted."

As I followed Veslin toward the back of the house I nodded in agreement with what he'd said, but couldn't help feeling a good deal of disappointment. If I wanted to solve my problem of being unarmed, it looked like rifling the rooms of my hosts was the only way I was going to do it.

We walked through a narrow hall that was lit only by a small lamp at its far end, the dimness making it seem that the hall dead-ended at the lamp without giving access to anything other than that lamp and the wall it hung on. We were nearly at the end and I was about to say something, when Veslin moved to the left and opened a door I hadn't been able to see sooner. Once I was on top of it I could see it easily enough, and then I forgot everything else in favor of what it opened on.

"This is my study," Veslin announced unnecessarily, stepping completely aside so as not to block sight of any part of the room. It wasn't very large, but as I moved through the doorway I could see that almost every inch of wall space was taken up by shields, shields of every size and description, of every color of every House, of countries I recognized and those I didn't. The floor was polished wood and black leather chairs stood around with an occasional table or two, but nothing else was in the way to distract someone from all those beautiful shields. I turned in a slow circle, trying to take it in all at once, and then Kylin mentioned the point I'd noticed almost immediately.

"They're all broken," he said, turning slowly the way I was doing, just as captured as I was. "They must all have come from different battlefields. How many of their owners lived through whatever broke their shields?"

"Unfortunately, not many," Veslin answered, his voice sounding sad. "In some countries, no gentleman enters battle without a shield showing his device, and after a while, when his reputation has begun growing, that brings him those who will search out known fighters in a battle. The more well-known his device, the greater the number who will seek him, and after a certain amount of time the numbers have to go against even the best."

"I've heard of the custom," I said, looking at one long shield that had obviously taken a lance or spear in its center. The device was a wild cat of some sort, golden on a bar of red, but the weapon that had entered it had obliterated the head and face of the cat. "I've never considered it a very smart custom, not when the boast of who you are can quickly make it become who you were."

"Even the most cautious fighter tends to suffer from the same blind spot," Veslin said with a sadness-banishing chuckle. "If you're a Blade, then I have gold to wager on the fact that you wore your Company's medallion right out where everyone could see it, especially if you happen to be a member of a Fist. Do you need to be told that the stone indicating a Fist draws as many challengers as almost any device you might see here?"

"No," I admitted with a chuckle of my own, glancing around to share the amusement showing in his light, piercing eyes. "I am a member of a Fist, so I'd be a fool to take your bet. The ones who were almost sure they could take one of us went after Jak or Foist or Ham, while the ones who were utterly convinced went after Rull. I usually got the ones who were a little less than almost sure, the ones who thought they were playing it safe just in case. It never occurred to them that if I couldn't handle it, someone would have proved that long before they got there."

An odd sound came from the third person in the room, and Veslin and I looked around to see that Kylin had turned his attention from the shields and was walking slowly back and forth across the floor. It was almost as if he were forcing himself to walk slowly and calmly, forcing himself to let go of very great anger, and I couldn't imagine what was wrong with him. Veslin's eyes suddenly filled with half-amused compassion as he rubbed at his face with two fingers, and then he turned toward the part of the room that was to the far left of the door we'd entered by.

"Why don't you two come over here, and I'll pour us all some wine I don't share with just anyone," he said, moving to a large, round table surrounded by chairs, "I also have something rather special to show you, and since a story goes along with it the wine can be considered a necessity."

There were five well-stuffed black leather chairs around the table, but what was on the table did more to take one's attention than the prospect of sitting comfortably. Aside from a crystal pitcher and half a dozen crystal goblets, the table held a black leather box trimmed heavily with silver. The box wasn't quite long enough to take a decent-sized dagger, but it was about eight inches high or more, and the top of it was hinged as if it were a miniature trunk. The keyhole in its front, just below where the top of it met the body, seemed more ornate than most keyholes tend to be, leading an observer to wonder what sort of key it took to open the box.

"Now, that's what I call interesting," Kylin said as he joined us at the table, letting his eyes move over the box. Whatever had been bothering him a minute ago seemed to be gone now, and I couldn't help noticing that he was very close on my right. If I hadn't been alert for a move like that he might have boxed me in, but his version of tactics did nothing more than accomplish his own outflanking. When he accepted a cup of wine from Veslin and sat down in the chair right beside me, he looked up to see that I'd moved to my left before accepting a cup, and was therefore taking my own seat with an empty chair between us. He then had the choice of making himself look foolish by moving, or staying where he was. A moment of thought convinced him to stay where he was, but the lamplight reflected the darkening of his eyes.

"Yes, interesting is what I thought too when I first saw the box," Veslin agreed with Kylin's comment, sitting to my left with his own silver-filled goblet. The crystal of the cup let the color of the wine show through, making it sparkle and flow as though we held cupfuls of moonlight. "It came to me a number of years ago, from the man who had done most to put an edge on my battle skills - and who had also been a priest of Evon. It had been years since I'd seen him last, and startled is too mild a word to describe what I felt when he sent for me. I hadn't even known he was in Gerfid, the town near where my unit was

fighting."

Veslin slid forward in his chair and reached to the box, using one finger to gently flip open its lid. The inside of the box was lined with black velvet, and when I also leaned forward just a little I could see the pure, shining silver of what lay on the velvet. For an instant it flamed so bright I could make out nothing but the fact of silver, and then the glow settled down to separate into two silver bracers!

"But they're not a pair," I said, feeling, even as I said the words, that the protest was incorrect. It somehow seemed that the two bracers, mismatched in size though they were, belonged not simply together but almost in the same volume of air. If they had both been the same size, I think I would have looked for the mirror reflecting the image of a single creation.

"They may not be a pair, but they have an interesting story behind them," Veslin said, now sitting back and sipping at his wine. "They were the reason my friend had sent for me, knowing as he did that he was dying. Go ahead, the two of you. I don't mind if you try them."

It came to me then that Kylin was also leaning forward in his chair, as taken by the sight of the bracers as I was. I didn't know about him, but it had been all I could do to keep my hand from reaching out to the glowing beauty of what the box contained, as though I were a small child entranced by the glory of a flower or butterfly. I put down the goblet of my untasted wine and wiped my palms on the skirt of my dress, knowing I ought to be assuring Veslin that I didn't have to touch something that beautiful to appreciate it. I knew I

should refuse that outrageous a liberty even though it was so freely offered, but I found that I couldn't. I licked dry lips and tried to make the words come out, but simply couldn't. I had to touch that silver glory, I simply had to.

I couldn't swear that my hand wasn't trembling as I reached down toward the box, and was only faintly aware of the fact that another hand was reaching at the same time from my right. I'd thought at first that the box wasn't large enough to accommodate two hands reaching into it, but I had slid my fingers inside the smaller bracer and was lifting it out when I realized that the same was being done with the other. For the briefest instant I was aware of that, and then I was aware of nothing but the silver magnificence I held.

Whoever had made that bracer had to be as much of an artisan as an armorer. It was engraved with the most complex design I had ever seen, a pattern that sent my gaze deep into its intricacies and lost it there, forcing it to retreat in confusion rather than letting it find its way out. The bracer itself was thick, a good quarter inch of weight my fingers hadn't been expecting, worth a small fortune in coin if it was silver through and through, worth a good deal less to a fighter if it was. Silver is too soft a metal to stand up well in the place it would be needed, especially as a bracer, doubly especially with anyone who had been trained to use a bracer in place of a shield. I could imagine it breaking along with the arm it clung to at the first heavy blow it was asked to stop, but then the image flickered and disappeared. Something about the bracer said it would not fail, no matter how hard a blow came to it, and its beauty would not let me disbelieve.

It was the fingers of my right hand that held it up while I inspected it closely, but it was the fingers of my left hand that began working their way through the bracer's curving sides, pulling my wrist and arm after them. For a moment I was upset that I was slipping it on, feeling barely worthy enough to be allowed to look at it, but then I remembered that Veslin had said I could try it. The metal was cool and as smooth as fine silk, not a burr or a rough spot that my skin could detect, and once it was on it felt a lot lighter than it had when I'd simply been holding it. It wasn't terribly big, stretching no more than six inches or so up my arm, but its curving sides held it tightly in place, almost as though it were deliberately wrapping itself all around and holding on. When I turned my arm over there was almost no skin showing between the curve of its

edges, which for some reason was faintly surprising.

"They seem to fit you two rather well, don't they?" Veslin said, and it came to me that those were the first words he'd said in quite some time. I glanced up to see that Kylin had also put on the bracer he'd taken from the box, and that he looked as though he'd just awakened from sleep. "They aren't silver, of course, only made to look like it, and the cost is the least of it. Who would want to go into battle wearing silver bracers?"

"No one I know," Kytin said with a small laugh, looking down again at the bracer on his arm. I couldn't help doing the same, and then I laughed too. The bracer was beautiful, all right, but now that I looked at it more closely, I could see that silver was the last thing it was.

"These bracers came to my friend as part of a legend," Veslin said, sipping with enjoyment at his wine. "While he was in full health he never believed any part of the legend, but once he began ailing it seemed to prey on his mind. He'd been given the box by an old friend of his many years earlier, just before that old friend had died. That's when he first heard the story, and by the time I reached him he was burningly desperate to pass both story and box along to me. Please drink up, I think you'll find this wine worth the lasting."

I saw I wasn't alone in having put my glass of wine down, and smiled to myself over how absurdly eager I'd been to try on a bracer that was pretending to be silver. The wine was silver, a silver classer from the eastern mountains, and once I'd retrieved my cup and tasted it saw that Veslin was right. It was worth a good deal more than a single sip, and possibly even more than a bracer that fit too well to be real silver.

"It seems that the story involved is one you may have heard before," Veslin said, smiling at the very positive reactions to his special wine. "Most people have heard the legend of the time the gods battled, one or two of them trying to establish supremacy over the rest. Evon's men were caught up in that war, either as innocent victims of the forces unleashed by the terrible meetings, or as tools of the god or gods they followed. Those were the times whole forests went up in flames, flowing rivers suddenly went dry, and entire sections of the eastern mountains were thrown shattered to the ground."

"I doubt if there's anyone alive who wasn't raised hearing those stories," Kylin said with a grin, the reaction of most educated people of our time who spoke of the legend. "I've heard it said that most of those things really did happen, but not for the reason the old storytellers insist."

"The storytellers also insist that belief in the war has been taken away from men, so that it can be started up again some day," Veslin said, matching Kylin's grin. "Whatever the truth, the legend goes on to say that Evon was involved in that war in some way, and came down to our world to live among men for a time. While he was here he made a very special panoply, weapons and armor meant to be used against the spreading of evil, forging the lot and crafting it only partly in the way of men. Every bit of it was made of silver, but certainly not of ordinary silver, and when the last piece of it was done he called a selected number of his followers to him. These followers he named his priests, and into the care of each he gave a different part of the panoply, instructing them to carry the parts out into the world, to find those who were worthy of bearing those parts into battle against the evil which threatened men and gods alike."

"Which, I've heard, is the reason priests of Evon don't preach like priests of other gods," I put in, adding my own amusement to the general atmosphere. "They'll council other followers of Evon, but they don't preach because they have that other, more important task given them. I suppose it's never occurred to those who say that, that priests of Evon don't have to preach. Only weapons-wielders follow Evon, and becoming a fighter or a Blade is a conversion of sorts in itself."

"That's very true," Veslin said with a smile, completely relaxed in his chair. "If someone is to learn

weapons skill and become any good at it, the basic decision has to come from him, not from someone talking him into it. Priests of Evon don't have anything to preach about, so we spend our time offering advice, marrying people, fighting with our units - and discussing legends.

"Which brings us back to the legend we've been discussing. Once the original war was over, with Evon's side having won, the pieces of the panoply were supposed to have been returned into the care of his priests, to be held until the next time they were needed. An interesting aspect of the legend says that if someone attracts one part of the panoply to him in time of need, other parts of it will be drawn to that one if other worthy wielders aren't to be easily had. I don't really understand how that's supposed to happen, any more than I understand how the pieces are supposed to be able to - divide themselves, you might say - to double their number in case there are two to be outfitted. The whole thing is fascinating, to say the least."

"And that's the story you were told by your friend," Kylin said, his expression matching the priest's interest. "If it were true and you were the new custodian of a part of the panoply, you'd have to be out there in the world now, looking for people who were worthy of wearing Evon's gifts, instead of sitting back comfortably in this house. You could hardly expect them to show up in this village, and if I were in your place I don't think I'd care for having to leave here. You must be glad the gods haven't decided to go to war again."

"Oh, yes, more than glad," Veslin agreed soberly, but for some reason there was a glint of amusement in his very light eyes. "And you're right, of course, about not being able to expect the worthy to simply walk up to my door and knock. Being young and a fighter during the time the gods go to war must be a time of living life to its fullest, but I'm afraid I'm past the age for a true appreciation of something like that. Battle loses its matchless appeal, when it's your sons and grandsons who must face it rather than yourself. You're happy for them and in no way envious, but it isn't quite the same."

"I can understand that," I said, wondering at the odd look that flickered briefly in his eyes, almost a combination of fear and sadness. "Being in a battle yourself is much better, than standing back and watching other people doing the fighting. You might say it gets in your blood."

"You might also say it sometimes gets the blood out of you," the big fool to my right put in, sounding annoyed, jumping in as though I'd been talking to him as well as to Veslin. "There comes a time in everyone's life when they have to leave the games of childhood for the responsibilities of an adult. It's natural to feel regret over the loss, but no real adult tries to hang onto the playthings of a child."

Veslin raised his cup to his lips again, but not before I caught the beginnings of a smile of amusement. Apparently he understood what Kylin was talking about, and found something funny in it. I, however, hadn't the faintest idea of what his babbling was supposed to mean, so I had no trouble ignoring it.

"Do you think your friend gave you the bracers for a reason?" He asked Veslin, still looking only at him. "I mean, other than the fact that he was dying and felt that he had to pass them on?"

"It's possible he chose me because he knew of my collection," Veslin answered, waving a hand at the walls around us and what they held. "I've been collecting broken shields since I was very young, visiting other lands to see what sights they had to offer. I couldn't keep them with me, of course, but Indris' mother lived in a city in those days, so sending them to her to keep for me was more expensive than difficult. During one leave I took my friend home with me, and the collection was the second thing I showed him."

"What was the first?" I asked, wondering what he might have had that was more exciting than those fascinating shields.

"The first was my sons," he said with a gentle smile, his light gaze holding mine. "A man is always proudest of his sons and daughters, as well as of the woman who gave them to him. My woman would be with me yet, if Evon hadn't found a need for her at Home. Indris came to us long past the time her brothers were grown and gone on their way in the world, a blessing for us but not for her. She was still a very small child when her mother was called Home, which made it necessary for her to be raised by her father. Poor thing, she was a Blade almost as soon as she could walk, courtesy of a man who didn't have enough else to occupy him. I find it a matter of great pride that she managed her life with as much happiness as she has, and now enjoys my company. Her mother must have watched over us, for her to have turned out as well as she did."

"But what's wrong with her having been a Blade?" I asked, confused over what he'd said - and how he'd said it.

"It's an accomplishment not every woman can claim, but you make it sound as if there's a - taint - of some sort to it."

"No, child, not a taint," he answered, having no trouble finding the words he wanted. "A woman's achieving Blade status is a proud thing, but Indris did it because I was there to train her, because she adored her father and wanted to be like him - and because she found no other choice for her temperament. There are women who are happy being nothing more than wives to men, and they're the lucky ones, the ones who are able to find contentment. With all the strides we've made in the world, we've as yet to find a place for those who need additional contentment, the pleasure of a job well done or a contribution made. In this great age of advancement and enlightenment, when man can make fragile glass strong enough to be used to eat and drink from but still appear beautiful, a woman of deeper needs than most is still forced to make a choice between those needs. She isn't allowed to be everything a woman can be, she must be one thing or the other. A Fistmate or a wife, a Blade or a mother. Why can't she be both?"

"Being a Blade is to be free, being a wife is to be chained down like a domesticated animal or a pet," I answered at once, even though I was sure he hadn't asked the question expecting it to be answered. "Not every woman wants to be a wife and a mother, and demanding it of those who want no part of it simply isn't fair. It's worse than demanding that those satisfied women leave their homes and children and go out to train with weapons would be. If no one tried to force things on those who were unwilling, this world would be a much better place."

"Now, that I can agree with wholeheartedly," he said, showing a faint grin. "The only part of your contention I'm having trouble with is the part about unwillingness. If a woman has tried being a wife and mother and has found that it isn't for her, no one can argue with her decision. It is, after all, based on experience. What basis is being used, though, by a woman who hasn't tried it herself? Hearsay? The opinions of others? Guesswork? How far would bases like that take you in a battle?"

"I don't have to swallow poison to know I want no part of it," I came back, suddenly aware of all the silence coming from my right as soon as the new direction of the conversation became apparent. "Indris was a Blade who made her own decision as to what would make her happy. All I ask - demand - is that I be given the same right."

"Rights are never given, only earned," Veslin said, "but that isn't the point we're trying to get clear here. You say Indris made her own decision and you're right in that, but she didn't find her happiness alone. Being married to most men probably would have made her miserable, but luckily Javin wasn't most men. He shared his own work with her while their children were very small, used her help to test many of the blades he forged, then stood beside her when it came time to train their offspring. She was never made to feel that the skill she had acquired was a foolish waste of time that could have been more profitably used

to learn sewing or cooking or cleaning. The acceptance Javin gave her was complete, helping her to be whole. Where would a woman find chaining, if she shared her life with a man like that?"

"How many Javins do you expect there to be?" I asked in a mutter, looking down into my crystal goblet and the small amount of wine left in it. I still wanted nothing to do with marriage, and wanted even less to continue the discussion with Veslin. He was only trying to help, I knew, but I didn't want his help - or anyone else's. I would take care of my problems in my own way - as soon as I could think of one.

"Maybe there are more Javins around than you know," another voice chimed in, a calm voice belonging to someone who had been letting Veslin do his arguing for him. "How can you tell, when you refuse to give anyone the smallest chance to prove it to you? I can understand being afraid of something or not trusting it, but I can't understand running from it without first trying to find out if it can be bested. No one can blame someone who tries their best and then fails, but what are you expected to think about a person who won't even try? What would you think of them?"

The question hung in the air to my right, a direction in which I refused to look, and Veslin just sat in his chair waiting, making no effort to give an answer of his own. I could see I was supposed to admit I'd been unthinkingly cruel, cowardly in my actions, and considerably short of adult behavior; it's possible I was even expected to apologize. I

was really tempted to get into the questions of cowardice and cruelty, but my primary aim was to destroy concern and caring. I'd almost forgotten that again, which made me nearly as annoyed with myself as I was with the fool who couldn't even take advantage of a woman without starting to feel something for her.

"What I think is that I tend to admire people who refuse to slash their wrists or jump off a roof simply to see what will happen," I said after a moment, then finished the last of my wine. "Why leave something you enjoy for something you hate, just because other people think you ought to enjoy that latter something? And who says I have to give anyone a chance to do whatever it is they want to do? Talk about a hell of a way to run a battle. This wine is really excellent, Veslin. Would you be willing to part with another small taste of it?"

The smile I gave the priest was a calculated one, designed to show that I wasn't blaming him for having tried to help. He wasn't aware of what was really going on, after all, so how was he to know his help wasn't called for? The young - old man sighed as he got to his feet, as though disappointed about something, but what came from my right was a wordless growl.

"Try to keep on being patient, Kylin," Veslin said as he reached for the wine pitcher, flicking the lid of the box closed with one finger to get it out of his way first. "When you spend a lot of time dreading something, it isn't easy to suddenly turn around and accept it. Give her at least the same amount of time, and everything will work out the way you want it to."

"I still don't understand why your friend gave you the bracers," I said, determined to change the conversation, holding my goblet out for the nearing pitcher. "All the shields in your collection are broken, so the new additions don't fit. And why aren't there two of each size, instead of only one?"

"I'm trying to be patient, Veslin, but at times it doesn't work well," Kylin said, rising to his feet to put a hand to the pitcher before it could pour any of the silver wine into my cup. "I think she and I need to talk this out, at least as far as we can. If you don't mind, we'll go to our room now."

"Forget about anyone else minding," I snapped, finally outraged enough to speak to the fool directly. Out of deference to my neck I also stood, and put my useless goblet down on the table, where it would be better protected from the urge to throw it. "I was never asked if I wanted to share a room with anyone,

and wouldn't have agreed even if I had been asked. If there aren't enough rooms to go around, I'll use the stable out back. As a matter of fact, I'd prefer it."

"If you're in one room and I'm in another, how are we supposed to talk?" he came back, trying again to sound reasonable and logical. The calm he was looking down at me with didn't stretch across the short distance between us, and even seemed to affect me in exactly the opposite way.

"Why in Evon's name would I want to talk to you?" I asked very deliberately, trying to feed my own emotions back across the space. "I know you probably haven't yet noticed, but I don't happen to like you. And if there's still any question about where I'll be sleeping tonight, I have my own suggestion to make on the subject, a good deal better than my stable suggestion."

I turned away from his very patient sigh that rubbed my own patience raw and bloody, and gave my attention to a Veslin who was standing quietly and simply listening after having put the pitcher down. The man obviously considered himself no more than a concerned spectator, but I was prepared to change that considerably.

"It appears I need a place to sleep tonight, Veslin," I said, moving a full step closer to him while letting our gazes meet. "If you have no other plans of your own, I'd appreciate the chance to - get to know you better."

A woman among men learns to know just how much interest the men around her happen to be feeling, and by that standard I knew at once that Veslin was anything but reluctant. A faint smile turned his lips that was echoed in his eyes, and the way he looked at me said he would be more than happy to oblige. I waited for the words, beginning to realize that the time would turn out to be more than just an escape from an unpleasant situation, but the words that came weren't from him.

"You can't do that," I heard from behind me, the shadow of a growl back in his voice. "As your betrothed I have the right to share a room and a bed with you; no one else has that same right. You can't go with anyone else."

"As a Blade, I can do anything I damned well please," I said without turning, closing my fists against the hurt I could hear in him. He had no right to be hurt, no right at all, not when he was an enemy! Why couldn't he be like other enemies, and simply not care at all? "I told you what Blades were like, but apparently you didn't believe me. Now you'll be able to see for yourself how a Blade takes care of seeing to her needs."

"That's absolutely it," he said as I raised a hand to stroke Veslin's face, and then there were fingers on my arm, keeping my hand from its intended destination. I was pulled around hard to face a very angry enemy, and then sight of him was gone and I was up on his shoulder! I screamed in outrage and tried to struggle free, but his furious strength refused to allow it.

"I trust you remember where your room is?" Veslin said with an infuriating calm as the beast turned away from him and began striding toward the door. "And I hope the rest of the night turns out to be quieter and more pleasant for both of you."

That neither of us answered him didn't seem to bother him in the least, and the last glimpse I had was of him chuckling and reaching for the pitcher of wine. After that we were out the door and back in the narrow hall, and all the kicking and fighting I did accomplished nothing at all. I was carried along like a sack of oats, back to the front of the house and up to the second floor.

While I'd been spending my time in Indris' sitting room, Kylin had apparently been given a tour of the house. I was carried up the stairs and past neatly whitewashed walls to a room he approached without

hesitation, taken inside, and then turned so the door might be closed behind us. A small lamp on a bedside table made the neat room look welcoming and homey, its white and brown and pink and blue and yellow all softened to gentle shadows and easy color. I got no more than a glimpse of that before it was out of my range of vision again, and then the closed door was retreating behind still-angry strides. I pounded again at the back under my fists, continuing to draw nothing in the way of response, and then yelped as I was suddenly dropped. Landing on my back on the soft bed was almost as disconcerting as landing on the hard floor would have been, and by the time I struggled up the monster was sitting beside me on the bed to my left.

"You had no right embarrassing our host just because you have an argument with me," I was told in a very flat way, anger flickering behind dark-light eyes. "It's time you learned what to expect if you ever try something like that again."

I tried to avoid the big hands that came to my arms, tried to fight them when they closed on me despite my efforts, but it was all a waste of strength. I was drawn face down across his lap, held in place by my right arm, and then he actually began spanking me! I suddenly remembered the time Jak had done the same thing to me, right after a fight in which I'd done something extremely stupid, his anger too great to be relieved by mere yelling. It had been pure luck that I hadn't been killed in the fight, and he'd taken my leathers down and whacked me rosy, to teach me in the most unforgettable way possible not to do the same again. As Kylin's big hand rose and fell, landing hard every time it landed, I couldn't get rid of the feeling that it was happening again, that I was being punished for doing something really bad. I twisted silently in deep humiliation, hating him for doing that to me, but also hating myself for thinking I somehow deserved it. I hadn't done anything to deserve it, all I'd done was hurt an enemy!

When Jak had done the spanking it hadn't ended for quite some time, but possibly he'd been angrier than Kyün was right then. After a dozen or so smacks it was abruptly over, and I was pulled up to kneel straight on the bed beside him.

"If I ever have to do that again, I won't be nearly as gentle as I was this time," he said, a ghost of the growl still in his voice and eyes. "Now get out of your clothes and into that bed."

"I won't..." I began, rubbing at what the full skirt of my dress hadn't really protected me from, just short of trembling with everything I was feeling. I didn't want to do anything he was involved with or cared to suggest, but the two words were all I was able to get to.

"But you will," he interrupted at once, turning to look at me after having risen from the bed. "You were the one who didn't want to talk, so we won't be doing any talking. If you make me repeat myself, you won't like the way I do it."

He turned away again to continue circling the bed, and - I suddenly found that I couldn't do anything but lower my head and begin opening my dress. For the first time in many years I felt like putting my face in my hands and crying, but that was the one victory I'd die before giving him.

It didn't take very long to get out of the dress and unlace my sandals, and then I simply lay down on top of the very soft quilts the bed was covered with. My back was to the man I could hear moving around on the far side of the bed, had been to him the whole time, and then the lamp was blown dark and another body was lying down behind me.

"Since you have needs to be taken care of, it's my duty to see that it's done," he said, and a hand was suddenly on my middle, an arm resting on mine. "I'll try harder this time to do the job right, but if it doesn't work you're to tell me. The least a woman in your position deserves is a man who can satisfy her in bed, especially when he can't seem to manage it outside of one. If it still turns out not to be any good

for you, I'll - try talking to someone to see what it is I'm doing wrong."

I didn't move at the touch of that warm, gentle hand on me, but I suddenly realized there were tears streaming down my face, tears only the dark around me could see. It wasn't fair, it wasn't, and it hurt so much I wanted to die of the pain. But dying was the easy way, a path only the common-born were allowed to tread, a path denied to those who were noble. Noble. When my body began shuddering with the sobs I couldn't hold in he moved closer and held me tight in gentle arms, and that made it all a thousand times worse, a thousand times more painful. I deserved that pain, I knew I did, and also knew I'd never find a way to make it stop.

When Indris heard the sound of footsteps going upstairs, she left what few dishes and things she hadn't yet put away and went hurriedly to her father's study. In the past it had been a habit with her to stop and look around whenever she entered the study, but that night she was too excited to indulge in the usual.

"Father, tell me quickly, I'm dying to know," she said as soon as she was through the door, keeping her voice down but unable to keep the excitement out of it. "I knew it had to be one of them as soon as I saw them, but which one was it?"

Her father had been standing with a cup of wine in his hand, staring sightlessly at the wall, most certainly not staring at what was on the wall. He knew his collection of shields so well he could see them even when they weren't in front of him, so she knew he had to have been staring at something else entirely. He smiled when he heard her question, more amused than she thought he'd be, but she had to admit she was sounding a good deal younger than she thought she would.

"Would you believe, daughter mine, that both of them were chosen?" he asked, turning his head to look at her with sparkling blue eyes. "When I opened the box to show them the bracers, we found two single ones of different sizes. It was all I could do to conceal my surprise."

"Both of them," Indris said, walking more slowly forward to a chair near her father before sitting rather heavily. "I hadn't known that could happen, hadn't even thought about it. Now - what are they going to do?"

"They'll answer the summons just as they're supposed to," her father replied, moving close to put a gentle hand to her hair. "I know it would have been easier on them if only one had been chosen, but the decision wasn't ours. And that girl almost broke through part of the deflection aura, asking questions about something she was supposed to have forgotten as soon as it was on her and the subject was changed. I'm hoping it was just her desperation to avoid talking to Kylin and about their relationship, but I'm afraid it might be one of the reasons she was chosen. She may have some - extra ability of some sort, that will play a key part in what inevitably must follow."

"The battles behind the war," Indris said with a sigh, leaning back in her chair. "Battles that will certainly be worse than the open war itself. Now they'll undoubtedly be separated, sent in different directions to serve different purposes."

"I'm sure the thought of that would make Sofaltis happy, but I wonder if it really will."

"Don't be so sure they'll be separated," her father answered, pouring a cup of wine for her before sitting in a chair with his own. "I told them the story of the legend, of course, but I gave them the version everyone's familiar with rather than the true one. Evon didn't make a full panoply, remember, he made only the right half of everything. The left half appeared as a mirror image come to life, a gleaming reflection of the silver which is the symbol of his purity of purpose. Once it was done no one could tell the difference in the reality of one side as opposed to the other, but I've always felt there was a particular reason he did that. Those bracers are linked in some way, one inseparably to the other, so Sofaltis may

not be as free of Kylin as you believe."

"Or as she thinks she wants to be," Indris said with a nod, still concerned as she sipped her wine but nevertheless faintly relieved. "Were you able to find out what the trouble is between them, the real problem that poor girl keeps skirting around? I tried during her bath, but her mind slid away to examine it alone, leaving me behind a slammed-closed door."

"I was hoping I might have the opportunity, but it didn't turn out that way," Veslin said, shaking his head with faint frustration. "Sofaltis thought she could avoid having to share Kylin's accommodations by offering to share mine, but she doesn't seem to know much about the man she's bound to. If I'd agreed I probably would have had to fight him, he's feeling that insecure about her. I'm convinced her absolute refusal has something to do with the covert war flowing around us, and if I could have spoken to her I might have been able to resolve the problem."

"Is that all you would have done with her?" Indris asked, her expression very carefully innocent. "Spoken with her?"

"She's an infant, you hellion, even more so than you," Veslin answered with a snort, then shifted to a grin. "But she's an infant with an instinct about men, and wouldn't have been surprised by anything that happened. When a man holds a woman in his arms after they've blended souls, she's much more likely to tell him things she wouldn't have spoken of under other circumstances." His amusement had been fading, and by then it was all gone. "She has to be feeling much, much more for Kyün than she'll admit even to herself. It wasn't disgust that made her avoid even the touch of his hand, far from it, and I wish I could have done something. I'm certain they're suffering for no real reason, except as victims of the war."

"Maybe - maybe it's part of the hidden war," Indris said slowly, distress returning to her as she leaned forward to look at her father. "Maybe it's happened because they were meant to be summoned. If that's true, they haven't any chance together at all."

"Indris, child, the hidden war is being fought to preserve decency, not destroy it or make it just another tool for the users," Veslin said, his words assured despite the faint doubt that had crept into his eyes. "We have to believe that so low a thing would not be done to two innocent children, or the war will already have been lost-by us."

"Unless there's a special purpose we haven't been allowed to see," Indris returned, finding more comfort in the depths of the silver wine than in her father's words. "I hope with everything in me that you're right, Father, but there are too many things happening that we can't see. I don't have to tell you how many lives are ruined by even the most well-intentioned wars; theirs just might be two of them."

Indris waited to hear Veslin disagree with her, but the silver wine had absorbed two pairs of eyes, and nothing further came but deeper silence.

## **Chapter Twelve**

When my eyes opened to the light of a new day, I was relieved to find that I wasn't comfortable despite the soft bed, and I hadn't forgotten anything of what went on before I slept. It's more than disconcerting to wake up happy only to discover you have nothing to be happy about, but hopefully those days were over. I woke up as miserable as I'd been before I slept, which is a hell of a thing to feel pleased with.

I moved around under the quilt in the cool morning air, also relieved to discover that I was alone. My bedmate of the night before was gone along with his clothes, having left so quietly I hadn't heard him go. Not that it really mattered if he was there or not, I was sure he hadn't gone far. He wouldn't have gone far, not after what had happened between us before we slept, not after I'd ruined everything I'd been

trying to accomplish.

I brought a hand up to my mouth quickly, holding in the moan of pain, refusing to let it free. If it escaped I knew I would be crying again, just the way I'd cried in the dark during the night. As if crying would solve anything, or make what I'd done go away, or turn me back into a decent human being from the sickening thing I'd become. I was useless and worthless, without any trace of honor or shred of decency, and my father had been right to laugh at the idea of naming me his heir.

I turned under the quilt to bury my face in the pillow, wishing I could stay that way long enough to smother and die. He was an enemy, for Evon's sake, committed to doing harm to my family and everything we cared about, but when he held me in his arms all I wanted was to give myself to him without reservation, without criticism, without restraint. I could still feel the strength in his arms and shoulders and body, the warmth in his lips, the unending pleasure of his lovemaking. He used me more completely than any man I'd ever known, but never tried to keep most of the pleasure for himself. From first to last his intention was to share, but the moment he entered me I knew I was his, whether I cared to be or not, whether he shared or not. It was totally beyond me to refuse -

But he was my enemy!

The moan forced its way free at last, but was absorbed by the pillow just before I had to turn my head and breathe. Every time I tried hurting him all I did was hurt myself more, and after last night I'd never again be able to tell him he couldn't satisfy me. He would have had to have died in order to miss it, and I could testify to the fact that he hadn't died. I was so terribly, horribly disgusted with myself, to let an enemy reach me like that, to be so pliable that I would betray everything I loved in exchange for nothing but the satisfaction of my body.

Like a small, mindless female, good for nothing but giving men rides and having their babies.

Not a woman, who at least had her pride no matter what she found it necessary - or desirable - to do.

Female, low, stinking, squirming, totally useless female!

The self-hatred and loathing stirred me a short way out of the misery, but not nearly far enough. I turned onto my left side with a sigh, looking at the bright, cheerful sunshine pouring in through the window, incapable of sharing its warmth and happiness. I knew I was looking at the sunshine of the day I'd be getting home, and was so depressed I almost couldn't bear it. The only thing I could do when I did get home was tell my father everything, leaving it to him to decide what was to be done. It would be the most humiliating thing I'd ever had to face, but I couldn't say I hadn't earned humiliation at the very least. I owed it to my father to tell him everything, and then do exactly what he wanted me to do.

I lay there for another few moments with the thought, even more depressed but in no way reluctant, and then got up to begin dressing. If there was one thing I'd learned to be good at during my life, it was facing up to the consequences of the things I'd done. For some reason I'd never developed the habit of making excuses, of trying to show my actions in a better, more acceptable light. I'd spent a good part of my childhood suffering through lectures because of that trait, and now was facing considerably more than a lecture. I sighed again, wishing for once that I could make excuses, then shook my head as I finished tying my sandals. In order to make excuses you have to be able to think of them, and in that particular situation finding an excuse would be like chipping down an entire mountain range with a palm dagger.

I left the pleasant room I'd barely looked at and made my way downstairs, letting lethargy of spirit slow my steps to an unenthusiastic dragging of feet. I had no interest in seeing or talking to anyone, only in being on my way, but you don't thank people for their hospitality by disappearing without a word of good-bye. Indris and Veslin were entitled to a face to face thank-you, and I would see that they got it.

I stopped at the bottom of the stairs for a moment to orient myself, then went toward where the kitchen should be. That really was a very big house for so small a village, but if Indris' husband had been that popular an armorer, he probably could have built one twice the size and not worried about the cost. As I neared the kitchen I could tell Indris was in the middle of cooking things from the delicious smells coming out to meet me, but as enticing as the overall aroma was it did nothing to raise an appetite in me. My mood was in no mood to be hungry, so to speak, a statement of disinterest I couldn't have agreed with more.

"Well, good morning," Indris said with a smile, turning from what she was doing at the sound of the door opening. "The food's almost ready, so your timing couldn't be better. Pull up a chair at the table, and the food and I will be with you in a minute."

"I appreciate your offer, but food isn't the reason I stopped in here," I said, moving farther into the room. "Since I'll be leaving soon, I came to thank you for everything you've done and to say good-bye. As soon as I get home I'll have this dress sent back to you, so you'll have it for the next vagabond in need, if for nothing else."

"Vagabond," she said with a snort, her smile having disappeared as she studied my face. "If you're a vagabond, I'll be welcoming them from now on instead of chasing them away with a broom. You and Kylin earned everything you've been given, I think we all know that. At least have a cup of tasil with me, if you aren't hungry enough for a meal. By then Kylin and my father ought to be back."

"Back from buying horses?" I asked, the only errand I could think of that they would be away on. "They'd better hurry, we've already wasted too much time as it is."

"You seem to be in a hurry to get somewhere in particular," Indris remarked, watching her hands as she poured two cups of tasil rather than looking at me. "And you did say you were going home. Is there anything special about to happen that you're in a hurry to get to?"

She turned then with the metal cups in her hands, the look in her dark eyes far from neutral. She was asking me a question she thought she would get a happy answer to, one that would let us both get back to smiling, but smiling, like food, was something I had no interest in.

"I suppose you could say I'm in a hurry to talk to my father," I answered, walking over to take one of the cups from her. "Aside from that, I can't find much to look forward to in my life."

"Sofaltis, you're so young you should have everything to look forward to," she protested, the hand I'd freed for her coming to my arm. "Kylin was so happy when he came down earlier, he was all but singing! I was hoping that meant you two had worked things out together, settled whatever problem had stood between you. You're still not looking forward to the marriage as much as he is?"

"I'd always thought men were supposed to be the reluctant ones," I told the anxiety in her dark eyes, then turned away to sip at the tasil. "All the old stories and songs talk about how hard a woman has to work to catch one, but that isn't true, is it? Most men want and need marriage very badly - even when they shouldn't."

I knew the silence behind me was a puzzled and confused one, but I also knew I'd already said more than I should have. The tasil was strong and warming, bringing a small measure of vigor rather than trying to fill a void that wasn't there, and I was glad Indris had insisted on it. I intended riding hard when I left there, even if someone else wasn't in the mood for it...

"Here's the wood you wanted," a voice suddenly came from the kitchen's outer door, opened only an instant before. "And Veslin would like to know if you have a minute or two. He needs your help out in

the stable with something."

"Thank you for remembering, Kylin," Indris told him warmly as I turned again, to see the man dumping a double armload of kindling into the bin to the left of the hearth. "And of course I have time to help my father. You took care of everything you had to?"

"Everything and then some," the man agreed with a smile, brushing at his shirt as he sent a glance in my direction. "The boy your father recommended has the fastest horse in the village, so he should reach Gensea by noon. He'll deliver my message, then wait to guide the escort back here. I've asked them to bring horses for the girl and myself, but even if they move fast, as I'm sure they will, they probably won't get here much before dark. It looks like you'll be having guests at least until then."

"Very welcome guests," Indris said firmly as she took a final sip of her tasil before putting the cup down near the hearth. "And if they have to stay the night as well, it will please me even more. I'll just see what my father wants, and then we'll eat."

She sent another smile that included me as well, then went through the door Kylin had used, pulling it shut behind her. The sunlight that had been streaming in through it was abruptly cut off, but the resulting dimness wasn't too deep for me to see the lingering smile on the face of the man who stood not far from me. He was looking directly at me now, and when I didn't return his smile, it began fading.

"Don't tell me," he said with a sigh, folding his arms across his chest. "Now that we've got our bed problems solved, you've found something else to complain about. Would you like to tell me what it is, or do I have to guess?"

"Guessing at things takes intelligence, which means you're not equipped for the job," I came back immediately despite the heavy flush I could feel in my cheeks. He, my enemy, actually seemed to believe he had a basis for complaint, which was the most ridiculous thing I'd ever heard. "What did you mean telling Indris we'd be staying here, maybe even until tomorrow? I want to leave now, and that's what I intend doing."

"Tisah, it would be foolish not to wait for the escort Traixe will send," he said, the sudden look of understanding in his light eyes bringing with it a flood of fresh patience. "The men who kidnapped you are probably already back at the castle, waiting for us to show up so they can try again. I'm not going to bet your freedom that I'm good enough to keep you out of their hands, not when it's totally unnecessary. When the escort gets here we'll ride back with them, and that way we'll make it without any more problems. In the meanwhile we can spend some more time visiting with Indris and Veslin."

"I've spent enough time visiting with Indris and Veslin," I said through my teeth, my left hand curling to a fist at my side. It was supposed to be Traixe's men that we'd be waiting for, but it had quickly come to me I had only his word for that. The ones snowing up might just as easily be those very kidnappers he was so worried about, and I was expected to simply sit there and wait for the surprise? "I'm not afraid of those kidnappers even if you are, which means I'm leaving now. You play it safe by waiting for the escort; I don't need them."

"You intend going on foot?" he asked as he watched me move to the hearth to put my cup down, his voice mild and tinged with faintly amused curiosity. "Since I'm still the only one with a filled purse, you won't be able to buy a horse or food or anything else. If you still insist on being stubborn and try leaving on foot I won't have any trouble catching up with you, and then you'll have the added embarrassment of being carried back here. I think you'd better forget about showing me how fearless you are, and spend some time remembering last night. With a whole day of waiting ahead of us, visiting is only one of the things we can do. We can also practice some more for-our wedding night, just to be sure we get it right,

you understand."

He sent me a wink and a wide grin then turned to the hearth, chuckling as he bent to see what the pots and pans being kept warm near the fire contained. Indris had been right about how happy he was, but his happiness had nothing other than my utter shame as its reason for being. He had taken the helpless female and had made her even more helpless, and now he expected to pass the time until his friends got there by enjoying himself in bed on top of her again. The rage rose up so high I nearly choked on it, furious not only with myself now but also with him. So he was the only one with a filled purse, was he, and if I tried walking away he would simply come after me and carry me back? It looked like it was time he learned nothing was that simply done to a Blade, not even to one who had lately forgotten the truism herself.

I stood so close to the wood bin ail I had to do was reach out, letting my fingers close around a thick length of branch that had been cut to hearth size. As a cudgel it felt just right which means I didn't hesitate an instant, not about to let his speed ruin things for me again. I took one step forward and swung with all the strength of my body and the anger filling it, catching him across the back of the head just as he was beginning to straighten out of the crouch. The heavy "thwack" of the blow nearly drowned out the small grunt he gave, and then he crumpled to the floor and lay there unmoving.

"That's my thanks for part of what I remember about last night," I muttered to his unhearing body, tossing the length of wood back into the bin before bending to him. His scalp was bleeding where the blow had caught him, but his steady breathing showed his skull was as thick as talking to him would lead you to believe it would be. For a brief moment I'd wondered if he would be dead, and when I'd seen he wasn't I hadn't known whether to be pleased or sorry. Looking down at him from my knees I knew I ought to take the dagger from his belt and see to it that my family had one less enemy in the world, but I couldn't do it while he was unconscious. If he had been standing and facing me I knew I wouldn't have had any trouble, but killing the helpless would have brought me down to the level of him and his friends.

Or at least his friends. Damn him.

I blew a low breath of vexation out between my teeth, then quickly moved him to his back. Indris and Veslin could walk in at any minute, and there I knelt, wasting time with an inner debate over whether or not my enemy was honorable. As my hands went to his purse I told myself firmly that it didn't matter whether he was or not, and I'd finally picked up enough of a sense of hurry that the inner arguments didn't argue. Inside his purse was a good amount of gold and silver and a few coppers, more than enough to have gotten us everything we'd needed from an inn, but he had refused to go in the direction of the inn. My suspicions flared again, higher than ever, helping me to make up my mind on exactly what I wanted to do.

When I was all through I got to my feet and left the kitchen by the door leading to the house's front door, leaving behind me a man who no longer had more than coppers in his purse, or a belt holding a dagger. The dagger sheath was strapped to my right leg with the belt, under the skirt of the dress where it wouldn't be seen, and the gold and silver coins were scattered around in the various pockets sewn all over the inside of the dress. I'd wondered about those pockets when I'd first put the dress on, but that was because I usually wore a pouch with my leathers. As a rule only men wore pouches, the theory being, I suppose, that you can show off only what you have the strength and the skill to protect. Women didn't usually have that strength and skill, but even the vulnerable sometimes have to carry coins.

I didn't breathe easily again until I was not only out of the house and down the porch steps, but also through the gate and moving briskly away up the dirt street. I'd spent an agonizing moment or two trying to tell myself I really ought to take Kylin's sword as well as his dagger even if that did leave him weaponless, but then I realized his sword would be no more than a weapon of desperation for me, to be used if there was absolutely no other choice. The blade was longer and heavier than what my movements

were trained to, obviously made to his specifications and size, but there were also other things to be considered. In Blade leathers I could wear a sword without causing comment or attracting notice, but in a dress it would hardly be the same - and I might conceivably find myself pushed into having to use a weapon that was wrong for me. And that bright silver hilt; if I passed any of my former companion's cronies, they'd know that hill at once - and undoubtedly also immediately recognize the Blade wearing it, instead of dismissing her as just another female in a dress.

No, I had to leave the sword behind, but I wasn't happy about my ridiculous feeling of satisfaction over doing it. Especially when I thought about the possibility of Veslin coming after me. He'd made his position more than clear when he'd acknowledged Kylin's betrothal rights to the extent of giving us only a single room to sleep in, making no effort to find out if that was what I wanted. I'd never before noticed how damned universal that attitude was, that Kylin had all the rights and I had none, and it would have been difficult enough facing Veslin with a weapon. If he came after me to bring me back to the man I supposedly belonged to -

I shifted the single gold coin I'd kept out from right hand to left hand, grimly determined to be out of the village before anything like that could happen. I was not going to be given back to that man as though even I agreed he had his rights, not as long as I was still breathing!

Anger helped to move me faster along the dirt streets, but at that time of morning, when everyone was already working at what they did, it took a little while to find someone to question. It was an old man carving wood under a tree who finally told me where I might find someone with a decent horse for sale, and that took me to the other side of the village. That man, busy repairing his well pump, did indeed have a horse, and to my surprise he stopped what he was doing long enough to show it to me. The placid brown gelding was quite a distance from being a war horse, but he seemed to be sound enough and was still too young to be called a nag. I was hardly likely to find better, so I turned to the man with a nod.

"If you'll throw in a saddle and bridle, I'll take him," I said, squinting against the rising glare of the sun. "And don't expect to lose on the gear, I'll pay for that as well."

"I got the gear, so it's yours," the man agreed with an amiable nod, chewing on a piece of straw as he studied me. "Didn't think you'd talk about payin", though. Most who helped out folk from a village wouldn't. They'd figure what they wanted was already paid fer."

"Well, I don't happen to see it that way," I said, struggling to keep control of the hurry inside me in the face of the man's easygoing manner. Trying to rush him too much would probably be an insult, and I didn't want him changing his mind about selling the horse. "Would you mind if we got him saddled now? I do have something of a long ride ahead of me, and I'd like to be off the road before dark."

"Can't blame a woman none fer that," he answered with a still-pleasant nod, taking the horse's halter rope to lead it back into the stable. "Even a woman like you."

I followed after, wondering exactly what he'd meant by his comment; once we'd gotten inside and he'd begun saddling the horse, I found out almost immediately.

"Yep, a man would expect a woman like you't" have the sense't" be off the road by dark," he said, looking at nothing more than the horse he was saddling. "Had the sense't" show folks what't" do with rubbish we didn't have the stomach to face up to on our own. Fixed it so we could kick that rubbish right out, givin' it a passel o' bruises first't" tell it not't" come back. Yep, a man don't hafta worry 'bout a woman with sense."

He tucked in the end of the girth strap, lowered the stirrup leather then reached for a bridle, and I still couldn't think of anything to say. The man had complimented me in the oddest way I'd ever encountered,

and I had no doubt he was sincere. What I didn't know was how to respond to that compliment, but it turned out a response didn't seem to be expected. Once the bridle was on he unstrapped the halter, and then the man was handing me the reins of my new mount.

"He's all yours now, just like you wanted 'im," I was told, a faint smile on the sun-darkened, leathery face and in the mild brown eyes. "I'll ask Grail't" keep you safe, just in case your Evon's busy doin' somethin' else. You ever come back here, me and mine'l look on it as a kindness if n you stop by't" see us."

He nodded in a friendly way, turned to give the horse one last pat, then strode out of the stable as though on his way to get back to something important. I hadn't expected to waste time haggling over the price he wanted for the horse, but not only hadn't he mentioned a price, he was now walking away as though everything were already taken care of! I stood there for a moment, trying to figure out what was going on, then gave up on trying and simply followed after him.

"Wait, wait just a minute!" I called, urging my new mount along with me. The man stopped in the middle of the yard, squinting at the sun after the dimness of the stable, and waited politely for me to reach him. Once I did I said, "Haven't you forgotten something? This horse hasn't been paid for."

"Far as I c'n see, it sure as hell has," he returned in a drawl, pulling the brim of his hat down farther over his eyes. "One o' the womenfolk you an' your friend kept from gettin' hurt yesterday was mine, an' I been tryin' 't' figure out how't say my thanks fer it. Now they're said, an' it warden't hard a tall. You have a good, safe ride now, y'hear?"

His shaded eyes looked directly at me, telling me his mind was made up and nothing was about to change it, certainly not anything I could say. It bothered me that he was giving up the price of a horse simply because of his strict sense of honor, and then I thought of something that could change all that.

"Since you're sure you've already been paid, all I can say is thank you," I told him, adding a warm smile to the words. "I wonder, though, if you would be willing to do me one more very big favor?"

"If 'n I c'n," he answered with a nod, not a flinch out of him as he committed himself to giving up even more in gratitude. "Ain't no way't" really put paid't" what you done fer us."

"Well, if you can do this last thing for me, I'll certainly consider us even," I said, reaching my hand out to him. When his own hand extended in response, I put the gold coin in it. "I'd like you to hold that for me, keeping it safe, until I come back for it. I don't know when that will be, but I need it to be kept by someone I can trust."

"You sure you wanna do this?" he asked, his eyes on the coin, his easy calm finally the least bit ruffled. Most men in his position would live their lives out without having seen that much money even at the end of it, not to mention all at once in a single coin. By then I had already moved to my horse and was starting to mount, and when he saw that he came over to help me up. Once I was settled in the saddle, I smiled at him again.

"I'm positive I want to do that," I said, pleased with the eagerness to go I could feel in the horse under me. "Of course, there's one other side to the favor. If I haven't come back for the coin in two weeks, you have to keep it as your own. Evon bless you and yours for this fine gift, today and every day from now on."

I raised my hand as I put heels to my mount, and then I was on my way out of the man's yard with him still standing in the middle of it. I'd made it clear that the gold wasn't an attempt to pay for something his pride needed to give away in gratitude, but I wanted to be out of there before he reck'nd he really ought to try refusing my second favor. Since he'd already agreed to it he couldn't back out without my consent,

so it was up to me to be gone before he could think of a valid reason for that consent. I wanted him to have the gold as much as he'd wanted me to have the horse, and after a while he'd understand that.

By the time I was through the fields surrounding the village and on the road to Gensea, I'd made myself as comfortable in the saddle as I was likely to get. The skirt of my dress was wide enough to keep my legs-and the dagger-covered, but even so it didn't let me feel as secure as I usually felt on a horse. Having sandals on my feet instead of boots only made it worse, of course, boots having heels while sandals don't. I had to pay constant attention to keep my feet from sliding through the stirrups, and between that and the heat of the day and the dust rising up from the road, I knew the trip wasn't likely to be the most pleasant I'd ever taken. The only good part about it all was the smooth, easy trot of my mount, a pace he seemed ready to keep to for as long as necessary.

The hours went by faster than I'd expected them to, and that close to the city there was no one on the road who intended using it as a source of income rather than as something simply to travel on. The nearer I got the more traffic there was on the road, almost all of it mounted rather than on wagons, and after a while I was drawn away from my own thoughts by an oddity I kept seeing repeated. Those passing me on the way to the city glanced at me with normal curiosity, but those coming away from the city, almost all riding in smaller or larger groups, were too intent on their agitated conversations to notice anything at all. I spent some time wondering what had gotten them so upset, but there was no true way of knowing without stopping one of them to ask.

Instead of stopping one of them, I kicked my horse out of his trot into a gallop.

Sometimes the cold feeling you get in bright sunshine and heat turns out to be nothing but imagination, but on other occasions you discover that Evon has taken the trouble to give you advance warning of what's ahead. This time I had no intentions of riding into and through the city, but when I guided my tired but still-willing mount to the left fork of the road that would take me around, I saw a large group of men stopped about where the road just began curving around the city's walls. Those going into the city itself were staring at the knot of men, and when I got closer I saw why. They were City Guardsmen, and they weren't letting anyone go past them.

I pulled my horse back down to a trot, wiped the sweat and road dust from my forehead with my free right arm, then deliberately swallowed down the urge to come to a full stop. I knew I wouldn't want to hear what those Guardsmen would have to say, but I had to hear whatever it was. My ankles felt bruised and scraped raw from the stirrups, and my legs and back were hurting in a way I hadn't felt for years, but coming up behind the two men already stopped by the Guardsmen proved to be harder and more painful than riding on for the rest of the day would have been.

"... mean we can't go up to the castle?" one of the two men was demanding, both of them dressed in the brown leather of fighters. "We're here looking for hire with the Duke, and that means we got to go up there. Are you in the city so desperate for recruits, you're trying to stop men heading for the Duke?"

"Going up to the castle won't do you any good right now," the captain of the Guard answered, finding nothing of the amusement the fighter had been trying to share. "It so happens we can use you in the city, but not for the reason you think. We're in the middle of heavy trouble right now, and we're going to need every fighter we can get."

"What kind of heavy trouble?" the man asked, exchanging a brief frown with his friend. "We thought the fighting in the north hadn't gotten here yet."

"Strictly speaking, it hasn't," the Guard captain said, raising his left hand to shade his eyes from the lowering sun.

"As far as we know, this is completely local trouble. What's the matter, were you two trying to keep away from the fighting in the north?"

"Hell, no," the second fighter said with a snort, more amused than insulted. "Rumor is the war'll be movin' this way before too long, so we thought we'd come ahead and get our seats for it now, before the mercenary groups move in and swallow up every place worth havin'. Like my partner said, we're here lookin' for hire. What kinda local trouble we talkin' about?"

"Really nasty local trouble," the captain answered, his grimace having nothing to do with the sun. "Don't ask me how it happened, but suddenly we have crazy rebels all around us. We'll be fighting in the name of the Duke, but he won't be there to lead us."

"Why not?" the first fighter asked, this time supporting his frown alone. "We heard Duke Rilfe was one of the good ones, always there to lead where he wanted men to go. Not like the ones who find it smarter to hang back and watch. Why won't he be there?"

"Because he can't be there,"-the captain said while the cold went all around my insides and squeezed. "He can't be there because he's the one the rebels are holding up at the castle. He and his two little daughters, and we're going to have to fight to get them free."

My breathing started up again at that, but the ice on my insides stayed exactly where it was. They had my father and my sisters, and those idiots from the city were going to storm the castle! I had to do something, or the three hostages the rebels held would certainly be the first three to die!

\* \* \*

Kylin opened his eyes and tried to sit up, but the stabbing pain in his head turned the effort into nothing more than a groan. He put his hands to the ache, trying to clear the blur from his vision, trying to figure out what in hell had happened. One minute he'd been looking into pots of food, and the next-

"Don't try to move yet," Veslin's voice came from his left, the words soft enough so that they didn't add to his pain.

"You'll be all right, but give it a minute or two and it won't hurt as much."

"What happened?" Kylin croaked, blinking away the blur to see that he lay on a narrow bed in a strange room. "My head feels like someone's been using it for quarterstaff practice."

"From what we can gather, that isn't far from the truth," Veslin said, sighing as he looked down at the younger man. "You were bashed in the back of the head, and one of the pieces of kindling in the bin by the kitchen hearth has blood on it. I'd say we all know who it was who did the swinging."

"But I'm sure she didn't mean to hurt you," Indris said at once from his right as he cursed under his breath, then began handing him a cup of something. "Once you drink this you'll feel a good deal better, but right now my father and I will help you to sit up."

To Kylin's disgust he found he needed that help, but once the smooth, sweet whiteness in the cup was down his throat he did immediately begin to feel better. The pain in his head faded to a distant throb, the water drained out of his muscles, and moving his eyes from one sight to the next stopped making him dizzy. He was just about back to the way he had been, which meant anger had nothing to fight for his attention.

"Where is she?" he asked the two anxious faces watching him, one hand rubbing at the remaining stiffness in his neck. He'd tried to keep most of the growl out of his voice, but the way Indris flinched showed he

hadn't been overly successful.

"Kylin, please don't be too angry with her," the woman said, her dark eyes trying to convince him her request was no more than reasonable. "I don't know if you realize how deeply unhappy she is, how confused and miserable on the inside she ..."

"Indris, I know exactly how unhappy she is," Kylin interrupted, getting to his feet to loosen the knots in his shoulders. "She's been that unhappy from the first minute we met, and by now I'm more than a little tired of it. She seems to think she's the only woman ever to be promised into a marriage she didn't want, and has been moping around as though it's the end of the world for everyone alive. I've been trying my damndest to show her it won't be as bad as she's obviously imagining, but everything I try is thrown back in my face. Are you telling me I'm missing something I should be seeing?"

"Not really," Indris answered, looking uncomfortable and vaguely frustrated. "I've seen myself how she ignores or dismisses all your kindnesses, but maybe she ..."

"And now, just because she'd rather risk her life than wait for an escort I had the good sense to send for, she takes her mad out on me with a stick over the head," Kylin plowed on, getting angrier with every word he spoke. "She's a spoiled brat of an undisciplined Blade, and if she likes using sticks all that much, we'll see how happy she is when I get through using one on her. She'll need a pillow to sit on for the ride home tomorrow, and even with it she'll wish she could have walked instead. Now, where is she?"

"Kylin, I think you'd better check your personal possessions," Veslin said, rubbing his face with one finger as he studied the younger man. Those eyes... "Where she is will be obvious after that."

The King's Fighter looked down at himself fast, one hand going to his purse which was loosely tied to his swordbelt, the absence of his dagger and belt completely obvious even before he'd opened the pouch flap. Once he did and looked inside, his anger rose even higher.

"Coppers!" he grated, not giving a damn that his voice was now pure growl. "She took all the gold and silver, and left me nothing but the coppers! And if my dagger is gone, that means she is, too! Without having been bright enough to add my sword to her thieving! She'd rather walk the road with nothing but a dagger to keep her safe, just to show how fearless she is! I'll kill her. By Evon do I swear, when I get my hands on her I'll ..."

"Kylin, you'd better calm down," Veslin interrupted his furious ranting, his voice concerned as he put a hand to the younger man's arm. "The sweetmilk eased your pain and quieted the dizziness, but if you start getting wild and jumping around, it will all come back at once. You'll sit down and take it easy for a while to let your body start healing itself, and then you can run and shout all you like."

"But I have to start after her," Kylin protested, unhappily aware of the faint shifting behind his eyes, a warning he would have preferred ignoring. "Without me there, anything can happen to her."

"She's already been gone two hours, and she isn't on foot," Veslin said, silently urging him toward the door Indris held open. "You need a mount of your own, and you might as well be sitting down and eating while I find one for you. After that you can leave as quickly as you like."

Kylin would have rather argued the order disguised as a suggestion, but it made far too much sense for him to be able to do it. He'd accomplish very little if he fell off whatever horse he was able to find, and would lose more time that way than by taking it slow from the beginning. As they left the small room and made their way to the kitchen, Indris said something pleasant and reassuring about the food that he simply didn't hear. His mind was too full of Tisah, where she was and whether or not she was still all right. As soon as he got his hands on her he'd kill her; nothing would be able to stop him, nothing...

## Chapter Thirteen

This time riding through the gate didn't earn me a single glance, not with the way the gate Guards were stopping every male who looked capable of holding a sword, trying to recruit them for the proposed attack. Thinking about their stupidity was making me furious as well as frightened sick, and I had to keep my teeth clenched tightly together to keep from shouting and screaming at them. It wasn't anyone in the City Guard who was responsible for that mindlessness; they were just taking orders from their superiors, the City Council. It was the Council I had to save my shouting for, telling them in no uncertain way that they were throwing away the lives of my father and sisters.

If I could find out who they were, and where they were, and how I got there through the maze of late afternoon streets clogged with what looked to be the same people who had been there when I'd first come through days ago.

My patient, steady mount took me forward into the crowds, having no idea where I was going but willing to take me there anyway. And that made two of us who didn't know, I realized, wiping the sweat and dust from my forehead with the back of my hand. I'd almost met some of the city leaders that night at the Feasting, but Evon's luck had been with someone else just then. I didn't know who had the most power in the city, the one whose word could stop that insanity before it went too far. And whoever it was, I couldn't go to him as a pleading female who knew nothing of fighting and therefore feared it. I had to get my leathers back first, and my sword - Back from the castle where the hostages were being held - Might as well make a stab at freeing them if you're going to do that - but you can't get in, can't even push through the Guardsmen to get closer - what in hell are you going to do?

The question was a good one, but all I could come up with in the way of an answer was to shift in the saddle, trying to ease some of the aching of my body. I'd been away from home too long, hadn't been back long enough for it to be of any use, didn't know a single soul I could turn to for help. Help. What I needed first was information, from someone who knew what was going on, someone who was a part of that city from the inside out, who'd be willing to supply whatever I wanted. The lesser nobles would be useless for that even if any of them were in the city, and that left no one at all.

I looked around me to find that the milling crowds were actually moving, carrying me deeper into the city with them at a not unreasonable pace, I reached up and rubbed at my left shoulder, not particularly amused by the thing, wondering if it was Evon who had that terrible a sense of humor. Now, when I hadn't the faintest idea where to go, the crowds were moving; days earlier, when I'd known exactly where I wanted to go, they hadn't budged an - Hadn't budged an inch, forcing me to try another street, which had gotten me good and lost, until I got to a dead-end court -

Where I'd saved the lives of a man and his sister! A man of the city who had acknowledged the fact that he owed me a favor! I didn't realize I'd stiffened with excitement until my horse snorted and tossed his head, telling me that shortening his rein and squeezing his barrel with my legs would do no good at all. He was already moving as fast as he could without trampling anyone, and he was really too tired and hot to be any good at trampling.

"Evon broil it, what was the name of that tavern?" I muttered to myself, patting my mount to apologize for confusing him even as I thought furiously. It had something to do with animals - or maybe fighting - or a pair of somethings, or - Evon take it and rot it, what was the name of that place?

I had to spend a few minutes calming myself down, and then I deliberately blocked out the shouting and calling and talking all around me and simply made my mind go blank. I'd been to enough taverns in my time, and if someone recommended one in particular I usually had no trouble remembering its name. The people whose recommendations I took had tastes very similar to mine, and if they'd enjoyed some place

in particular, the chances were I would do the -

The Ax and Shield. I almost shook with relief at the return of the memory, disgusted with myself for the false trails I'd been stumbling down. Ox instead of Ax making it an animal instead of a weapon, and my next try would probably have been the Cock and Bull. The next time someone said something like that to me I'd write it down, damned and broiled if I wouldn't! I wiped my shaky palm on the dust-covered skirt of my dress, then began looking around for someone to ask directions from.

Which turned out harder than I would have been willing to believe before trying it. With all those people around, the first ten or a dozen politely told me they'd never heard of the place, and their easy smiles forced me to believe they were telling the truth. Every one of them had been fairly well-dressed, the safest group to ask things of in a city like Gensea, and there had been no reason for them to lie even if I hadn't been convinced of their sincerity. If they said they didn't know, then-

Then I was asking the wrong class of people.

I sighed as I guided my horse out of the thinning line of traffic, noticing without noticing that at that time of day people were already going home. Stopping someone of the lowest class would be like demanding to be taken advantage of, but at that point I no longer had a choice. The Ax and Shield had to cater to the dregs and drifters, too low a dive to be known to anyone who didn't patronize it. If it had been an upper-class place, those of the middle class would have known of it even if they'd never been inside its gilded front door. No, it had to be a dive, and wouldn't I fit in well with my pretty red print dress...

I had to question more than half a dozen beggars, street girls and light-fingered types before I got three sets of directions that agreed, and I didn't follow them with anything like easy confidence and a light heart. Cities had all sorts of traps for the unwary to walk into, not the least of which were the night houses whose owners preferred slave workers to willing workers. Any night denizen who sent a country innocent into the web earned a piece of silver at the least, and too many of the people I'd talked to had grinned and looked me over before offering all the directions I wanted. In my leathers with a swordbelt strapped around me, they'd paled "and run the other way; in a dress I'd found them all too willing to help.

The neighborhood I finally wound up in was not too far from the better part of the city, but was in reality a full world away. Shopkeepers were boarding up their places of business in anticipation of night, small dingy places that went well with the rundown residences and garbage-covered streets surrounding them. It was the sort of neighborhood that made you feel it was on the verge of waking up rather than going to sleep, the lamps being lit in the various taverns and night houses only adding to the impression. My horse picked his way carefully through the muck and refuse, unhappy with the overall stench, disliking the bands of children who ran screaming across his path, disapproving entirely of the nastiness I'd ridden him into. From the lingering stares I was getting from the loungers and strollers of the street, I couldn't have agreed with the sentiment more. If I'd had any choice at all, any choice in the world...

The Ax and Shield wasn't quite in the middle of it all, but something about the place said it wasn't in the middle because it didn't want to be. Its faded sign had been brown and red and silver and black, but it hung over walls of the gray of stone, its front door dull but heavy wood. A battered lantern high up on one stone wall was meant to illuminate the sign, but that early in the evening it hadn't yet been lit. I sat there for a moment and simply stared, men began looking around.

"We've got to find some place to leave you," I muttered to my mount as I patted his neck. "If I tie you to that hitching pole, you'll be gone before the door swings closed behind me. I guess it'll have to be there."

My horse snorted his dislike of the dirty boarding stable I'd spotted on the opposite side of the street, but he didn't have any more choice than I did. The front doors of the stable were standing wide open, but the

thin man moving around inside wasn't worried that anyone would walk in and disturb his charges. The two large, armed men standing in front of the doors were there to see that nothing unpleasant happened, and having a horse was probably the only thing that got you by them without comment.

The stable owner was more than happy to accept my business, and that despite the fact that his stable was far from empty. The piece of silver I had to produce in advance finally told me why he was so happy, but I made no effort to point out that I could almost buy a horse for what he was charging for stabling. If I decided against using his facilities I would have to buy a horse, as soon as I discovered mine was gone. The only benefit I got out of silently producing his demanded payment was the way he lost his grin looking at my expression - and the way his two bullyboys let me walk out between them, still without comment.

Crossing that street in sandals was an experience in itself, but it would have been a lot worse if I'd had the sort of gentle upbringing so many people thought I should have had. I made it to the other side more or less uncontaminated, really glad that the dress had turned out to be too short for my height. Skirts brushing the ground may be stylish, but not in a neighborhood like that. The door of the tavern had a heavy metal grip, but despite the weight of it all it swung open smoothly and quietly, letting me move inside with no further delay.

The Ax and Shield wasn't more than only just true to its name, with a rusty throwing axe and a wood-and-paper shield hanging on the wall behind the counter at the back of the large room. It wasn't quite as dirty inside as out, but the stone walls were greasy with years worth of lamp soot and cooking smoke, the wooden beams of the ceiling were just about black, and the heavy plank floor should have been ankle-deep in sawdust instead of unevenly coated with it, if all the pools of spilled brew and wine were meant to be sopped up. The larger tables and their benches were in the corners to the left and right of the door, smaller tables littered the floor with rickety chairs or stools around them, and the lamps which were already lit were badly in need of trimming and cleaning. In other words a perfectly normal tavern for a rundown area like the one it lived in, better than the streets and maybe even better than the homes of its patrons.

The mutter of voices hadn't really stopped when I'd walked in, not with the number of mutterers in the place even at that early an hour. A good two-thirds of the big room was filled, mostly with men at the small tables or standing in front of the counter at the back, a serving girl bringing drinks to those who didn't care to get up themselves and walk for them. The men paid for the service, of course, rather than having it included in the price of whatever they were drinking, just the way the services of the three other women in the room weren't included. Night houses took care of everything at once, but taverns didn't have the same arrangement.

I took a breath of the thick, over warm air around me and then began walking toward the counter, trying to decide what to do next now that I'd found the place. I'd been told by my guide out of the city to buy a drink and wait to be contacted, but he hadn't mentioned how long a wait it might be. I didn't know exactly how fast time was running out on me, but it would be safe to assume I didn't have any to waste. I worked my way around to the right side of the counter where there were fewer patrons, and also where it ended short of the wall to allow a narrow aisle which led back to a door standing in shadow.

The tavern keeper behind the counter, a big man with a craggy, unshaven face and a dirty, once-white cloth tucked into the top of his trousers, spent a minute or two trying to ignore me. He seemed to be hoping I'd disappear if he pretended I wasn't there to begin with, and I discovered that the attitude was annoying me. I wasn't used to being ignored in taverns, most especially not in taverns that were dives, and I suppose my impatience showed in my expression. After the minute or two, the tavern keeper walked over to me with a scowl.

"We don't serve no ladies in here," he informed me in a deep, scratchy growl, black eyes staring at me from under bushy brows. "Get on home, girl, and do it fast."

"Your service policies are fascinating," I said in as dry a tone as I could manage, cursing silently at myself for momentarily having forgotten what I was wearing. The man was trying to frighten me into leaving, the way he would have done with any other innocent little girl. "But fascinating or not, I'll have a brew."

"You don't hear so good," he said, but his eyes narrowed as he looked at me a little more closely. "If you're hopin' t' catch your man stumblin' in here with his hands all over a rag, it ain't gonna happen. You wanna make trouble, you do it some place else."

"I'm here for a brew, not trouble, and I don't have a man," I said, trying to make him believe it. "What I do have is an appointment to meet someone here, so you're stuck with me for a while. If I have a drink in my hands, the wait should go faster for both of us."

He continued to stare at me for a moment, possibly trying to decide whether or not to throw me out anyway, then turned away and went to draw a brew. He came back with the drink sloshing over one side of the dented metal flagon, then plunked it down on the counter closer to him than to me.

"I don't want no trouble," he said again, just as though I hadn't heard him or believed him the first time. "The one you're waitin' for - gimme a name."

The demand was as flat as the look in his eyes, as flat as his hands on the counter to either side of the flagon. I couldn't believe he was asking a question like that, then sighed when I remembered again what he was seeing.

"The man's an old friend of mine, someone I've known for years and years," I said, calmly meeting the veiled suspicion in his eyes. "He's small and dark and was a Blade for a while, but he's given that up now. He invited me to meet him here the next time I was in the neighborhood, so that's what I'm doing. His name escapes me for the moment."

An odd look came into the man's eyes and he snorted, then he pushed the flagon to me and walked away. I wasn't quite sure what his reaction meant, but I couldn't help noticing that he hadn't asked to be paid for the brew. Either he felt I'd earned the drink by showing I knew better than to mention names, or something was going on that I wasn't yet seeing as a whole. I knew I would probably find out about it sooner or later, so instead of worrying at something I couldn't change I took my brew to an empty table that stood to the right of the counter, then sat down with my back to the wall.

My body, at least, was grateful that I was finally resting it, and a short while passed with nothing terribly exciting happening. The serving girl got most of what she served from the tavern keeper, but every now and then she hurried up the aisle on my right to the shadowed door recessed into the back wall and through it, then came out a minute or two later with what was probably supposed to be food. From what I could see and smell as she passed my table, it wasn't anything I would have had the nerve to swallow, even on a bet. The small, overfilled bowls dripped new stains to add to the old on her cheap skirt and blouse, and none of what she brought looked hot but the soup, which looked even greasier than it did hot.

The working women stationed at their own tables glared in my direction at first, but once I'd shaken my head to the offers of three men who came over one at a time, they understood I wasn't there to compete. All of the women were a bit long in the tooth and were trying to hide it by wearing too-youthful, low-cut blouses and very full, very bright skirts. Their less-than-tender age was probably the reason they were working a tavern rather than a night house, and the men I turned down seemed disappointed that I wasn't there to replace them.

I sipped at my brew as I let my gaze wander across the big room, faintly surprised that the patrons of a place like that were so well-mannered and well-behaved. There were no arguments, no fights, no rowdy laughter and horseplay, no insistent drunks to discourage; even the men who had approached me had taken no for an answer without a fuss. There was some quiet laughter at some of the tables, but most of the conversations seemed serious and absorbing, at least to the men engaged in them. I was beginning to wonder what sort of place that tavern really was, when the door was yanked open and six men laughed their way in.

"We'll have brew and lots of it," one of them called even before they'd reached the counter, their raucous amusement intruding on everyone's previous quiet. Scowls followed them as they moved across the floor, but the sight of their tan leathers and swordbelts kept words from joining the scowls. The six newcomers were mercenaries, and when they reached the counter they casually pushed the men already there out of the way so they could all stand together.

I'd been curious as to whether the tavern keeper would give them the same lecture about trouble that he'd given me, but possibly once a day was the limit for that particular lecture. He busied himself filling flagons without saying any-thing at all, and it was difficult telling if the previous conversations had started up again because of the laughing, joking and noise of the six. One of them pounded on the counter as though it were a drum, apparently trying to hurry the arrival of the brew, and once he'd started another laughed and joined him.

All six had flagons in front of them and had swallowed down half or more of the round, when one of those in the middle of the line stepped away from the counter fast with a laugh of his own. The serving girl had hung back among the tables until she thought the mercenaries were occupied with drinking and then had tried hurrying past behind them, but the one in the center hadn't been as distracted as the rest and had turned fast to catch her. She gasped with fright as she was pulled up against the big man, a very young girl caught up in something she wanted no part of, and the tavern keeper finally remembered there were supposed to be rules in that place.

"She ain't for nothin' but servin' drinks 'n food," he said to the mercenary holding the struggling girl, raising his voice to be heard over the laughter of the others. "You want a woman, take one a them that's here for it. The girl's got chores waitin' in the kitchens."

"I like my rags at least half a decade younger than my grandmother," the man answered, grinning down at the whimpering girl rather than looking at the tavern keeper. "This one doesn't have much in the face, but I'll bet she's round and ready under all that cloth. You don't mind if I just take a look, do y-"

The way his words suddenly broke off drew my full attention back to the incident, a good part of my thoughts having drifted away to consider how long I'd have to sit there waiting to be contacted. Knowing how well most taverns protected their own had kept me from worrying that the girl would be hurt, but suddenly it was no longer the girl who the mercenary was looking at. Moving away from the counter had put him in a position to see my table with nothing blocking his view, and that's what he was looking at over the top of the girl's head. My table. And me.

"On second thought, maybe the girl should go and do her chores," the man said, loosening his hold enough that his victim was able to push away from him and race stumbling into the aisle leading to the kitchens. "I know better when I see it, and that's what I'm seeing right now."

His easy grin was now being sent directly to me, and then he began coming over right behind it. His friends had turned to look at me as well, most of them chuckling, and a cold knot tightened in my middle when the tavern keeper put one hand on the counter but didn't say a word. The serving girl was one of his but I wasn't, which meant I was strictly on my own.

"This certainly is a nicer place than I thought it would be," the mercenary said as he stopped in front of my table, leaning forward to rest his fists on it. That close his dark-haired and dark-eyed good looks couldn't be missed-or the fact that he'd had a couple even before getting to the tavern. It was fairly clear he was a younger son of some noble house, probably of the lesser nobility, and had found a more comfortable home as a mercenary than he would have had in a position that required some sense of honor.

"I find I really like this place," he said, grin going wider as he stared at me. "Especially the way it's decorated. Let's you and I discuss your price while we look for a corner where we can be alone, girly. My friends and I had a long ride getting here, so plan on earning every copper."

"I'm not one of the workers here," I said, not believing for a minute that he thought I was, raising my flagon left handed to casually sip from it. "I had my own long ride getting here, and now I'm trying to enjoy a quiet drink. Why don't you go back to your friends and do the same?"

"Well, well, now that's what I call luck," he drawled, picking out from what I'd said the only part he wanted to hear. "If you're not one of the workers here, then I don't have to worry about paying you. Get up and let's go."

I'd never really believed before that the things you go through can make you stupid, but that was the time I found out it was true. If I'd had any sense I would have gone with him quietly to get him away from his friends, waited until he had his pants down around his knees, then showed him what a good edge my dagger had taken. That's what I would have done if I'd had any sense, but I'd spent too much of too many days being told how obedient good little females were supposed to be. I had never been a good, obedient little female, and I felt strongly that it had been too long since the last time I'd proved it.

"Come to think of it, that is what they say about mercenaries, isn't it?" I drawled back, seeing the confusion coming into his dark eyes. "You're the ones who always need somebody else to do the getting up. What do you plan for once we find some place to be alone? Watching while I see to myself?"

The confusion disappeared from his eyes to let fury take its place, his recognition of the snickering insult coming just about immediately. That particular insult was the one most likely to start a fight with any mercenary still breathing and able to lift a weapon, and the one in front of me proved himself no exception. With a growling snarl he straightened up and showed how dangerous he was by knocking the small table out from between us, sending it and my brew flying off to his right and my left. Most of the tavern's patrons stayed where they were, doing the sort of watching-but-not-watching indulged in by those who have no intentions of getting involved in a fight, but four men at a nearby table discovered they were too nearby. The flung table almost landed in their laps, causing them to jump up and back, and their movement drew the immediate, glaring attention of the man I'd insulted. He watched them only a matter of seconds, just long enough to be sure they were backing off with nervous glances for the mercenaries still at the counter, but when he turned back to me he discovered he'd taken too long with the distraction. With the table out of the way I'd slid to my feet and to the right, with the aisle and the door to the kitchens now behind me. He began an angry step forward, then stopped abruptly when he saw the dagger in my right fist.

"Do you expect that to impress me, you stupid rag?" he snarled, the movement of his eyes showing he hadn't realized I'd stand only an inch or two less than his own height. "Holding a blade isn't anything at all like using one."

"It isn't?" I asked in turn, giving him a look of wide-eyed innocence. "I didn't know that. Why don't you come a little closer, so I can find out what the difference is."

There was a stir among the men not watching the goings on, a ripple that was most likely strongly suppressed laughter. The other mercenaries still at the counter also stirred, and the face of the man in front of me darkened when he realized he couldn't ask for help from his friends. They'd heard me insult one of their number and had felt insult of their own, but I was only a woman with nothing but a dagger, an easy victim for someone who was both male and mercenary. The man who had started the fuss would have to finish it alone, a necessity whether he wanted it to be or not. He hadn't yet noticed that his friends couldn't come at me unless they knocked him down or climbed over the counter, but even if he had he probably would have thought my positioning was an accident. He was stupid even for a mercenary, but he didn't believe in taking chances.

"Now you want me closer?" he asked, deliberately stepping back as he forced a sneer into his voice. "I've heard that rags like to change their minds, but I don't feel like letting you do that. You wanted me at a distance, so you'll get me at a distance - sword distance, that is."

He laughed as he reached for his hilt and drew, taking it slow to give me plenty of time to see it coming and panic. Facing a sword with nothing but a dagger was an excellent way of committing suicide, but I'd known too many mercenaries to have been anything like positive that he'd decide to play it fair. I'd been hoping he'd be arrogant enough to draw his own dagger, and when he didn't I had to ignore that cold knot deep inside as it tightened again.

He flicked his point at me casually, more interested in frightening me than in scoring, but when I simply leaned aside to cause the miss and that not-laughter rippled through the patrons again, his rage returned. I was supposed to have frantically tried beating his weapon away instead of all but ignoring it, and he was beginning to realize how idiotic he looked. Women were supposed to tremble back from men and their weapons, not thumb their noses and stick their tongues out, and he and his rage weren't going to let me get away with it. He growled again, deep in his throat, then started swinging in earnest.

His first blow chipped splinters of wood out of the counter as I jumped back, my dagger blade sliding the back swing on its way safely past me when it came. Those two moves hadn't been particularly difficult, not after all the training I'd had, but that was scarcely the end of it. Even as I ducked a wild swing at my head I cursed the lack of a proper weapon, knowing beyond doubt that I could have taken the mercenary if I'd had a sword in my fist. If he'd been any good he would have been a Blade or a fighter, and as more of the counter exploded in chips I cursed at the thought of being ended by someone that unskilled. Not only was it unfair it was wrong, my own life being the very least of it. My father - my sisters - what would become of them-?

It may have been desperation that fired through me then, or maybe it was stubbornness and the knowledge that I had very little to lose. The mercenary had his lips peeled back from his teeth as he stopped and drew an X in the air in front of me with his point, no attempt to reach me in the gesture; the movement was the beginning of an exercise taught to the very young, a way of regaining the control of calm in the middle of a fight without leaving yourself unprotected or off-balance. The man had paused in his attack to gather himself for a more precise effort, and I knew in an instant that I had to use that pause or his next attack would end it all.

I've heard people say how time slowed for them when they were forced to a final, desperate move, how it had almost seemed like a dream they moved through rather than reality. I had just enough time to wish it would happen the same for me, but then the second X came and after it the third, and then it all went so fast I would have missed it if I'd blinked. The mercenary, strengthened by the calm he'd captured, swung out of the bottom of the last leg of his exercise and into a slash starting high on his right, not the least pause or hesitation as he rolled into the downstroke. So fast was the movement that it was nearly a blur, difficult to follow and impossible to avoid. If I hadn't already begun my own movement I would have

been caught staring, doing nothing to keep from being cut down where I stood.

But I had started my own movement, a counter I would have considered insane if I'd had the time to think about it. Instead of moving back again up an aisle I was rapidly running short of, my counter took me toward the mercenary and his descending blade, my left arm raising up as though I wore a shield on it. I had enough time to catch a blinding flare of silver and then I felt the crashing jar against my arm, the staggering blow that would have knocked me flying if I hadn't been braced for it. Left leg forward and body set, the weight crashing into my left arm triggered the movement of my right, bringing the dagger forward fast with all the strength I had in me.

Slashing into the body in front of me, the body now close enough to reach, my blade sliding through leather to find nothing of mail beneath, nothing but flesh and sinew to slice through. Deep, deep it went in an instant's timeless time, rushing in and in until stopped by the slam of metal hilt to leather.

He screamed. How he stayed alive long enough to scream and stagger backward I have no idea, but the mercenary screamed and backed, pulling the dagger hilt out of my grip. His face contorted, his sword in his fist and my dagger in his belly, blood running down his leathers and from his mouth, he screamed and backed away from the woman who had killed him, his dying eyes filled with horror. I felt a good measure of horror of my own, seeing my only weapon backing away with him, forcing myself into motion despite the pain washing over me. My left arm flared so wildly I thought it might be broken, and I hadn't any time at all to wonder how I could have forgotten about the bracer I wore. Veslin's bracer that he hadn't asked to have back, still wrapped tight around my arm, forgotten about and unnoticed until it had kept a sword from slicing into me.

The mercenary kept staggering back and screaming until his left hand ran out of counter to move along, and then, as though only that contact had kept him erect, he fell backward to sprawl among the tables. The scream had ended with a choking, bubbling sound lost in the crash of his fall, and the sudden silence worked against rather than for me. The other mercenaries had seemed frozen in place all the while, held where they were by the scream, but as soon as it ended their paralysis went with it. I had time for two more steps forward, nearly to the dagger and sword that lay there waiting for me, and then the knot of them were in front of me instead, faces twisted in rage and hands reaching for weapons.

My lips went dry as my heart thudded madly, the knot inside adding its burning twist to the rest. There was no way those five were going to let me live now, and even as I shifted to backing from their snarling fury I regretted that the last things I would be aware of would be stale brew and vomit-clotted sawdust, the silence of fear and the snarling of hatred. I had won an unfair fight and now was going to die for it, but couldn't find an ounce of regret anywhere in me, at least for what I had done. I died trying, Father, not running or on my knees, I thought as I backed slowly and reluctantly from the pack who wanted my blood. I know you'd never ask more of me than that, but I do so wish I could have helped you and my sisters -

"That's far enough," a sudden, harsh voice came from behind me, nearly stopping my life as it stopped the mercenaries in their advance up the aisle. "This is the man who sent for you, but one step more and he'll need to send for replacements. If I swear to nothing else in my life, that I certainly swear to."

The mercenaries stared behind me with sullen, muttering uneasiness, unwilling to give up my blood but finding themselves faced with no other choice. I thought I knew exactly why they had no other choice, but I'd never make myself believe it unless I turned to look. It took something of an effort to make that turn, and once it was completed I still couldn't quite believe it. The man Oeran, the one I'd come to contact, stood there with a cold scowl on his face for the knot of mercenaries, his fingers toying with his hilt as though he had an intolerable itch, and beside and behind him - ; Black leather, black swordbelts.

Silver medallions with the gleam of a small jewel.

Four faces with blazing eyes begging the least of movements from the mercenaries now behind me.

The most beautiful of sights I'd thought I'd never see again. And the one who had spoken was-

"Rull," I whispered, actually feeling light-headed, and then I was rushing forward to try hugging four bodies at once in so limited an amount of body space.

"Do you believe they're actually annoyed?" the man Oeran said as he sat himself behind the very plain desk, having just returned to the room a moment earlier. "They seem to feel it's unfair for a female Blade to walk around dressed like an ordinary woman; it causes too many misunderstandings and difficulties."

"Poor things, now they'll be uneasy the next time one of them gets in the mood for rape," I commented, swirling the brew in the goblet I held. "Another innocent pastime ruined by the unthinking actions of a woman who refuses to be a quiet, reasonable victim."

"What in Evon's name made you send for them in the first place, Oeran?" Rull asked from the chair to my right, a straight-backed wooden chair he'd moved as close as possible to the raggedy old leather one I sat in. Foist stood to my left, arms folded as he leaned one shoulder on the plain stone wall, Jak sprawled in his own rickety chair to Foist's left, Ham squatted to Rull's right, his dark eyes still smoldering. To someone who didn't know them the four were completely at ease, but I wasn't someone who didn't know them.

"I sent for them because I had no choice," Oeran answered, his sourness clear as he poured wine into a goblet of his own. "Every Blade and Fighter still in one piece is committed either in the north or the west, and that leaves only mercenaries for hire. If I wait to fight back against what's happening, ignoring it while hoping it'll go away, I won't have to worry about any of it because I won't be around to hire anybody. I usually prefer better quality workers, but even your Fistmate gave me the impression she had other things to do with her time. What else was I supposed to do?"

"You still haven't told us what your problem is," Foist pointed out, his very light eyes on the small man he spoke to. "And if you offered hire to Softy here, why didn't you do the same with us? You have a thing about liking women better?"

"My friend, I'd like women better even if that wasn't part of my line of work," Oeran answered, his grin wide and full of amusement. "I don't really understand why, it must be one of those strange urges some men get from time to time."

With Rull and Ham and Jak chuckling. Foist admitted he'd asked a foolish question by showing a faint but real smile of amusement. Oeran saw it as he sipped his wine, silently accepting the point he'd won, then shook his head.

"To answer your question more seriously, I tried to snap up you four even before Rullin and I were through greeting one another after all this time, but he told me you were here for another reason. If I'd known it was your Fistmate there you were after, or even that she was the one waiting for me in the tavern, all this unpleasantness could have been avoided."

"Do you mean you knew I was out there?" I interrupted, sitting up a bit straighter in the chair. "Then why didn't you come out and say something?"

"Now, don't get mad at me," the man protested, looking the least bit uncomfortable. "When I got here with your Fistmates, I was told there was a girl in the tavern I'd offered a place to, one a little better than

the ordinary run of workers who come through there looking to accept my offer. I was interested, of course, but frankly I had other, more important things on my mind right then. If I don't do something to get my problems solved, I won't need any more workers because I'll be out of business."

"Wait a minute," I said, knowing I was missing something in his explanation. "I don't understand what you mean by "workers." How many female Blades can there be around here that you offer hire to?"

"My dear young thing, there aren't any other female Blades around for me to offer hire to," he said, trying to hide his amusement behind his wine cup. "If you'd come into the tavern wearing black leathers and a swordbelt, the message given me would have been completely different. As it was - Can you blame my people for believing an unarmed girl in a dress was after anything but a place as a worker in one of my night houses?"

"A worker where?" I demanded, totally outraged but finally able to understand the odd look I'd gotten from the tavern keeper - and the reason he hadn't asked me to pay for the brew. Either Oeran owned the tavern as well, and as a prospective worker I was entitled to a free drink, or the tavern keeper had decided to take it out in trade at some later time. Whichever the reason I didn't particularly care for it, and the laughter all around me was just making it worse. Oeran might have been trying to hide his amusement, but my Fistmates weren't that shy.

"Come to think of it, she might not be too bad as a night house worker," Jak remarked, his grin clear where he still sprawled in the old chair to my left. "She can't say she doesn't like the surroundings, or what she'd be paid for doing. And the four of us could help by being her first clients."

"I think she needs to work on her friendly smile a bit more first," Foist said, this time showing almost as much of a grin as Jak. "It's only Evon keeping that glare from killing you, Jak, and I've seen her looking like that before. By the time she was done back then, there was enough free-running blood to paint this room with. I'd rather keep my blood right where it is, and I'd guess her other clients would feel the same."

"Oh, I don't know, it might be worth the risk," Rull added his own oar, chuckling when my eyes left Foist to come to him. "I never thought she'd look that good in a dress, but now I can see I was wrong. It makes me wonder what she'd look like in a night house outfit."

"A night house outfit while she's riding fifth in the Fist?" Ham asked, not about to miss his turn. "That may not be such a bad idea. While the enemy's busy gawking at her, we can just trot on up to them and knock them out of their saddles. It could save us a lot of trouble - if she can stay awake long enough to work the house and the Fist both."

"I think I now understand what it takes to be a member of a Fist," Oeran said, closing the circle he'd opened without giving me the chance to say anything of my own to those four peabrains. "It takes an absolute disregard for personal danger, almost a conscious desire for suicide. You four act as though you've never seen her fight."

"Oh, we know what she can do," Rull said, his tone, unlike his sudden stare, suggesting he was completely unconcerned. "We're the ones she usually does it with, which means we know she'd never do it to us. When was it that you saw her fight?"

Oeran had been enjoying himself, but Rull's quiet question pulled the amusement out of the situation for the small man, especially when he saw that my other Fistmates were just as sobered. I took a swallow of my brew in an attempt to cool my temper, trying to decide if I really was more annoyed at that than I'd been over the teasing. Those four had always hated hearing I'd gotten into a fight without them, just as though they protected me when we fought together - which they'd never done. Their attitude simply didn't

make any sense, and I'd never been able to understand it.

"She turned up at a time when I wasn't free to do my own fighting," Oeran answered, looking at Rull but aware of the others. "She took that garbage out neat as you please, and that's how we met. What's the matter, wasn't she supposed to?"

He glanced from face to face with the question, seriously concerned, then discovered he wasn't being stared at any longer. The way he'd phrased his question had suddenly reminded my Fistmates how I felt about that particular attitude, and they were all just as suddenly talking to me at once. I let it go on for no more than a matter of seconds, then held up my hand for silence.

"The man asked you a question, bondmates," I said into the quiet I was given, inspecting my cup with extreme attention. "Why don't one or more of you answer him?"

"Damn it, Softy, you know we didn't mean it like that," Rull protested, apparently speaking for all of them. "You always get so wild, when all we're trying to say is - Oeran, there's no "supposed to" about it. We know she can handle herself alone, if she couldn't she wouldn't be in our Fist, but how are we supposed to explain what it feels like inside for us when she does do a solo? She's never been able to understand that part of us, and sometimes I get the feeling she doesn't even want to. Like now, for instance."

"I really doubt she's being thick or stubborn on purpose, Rull," the man Oeran answered with what sounded like sympathy while I found myself giving Rull a very cold stare. "Women are built different from men on the inside as well as the outside, that's why we have such trouble getting along with them. It's not that they don't want to see things our way, they usually can't. Are you and the others able to see it her way?"

Rull had been more or less returning my glare, almost as annoyed as I was, but when Oeran asked his question our Fist leader turned his head to look at the smaller man, and then he nodded.

"You may be right," he admitted, seeing Jak's faint smile and duplicating it. "Looking at things from a woman's point of view makes very little sense to us, but it must make sense of some kind to them or they'd spend less time insisting on it. So Soft and Gentle pulled your backside out of the flames, and that's how you two met. You were about to tell us how it got into the flames in the first place when we were interrupted by that little girl from the tavern."

"Having hysterics," Oeran agreed with a grimace, leaning back in his chair. "All right, let's see if I can find some sort of beginning for you. It isn't as easy as it sounds, not when this thing sort of crept up from behind and was all over me before I knew it."

A brief knock at the door brought a woman with a tray into the room, the tray holding a good selection of meat and pastry nibbles. Oeran interrupted himself to gesture the woman into taking the tray around to his guests, but although the food was considerably more appetizing than what had come past me in the tavern, when she approached me I simply shook my head. I was using my right hand to hold my cup of brew, my left arm still hurting a little too much for me to want to move it unnecessarily. I no longer thought it was broken, but it would save a good deal of argument and fussing if my Fistmates knew nothing about the pain in the first place.

"This could get to be a long story, so help yourselves as you like," Oeran said once the woman had put the tray down on his desk and left. "As at least you know, Rull, I retired from being a Blade about a decade ago, when my parents died and my little sister needed someone to look after her. She and I are all that's left in the way of family, and I wasn't about to leave her with strangers who cared more about her wealth than about her.

"I came back home to the south and used some of my share of the estate left us to buy a night house here in Gensea, and that was the start of it. The house prospered, I used my profits to buy a second and then a third, and even found myself with enough left over for other, quiet investments, like that tavern out there and a warehouse or two. Things aren't the same here as they are in the north, but in some ways it's more relaxed and life was sweet and full.

"Then, about a year ago, small changes started cropping up," he went on, a frown on his face, his eyes seeing something other than that large, undecorated room. "Some of my houses' regular clients stopped coming by, but it took a few months before the number of them grew large enough to notice. I bought a few drinks for those still coming in who were friends of the missing, but the most I could learn was that the men, or in some instances their wives, had "gone religious." They were all villagers or farmers, living within a couple or three days' ride from the city, so I naturally couldn't understand what the problem was. They were followers of Grail, and Grail, like Evon, had always recognized natural needs rather than try to deny them. There's no harm in a little relaxation, and often there's even some good. You'd never believe how many villagers get sent to a night house by their wives, because one of them picked up some technique and brought it home to his woman. The woman is surprised and delighted, tells her friends all about it, and the next thing you know half the village is here, needing something to take home to their own wives. Before I started in this business, I wouldn't have believed it."

"Those women must be awfully sure of their men, to send men off to other women," Rull commented, as amused as the rest of us. "You'd think they'd prefer keeping their men completely theirs."

"Life isn't easy for village or farm women," Oeran said with a shrug, having taken a swallow of his wine. "After years of breaking their backs right beside their husbands, they know if it's love and companionship holding the man there, or nothing more than duty or having nowhere else to go. The ones who have shared their lives are simply looking for more to share, and usually the men can't wait to get home to do that sharing. The ones who have shared nothing but spite, accusation and insecurity never find out what their husbands do on their own, and wouldn't appreciate it even if they knew.

"But as I said, that's the way it used to be. For what seemed like no reason men weren't coming in any longer, and none of those who still visited seemed willing to talk about details. The others had "gotten religion," and that was that. Another few months went by - and then what had started in the villages moved into the city.

"The first I knew about it was one night about six months ago," he said, his tone now grim and depressed, a perfect match to his expression. "I was working on the books in the study of my largest house, when my chief guard came bursting in. He said there was trouble and I was needed right away, which told me it wasn't the usual sort of trouble like a brawl. My house men are all trained to handle individuals or crowds with a minimum of fuss, and they're really very good. I followed my chief out into the main part of the house, and there he was, moving from area to area, shouting and preaching - a priest of Grail like none you've ever seen."

"Young, supercilious, arrogant, and dressed in robes made from better material than even you can easily afford," I put forward as a stab in the dark, while my Fistmates muttered something and glanced at each other. Oeran's eyes narrowed as my stab hit vitals, and the muttering was abruptly cut off.

"How in hell did you know?" the small ex-Blade demanded, straightening in his chair. "You couldn't have been there, or I would have known it. This isn't the north, where there are almost as many women visiting houses as there are men. Around here, the few female regulars are known on an individual basis."

"Let's just say I attended a different performance of the same pageant production," I told him, preferring not to go into details. "The priest I ran into wasn't only the way I described him, he was also a liar, a

sneak and a backstabber. The people in the village needed only a little help to throw him out on his outraged dignity, and I didn't mind supplying that help. That's where I got this dress."

"Well, the people in the house that night didn't start out being quite that cooperative," Oeran said, too distracted by his own problems to think to ask why I'd needed clothing. I'd decided on the way to the tavern to try getting help without mentioning who I was, leaving that little revelation for any last-ditch efforts I might have to make, and I hadn't yet changed my mind. I was sure Rull hadn't yet told the ex-Blade I was his Duke's daughter or Oeran would have said something, but I hadn't yet figured a way to ask for his help without changing that. If my Fistmates hadn't been there it would have been easier, but as it was...

"When I got to the scene of the shouting, every client in the house looked like he was ready to take off running and not stop for a week," Oeran went on, more slumped than relaxed in his chair. "The priest was ranting at them, telling them they were cursed forever, that when they finally went Home, Grail would slam the door in their faces and never let them in. He went on and on about how they had to do penance, how they had to pay for their sins, how they were forbidden to even think about ever doing anything like that again. Hell, he was all but foaming at the mouth, and a lot of those people he was tormenting were long-time friends of mine. I got mad, interrupted and told him he sounded more like a priest of Ramas, the god mercenaries swear by, than a priest of Grail, and that started him on me. I've never been backward about saying what I feel, not even to priests of Evon, so I jumped in with both feet.

"To make the story shorter than it was, it turned out the loud-mouthed fool was better at dictating and damning than debating and defending. He seemed to know less about the old-time teachings of Grail than I did, and I've been a follower of Evon since three years past my first decade. Once he began making mistakes and outright misstatements the men in the house stopped being afraid and started getting mad, and after a while I was able to have my men throw him out without more than two of my clients coming down offended and marching out after him. After that incident I decided it was more than time I found out exactly what was going on, and did what I should have done to begin with. I offered silver for information, and just sat back as it began pouring in.

"Once I had the whole picture, I almost wished I didn't," he said with a sigh, looking down into his wine. "Apparently those new priests were moving in everywhere, insisting that Grail now demanded more from his followers, got on their backs and refused to get off, and were preaching against everyone who followed another god, especially Evon. They were being obeyed a lot more strictly in the villages than in the city, but that's only to be expected. City dwellers are more used to finding ways around laws they don't happen to like. Everything was in an unspoken turmoil, and those who knew about it were beginning to be worried."

"I don't blame them," Jak said, leaning forward in his chair and making it creak. "I've never heard a Servant talk against the other gods before, never even heard about it happening somewhere else. It would be nice to know what they expect to get before they back off."

"What gives you the idea they intend backing off?" Oeran asked, reaching for one of the tidbits on the tray his desk held. "They've begun the process of controlling every facet of their followers' lives, from no eating without their approval to no sex without that same approval. If you want to start farming a new piece of land, you need the priest's blessing. If your wife wants to weave a new wool blanket, the wool has to be blessed as well as the loom. Any trip you want to make, any changes on your house, any additions to your family - it all needs approval. And anyone who tries disagreeing with them or fighting them meets with unfortunate - incidents."

Oeran put the tidbit in his mouth and began chewing it, but no one took the opportunity to comment. I could see my Fistmates were feeling the same chill I was, and also probably wondering how something

like that could have gotten started.

"They began by trying to beat up my clients, either on their way to one of my houses, or on their way home," Oeran said once he'd swallowed the tidbit and finished the last of the wine in his cup. "When I found out about it, I hired every backstreet bravo my agents could corner long enough to make the offer to, and that took care of it. The City Guard wasn't as safe walking or riding the streets as my clients were. That, of course, was when they started going after me instead, and I never realized they were so low they'd use my sister against me until it happened. That was when your Soft and Gentle came along, saving me from ending up in a pool of my own blood. I'd sent for those mercenaries when the attacks first started, intending to use them to wipe out as much of the garbage as possible and give us some breathing and thinking room. That tavern is now being used exclusively by those who have reports to make to me, or those who want to talk about what's happening without worrying that someone will overhear them and tell their priest. I was tempted to go ahead with my original plans, but I've just about decided that would be the worst thing I could do in light of this new mess. You must have heard about it; no one's getting into the city without being told."

"Yes, we heard," Rull said, making no effort to look in my direction. "The Duke is being held in his castle, along with two of his daughters. Are you sure the ones holding him are linked with these new priests of Grail? The City Guard seems to think it's rebels, and they haven't said why he's being held. We were assuming it was for ransom, and were wondering how much gold they were asking for, that it hasn't already been paid."

"They're not rebels, and they're not asking for gold," Oeran said, slowly refilling his cup with wine before rising to pass the bottle to Ham. "The city officials are keeping close on what they are being asked for, because they know they can't supply it under any circumstances. Even if they had what was being demanded of them, handing it over to free the Duke would probably get them all cut down once he was free. By his own sword with his own hand. I used my special connections to find out about it, and for once I really feel sorry for those officious idiots. They can't free the Duke without paying up, and if they pay up the Duke himself will have their heads and no one will blame him. They've gotten so desperate, they're ready to try storming the castle."

"Which will get them exactly nowhere even if they manage to raise an army, which they won't," Rull said, taking the wine bottle from Ham and passing it on to Foist without pouring anything into the cup he held. Ham had taken no more than a drop, Foist did the same, and Jak returned the bottle to Oeran with no more than a nod of thanks. That was another sign of how unrelaxed the four were, but Oeran didn't seem to notice.

"If the attack gets them nowhere, it won't matter in the least," Oeran said, clearly more upset now than he had been. "The thing they refuse to understand is that they probably will get somewhere, but not to a place they'll enjoy standing on. If that slime finds itself under attack, they could very well decide to hurt one of the little girls in order to stop it. They don't have to kill her, you understand, just - hurt her."

"Then they've got to be given what they're asking for," I said, finding it impossible to sit quietly any longer. Foist came away from his wall when I stood, putting a hand to my left shoulder, but I shook it off with all the fury and impatience crowding around inside me. "Tell me what they want, Oeran, and I'll see to it that they get it. I'd rather feed them three feet of steel, but - Tell me what they want."

"Take it easy, Softy, there are some prices no one can afford to pay," Rull said from my right, his hand refusing to be shaken off my arm. "Even if you plan on taking it back later, giving it up in the first place means you've let the enemy win. Find out what it is before you make any decisions about giving it to them."

With Jak and Ham also on their feet, Oeran was the only one left sitting. He stared around at us in bewilderment and confusion, trying to figure out what we were talking about, but I didn't have the time to wait until he did.

"All right, then, I'm simply asking," I said, not bothering to look at Rull in any useless effort to make him believe me. "Tell me what they're after, Oeran, and we'll let Evon's code of honor decide. If it isn't dishonorable, it gets done."

"But that's just it," Oeran protested, slowly rising to his feet. "It's nothing other than dishonorable, and everyone knows it - not to mention impossible. For the release of the Duke and the two little girls, the ones holding them want to be given the Duke's eldest daughter in exchange, but she's disappeared!"

## Chapter Fourteen

I stood there silent for a moment or two, but not because I was particularly shocked - or especially surprised. All that back-trail sneaking around, avoiding the main road and that inn-wasted time and effort, all of it. Rather than searching uselessly, the enemy had come ahead and made sure I would be handed over to them whenever I returned, no matter where I'd been in the meanwhile. I put my cup down on Oeran's desk then used the hand to rub at my left arm, so furious and frustrated I wanted to scream and break things. The enemy wanted me so badly they were prepared to go to any lengths to get me, but I didn't know why! Why was I so important to them, what could they possibly be after?

"So you can see why we can't give them what they want," Oeran said after the silence had gone on longer than he liked, his voice still sounding odd. "Very few people in these parts even know what the girl looks like, because she hasn't been home in years. And even if we knew where she'd disappeared to and got her back, what man of honor would hand her over in trade, even if the Duke didn't have his heart for it? There's nothing any of us can do."

"There's plenty to be done, especially for some of us," I said, straightening where I stood. "Who's in charge of dickering with those "rebels," and where can he be found?"

"No," Rull said very flatly before Oeran could answer me, the single word carrying the finality of the ages. "I'm Fist leader, and I say no. We'll find some other way."

"There is no other way, and I resigned from the Company," I answered, keeping my eyes only on Oeran. "What I

do now is no one's decision but my own, and that decision is made. How do I get to the people in charge, Oeran?"

"So that's who you are," the small man said, staring at me with an expression even odder than his tone of voice. "And I thought when we first met that you might be in trouble with the Law, or someone the City Guard would soon be looking for. Where have you been, and what's going on?"

"It's a long story," I said, beginning to feel very tired. "Let's just say our friends up at the castle had me and then lost me, but now they're about to get me back. If I do it myself there's nothing of the dishonorable in it, and you can bet they'll end up sorry they asked for me. I don't know what they expect to get out of this mess, but I know damned well what they will get."

"I'm sorry, girl, but it just won't work," Oeran said, sympathy showing strongly in his dark eyes. "It may not be dishonorable for you to give yourself in trade, but if any of the city officials allow it they'll still have your father all over them afterward. They know that even if you don't."

"And there's something you're not considering," Rull said while Oeran looked uncomfortable over the way I stared at him. "What real guarantee do you have that those people will release your father and sisters once they have you? Are you willing to accept the word of men who use little girls and promise pain to get what they want? What will you do if you give yourself to them, and then they decide they don't want to leave your father in a position to send his fighters after them? And that burdening themselves with two small children is entirely unnecessary? You'll already be their prisoner, Softy, so what will you do?"

I jerked my head around to finally look at him, seeing an intensity in his light eyes that wasn't usually there when we weren't in the midst of battle. Even with chilled fury savagely tearing me apart, I suddenly realized that Rull was in the middle of a fight, at least as far as he was concerned. At another time, I would have wondered what it was he was trying to win; right then all I did was pick up the cup I had just put down, turned deliberately, then hurled it against the stone wall behind and between Jak and Foist.

"You're absolutely right, the drink in this place isn't fit for washing a dog in," Oeran said from behind me into the most recent silence, and then I heard the sound of movement. "Let's all use the same side door we came in by, and go back to the house we started from. It's the best of my three, and you showed excellent taste picking it out of all the houses in this city, Rull. We needed this place to be sure of privacy for our conversation, but I suddenly find it more depressing than private. If anyone overhears us at the house, I'll let those mercenaries take care of it. At least it will give them something to do."

By then Oeran was in front of me, still looking at me with sympathy and not giving a damn that he'd been talking too much. The flow of words had been meant to calm me the way soft, meaningless noises sometimes calmed a war horse, and although they hadn't really made anything better, they also hadn't made it worse. I felt more than ever like striking out in all directions, incapable of believing that anyone, even my Fistmates, were really on my side, but at least I was able to keep from saying it aloud. I would have hated myself forever if I'd said something like that to the other four-fifths of my life, and then it came to me that Oeran was right. That bare room was depressing, and the sooner we left it the better.

"I left my horse stabled in that place across the street from here," I said, more than grateful that none of them had touched me even to pat my shoulder in comfort. "We can leave after I reclaim him. I paid enough to keep him safe; I'm not about to abandon him now."

"I have a better idea," Oeran said, turning toward the door out of the room, possibly to hide the relief that had flashed in his eyes. "I'll send one of my men to get your horse, along with the silver piece I'm sure you were charged. Anyone who comes into my tavern isn't supposed to be charged, but the old thief running the stable likes to forget that every now and again. It will be my pleasure to get the silver back for you."

I almost told him that it wasn't my silver so I didn't particularly care, but that would have taken too much trouble. Instead of saying anything at all, I simply followed him out.

Oeran's house wasn't all that far away, at least not the way he reached it. One back street led into the next, a dark, arched walkway saved us from having to circle around, and we even passed quickly and briefly through a bake shop. If I started out wondering why we weren't riding, it didn't take long before my question was answered. But I was far too depressed to be wondering, and too upset over Jak's and Foist's low-voiced conversation speculating on how the enemy had gotten into my father's castle. That was the third time they'd gotten in, which was totally beyond reason. How could they have done it a third time, when Traixe and his men were still supposedly alert and on edge from the first and second times?

I was so distracted by the rampaging of my thoughts, that we reached the back entrance of Oeran's house without my being more than faintly aware of what my sandals had needed to walk through to get there. It was just about full dark by then," but the neighborhood the house stood in seemed a lot less

rundown and overused than the one belonging to the tavern. A uniformed servant let us in, his face calm with that unimpressed expression usual to experienced night house personnel, a distinct change from the reactions of the people we'd passed on the way. I don't pass numberless dark but filled doorways and alleys without being aware of it even when I'm distracted, but apparently the sight of lots of black leather had kept everyone discreetly at a distance.

"Tell the kitchen I have five guests for dinner tonight instead of four," Oeran said to the servant/door guard as he led the way in. "We'll be in my meeting room till then, rather than in the salon."

The servant said something in acknowledgment as we all moved past him, but I had already stopped listening. There was something involved with what I had been thinking about, something to do with the enemy and the castle, and I could have sworn it felt like an answer. An answer to what I still couldn't be sure of, but it had to be an answer to something.

"Isn't that right, Softy?" Ham said to me, and I blinked back to an awareness of my surroundings to find that we were in a large room that was very expensively furnished. Oeran was closing a white door that stood in the middle of a wall covered with golden brown silks and bright golden lamps, and the floor we stood on looked to be white marble. Quite a lot of chairs and couches stood around, some of them golden brown leather, some golden brocade, and although the lamps were lit, the firewood laid in the hearth wasn't.

"Isn't what right?" I asked, having heard nothing of what had been said before my name was mentioned.

"I was telling Oeran that we could have waited for our meal in the salon anyway," Ham said, a faint grin on his broad face. "Just because we now have a girl with us, doesn't mean we have to hide her away after sneaking her in the back door. Here in the south, they act like women need special secret entrances before they're allowed to enjoy themselves."

"The women around here just aren't used to the idea of patronizing night houses," Oeran said with a grin of amusement as he headed for an elaborate sideboard filled and covered with decanters and goblets. "As a matter of fact, my workers aren't used to the idea either. In a salon in the north your Fistmate would not even be noticed, but here - Chances are my girls would freeze up, to the point of not even being able to smile at you. And since we are in the south, it's ladies first. What would you like to drink. Softy?"

He turned to look at me with the question, the smile still on his face, but it began to fade when he saw my expression. I had to be looking thunderstruck because that's the way I felt, and all I could do was shake my head.

"Secret entrances," I said, staring at Oeran. "It has to be that, there's nothing else it can be."

"I really don't think they'd help, girl," Oeran said, looking concerned and confused both at the same time. "If women aren't used to the idea of coming to night houses, special entrances won't do anything to..."

"No, no, not here!" I nearly shouted, suddenly on fire with the realization. "At the castle! That's how they got in those times, and I can do the same! I can get into the castle without their knowing about it!"

Everyone started talking at once then, asking questions and demanding to know what I meant, but I was too busy making plans to pay attention. Getting through the city gates after dark could be a problem, but if the Guard refused to let me through I could look for one of the unofficial ways out every city has. Sewer drain or crack in the foundation or even over the top, I'd make it out and then I would - But I was wasting time, just standing there in Oeran's house and thinking. It was time to get out and do, but when I turned and began heading toward the door a hand closed on my arm, pulling me to a halt.

"Hold it right there," Rull said, his grip tight and a look of annoyance in his eyes. "If you think you're taking off to do whatever you're planning alone, that long ride from the north obviously scrambled your brains. You must have come looking for Oeran for a reason, and I'd say it was time you talked about that reason - and how the rest of us can be fit into what has to be done. If it was help you needed, try to remember we're a little more effective than a bunch of boar-meat sandwiches."

I stared at him for a second, almost too impatient and anxious and worried and a dozen other things to be willing to take the time to consider what he'd said, but I'd just been reminded of something. I had come to Oeran for help but also for information, and all my plans hinged on a point I still hadn't had a clear answer to.

"I may not be able to let anyone come with me," I told Rull, wanting him and the others to know I wasn't shutting them out by choice. "There are certain - family things that I have no business discussing with anyone who isn't part of the family, but - Oeran, do they have any idea how many of those so-called rebels there are in the castle?"

I'd turned back to look at the ex-Blade, and he had no need to be told how important the question was. Instead of wasting time by mentioning drinks again, he merely shook his head.

"There are at least three dozen, but for all they know the number might be twice or four times that," he said, his eyes showing his own annoyance with such flimsy intelligence. "They do know that every House Guard and fighter has been put under lock and key, but they don't know if it was superior numbers or threats to the hostages that accomplished it. What did you mean, you know how they got in and you can do the same? Everyone's been assuming the first of them got in as tradesmen and delivery men, and let the others in afterward."

Rather than answer him immediately I turned away from five pairs of staring eyes to walk to a chair, then stood there brooding down into it without trying to sit. I knew well enough how good a Blade I was, but even the best Blade ever born couldn't have faced more than thirty opponents and hoped to win, not even if those opponents were entirely unskilled. There was the possibility that I might be able to catch them a few at a time and take them out that way, but what if I couldn't? What if they killed me or captured me instead? That would be the end as far as my family was concerned, and I simply couldn't take the chance.

"All right," I said with a sigh, turning again to face the five who hadn't made any attempt to rush me into a decision. "Preserving a family-secret at the cost of the family itself makes no sense at all. Let me tell you about what happened shortly after I got home, and then I'll tell you how I think they did it."

We all sat down and I described the first attack in the castle, then the kidnapping that left me miles away once I'd gotten free. I said nothing about having a companion on the trip back, preferring to save that part of it for another time, going directly, instead, to the main point.

"Ham's comment about special secret entrances for women triggered the memory," I said, grateful that none of them had interrupted with the questions they all surely had. "About a year before I was sent north, I made a discovery no one knew I made. One of the games I'd thought of to keep myself amused was the challenge of following Traixe around without his knowing I was doing it. Since Traixe was in charge of my father's fighters as well as being his advisor, following Traixe when he checked on the fighters almost always added at least one word to my vocabulary. It was one of the things that kept me from growing bored with the game, and made my ultimate discovery possible."

The five of them had smiled a little, but their attention to my story hadn't wavered.

"It was a day my father had taken my brothers hunting, and most of the fighters had gone with them," I

continued. "I suppose Traixe found himself with not enough to do, and the house was practically empty, and - what he did was make a special inspection, all by himself. I followed him to four places in the castle where the solid walls became a lot less solid when he pushed on them, and once he had returned to his apartment I went back to those places to find that there were tunnels behind them. At another time, I discovered that the tunnels led out beyond the castle into the rocky countryside."

"And that's how you think your father's enemies got into the castle," Oeran said with a thoughtful nod. "Through one of those tunnels. But why didn't your father's people think of that themselves, and how is it going to help us? If the ones holding the castle know about the tunnels, won't they be watching for attack from that direction?"

"I don't think so," I said, praying to Evon I was right. "My father's people didn't think of it because the doors leading out of the tunnels are heavily barred and made of rock. Anyone trying to break in that way would be heard long before he got anywhere, but there's another way it could have been done. If my father's messenger wasn't the only traitor in the household, the tunnel door could simply have been unbarred. And since that has to be the way they got in, I'm fairly sure I know which tunnel they used."

"Tunnel, singular," Jak said, picking up on the point at once. "That means you don't believe this Traixe is the traitor, even though he'd be the most logical suspect. If it was someone else, the someone else would have had to first find out about the tunnels, which shouldn't have been easy. Your Traxie already knew, and even if he didn't do any of the rest himself, he could have traded the information for gold."

"I'd need a lot more than guesswork before I believed something like that - about Traixe," I said with a headshake, refusing to let myself notice how logical the line of thought was. "You don't know him the way I do, Jak, and I can't believe he could have changed that much even after all these years - He'd have no reason, and people don't do things without a reason-"

I broke off then, too aware of how defensive I sounded. After the first attack Traixe should have thought about the tunnels, only he hadn't. And he was the one who had been working so hard trying to talk me into accepting Kylin, but supposedly only because my father would be harmed if I didn't. How did I know my father would be hurt because he intended ordering me to leave rather than marry? Why, because Traixe had said so, that's how I knew. But why would he do it, why - ?

"I doubt if it makes much difference whether or not this Traixe is the traitor," Rull said, looking as thoughtful as the others. "Only a stupid man would sell or share the location of more than one tunnel when the others could be made into separate, brand-new deals or disclosures bringing power, and the Duke would hardly be likely to keep a stupid man as his advisor. If they do know about all the tunnels we're in trouble and probably as good as dead, so we'll just have to work on the theory that just one, or at most two, of the locations have been betrayed. What makes you think it's only one. Softy, and how does that help us?"

"About the same time as the first attack, two kitchen workers were found dead in a back corridor near the kitchens," I said, forcing myself to abandon a line of thought that was getting me nowhere. "It didn't mean anything to me at the time I heard about it, but now I can see the reason they were killed. The entrance to one of the tunnels is back there, and the workers must have accidentally walked in on them when the attackers were being brought in. I'm not saying that has to be the only tunnel they know about, Rull, but it has to mean they don't know about the tunnel with my little secret. With the kitchens so busy preparing a Feasting, wouldn't they have preferred using the tunnel in the family wing if they could have? Especially since it's closer to where they staged their ambush? If they took the longer way that had so many more people nearby, it has to be because they didn't know about the closer way."

"They could have had a reason we're not seeing, but basically I tend to agree," Rull decided with a slow

nod. "They didn't use it because they don't know about it, so its location in the family wing shouldn't be under guard. What did you mean about your little secret?"

"Maybe I should have called it my little stupidity," I said with a sigh, wondering how even a mere decade-old me could have done such a mindless thing. "I did it and then I forgot about it, and for just an instant I thought it was my fault the enemy had managed to get in. I didn't know those kitchen workers, but Evon bless them for giving up their lives so that I might see the truth -

"Well, that's not important right now," I said, jerking myself back from the maudlin to the story at hand. "Not long after I found out about the tunnels, I managed to investigate them. I had no trouble getting into them from the castle, but getting out the other end proved impossible. I might have been big for my age, but I wasn't big enough to lift a really heavy bar and push a door of stone open. What to do about the problem stumped me for a while, but then I remembered Tugy, our smith's second son. Tugy was almost into his second under-decade and was built even bigger than his father, but something had gone wrong with him even before he was born. No matter how big and strong he grew, his mind stayed the mind of a very little boy, a nice, friendly and gentle boy, but still a very young one.

"I had played with Tugy often when I was very young, but as I got older his constant forgetfulness became too annoying to tolerate on a regular basis. I did spend some time with him occasionally, devising games that made him laugh, and it came to me then that I had a new game to amuse him. I sneaked him into the family wing, and then into the tunnel, and in that way was able to go through the far door any time I pleased."

"Don't tell me you left it open," Oeran said, a peculiar expression on his face that I could recall seeing on other people at other times. "It couldn't have been easy sneaking him in on a regular basis, so in order to use it any time you pleased..."

"Really, Oeran, even then I had more sense than that," I interrupted, aware of the amusement my Fistmates felt over our host's upset. "I didn't know how often Traixe checked those tunnels, so how could I leave the door unbarred without giving the game away? No, what I did was more involved than that, and took advantage of the fact that Tugy had a big man's strength. I had him put metal in the ends of the wooden bar to brace it into the stone on either side of the door, and then we loosened the bar brackets where they were seated in the door itself. Once you set Tugy to doing something he kept right on doing it until you told him to stop, so it really took very little time to get it finished. I also bathed the door hinges in oil so I could get it open alone."

"And anyone simply looking at the arrangement would believe it was still secure," Oeran said, this time shaking his head. "The door merely slid off the bracket bolts when it was opened, and the bar and brackets were held in place by the walls. If I ever get the urge to have a family, I'd better have nothing but sons. I can see I'm not made to cope with daughters."

"Luckily for the men of the world, not all daughters turn out to be like our Softy," Rull said with a chuckle that was echoed by my other Fistmates. "So if your little secret wasn't discovered and repaired, we have a way into the castle - if we can find it from the outside. You do know what the location of the door looks like from the outside?"

"I did know," I said, suddenly afraid that what I'd done had been discovered and repaired. "For a while I spent more of the night outside than in, delighting in exploring among the rocks without the constant nagging of my nurses to "stay clean" and "be careful" and "don't climb up there, it's too high." I ought to remember what the place looks like, especially in the dark, but the only way to know for certain is to try it. I'm ready to leave right now, so anyone coming with me..."

"Not so fast," Oeran said as I rose from my chair, gesturing at me to stay where I was while his mind considered possibilities. "It may be dark out, but it's still too early to launch any expeditions we don't want the whole city to know about, and we really should give those in the castle a chance to settle down for the night. Since we'll be looking for something that needs to be kept quiet only we six will be going, which means the fewer of them up and about, the better the chance that we'll have. And you. Softy, need a sword and something else to wear, not to mention the fact that you look like you can also use some sleep. First we'll have dinner, then we'll start taking care of the rest of it."

He got to his feet and looked straight at me, giving me the opportunity to argue if I really had to, but what he'd said made too much sense. I wanted to leave then and there, but if I did I'd simply have to wait out in the dark, taking the chance of being discovered. I forced myself to nod reluctant agreement just as a knock came at the door, which was perfect timing if I ever saw it. The knocker was Oeran's servant telling us dinner was ready, and that put a temporary end to our main topic of discussion.

Oeran really did very well for himself and the dinner was excellent, but despite the fact that that was the first meal of the day for me, I had very little appetite. I ate enough to be sure I could keep going through the rest of the night, then accepted my host's offer of a room where I could rest until it was time to go. I followed one of the servants upstairs to the back of the house, and then was left alone in a room I was assured hadn't been used for clients in a while. The silk hangings and bed covers and room accents were all a bright, buttercup yellow accompanied by a small amount of white, giving me the impression I was in the middle of an attack by sunshine. I grimaced as I closed the door, wondering how anyone could live in all that enthusiastic brightness for any length of time, also wondering if the clients brought in there had spent most of their time squinting, it was possible only the very desperate had used it, and was unused now because no one was quite that desperate.

The nonsense of my thoughts was interrupted by the sight of something on the flouncy, enticingly arranged bed, and walking over showed the something to be black trousers and a dark green shirt. On the smoothly buffed floor at the foot of the bed was a pair of scuffed black boots, and beyond the bed, on a table in the middle of the room, was a swordbelt and sword. The trousers looked as though they might fit fairly well but the shirt, obviously coming from a different source, would definitely be too big. I sighed, hoping the boots would be more like the trousers than the shirt, then began getting out of the dress.

I had just slipped the shirt on and was rolling up the sleeves to find my hands before trying to do any buttoning, when a glint of silver on my wrist reminded me again about the bracer I wore, it was then that I realized my left arm was no longer really hurting, but that was only a minor consideration among many major ones. Why did I keep forgetting I had the bracer on? How could I continually fail to notice it when it was out in plain sight? And why didn't anyone else notice it, which I was sure they didn't? My Fistmates, if no one else, should have asked about it, and yet none of them had. That mercenary in the tavern should also have been a little more wary of a woman not only holding a dagger but wearing a bracer, but he hadn't been.

Probably because he hadn't seen it.

"Evon, are you asking something of me?" I whispered, letting my fingertips gently stroke the dull, unimpressive, not-real-silver of the bracer. It would have been easy to believe that Veslin had simply forgotten I was trying the bracer on, that in all the excitement both that night and the following morning I'd forgotten too, but somehow I couldn't bring myself to believe that. Veslin wasn't the sort of man to forget things that easily, and he'd gone to a lot of trouble explaining silly, fanciful folk tales to two grownups who weren't likely to believe them. It was almost as though the bracer was meant to be mine, almost as though

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"My family has to come first," I whispered again, deliberately speaking aloud. "After they're safe I'll do

anything you want me to, but they come first. After that - Well, I guess you could say I'm yours."

I grinned a little at that, suddenly feeling that everything would work out in our rescue attempt. Even if Evon wasn't actively on our side, we could win if he wasn't against us. And once my father and sisters were safe, I had a fantastic adventure to look forward to, fighting in Evon's name, searching out his enemies and defeating them, traveling all over the world -

If I wasn't married off first.

That stupid, deflating thought came all by itself, ruining my newly-arrived good mood and putting my fists to my hips in annoyed frustration. I could just see myself telling my father I couldn't marry because I'd been chosen by Evon to fight in his name; if he didn't run immediately for a healer to treat the fever I had to be suffering from, he'd lock me in my apartment in chains until it was time for the ceremony. And if I told him instead that Kylin was an enemy, he'd either refuse to believe it or rear back and refuse to honor the betrothal contract.

Which would bring him the sort of trouble I'd been trying to keep away.

But if I went through with the marriage and Kylin was named my father's heir, how long would my father live?

If I married it could mean my father's life, if I didn't he would be dishonored and disgraced. Whatever I did would be wrong, but I had to do something! I put my hands to my hair and closed them to fists, wishing I'd never answered the letter to come home, wishing I'd swung that piece of wood harder that morning. I'd been worse than a damned fool, worrying about what I did to someone who was an enemy! If I ever got another chance at him-

"I knocked and I thought I heard someone say to come in," a voice suddenly interrupted, sounding faintly amused. "Was I mistaken, or have you decided to work for Oeran after all?"

I looked up to see Rull just inside the partially opened door, one arm high up on the door edge, the other hand a loose fist resting on his swordbelt. His broad, familiar face had a grin on it, and his light eyes were moving slowly over me, giving the impression he'd never seen me before. I couldn't understand why he was inspecting me like that until I remembered that a shirt was all I had on, and it wasn't even buttoned. As strange as it sounds I would have been more comfortable if I'd been stark naked, a state Rull had seen me in a lot more often than once.

"I think advanced age is starting to make you imagine things," I told him sourly as I turned back to the bed to reach for my trousers. "You weren't invited in, but you are being invited out. I'm in the middle of building a good hate for men and you're keeping me from it, so you'll just have to - Hey!"

"Hey, yourself," he said as he kept me from snatching back the trousers he'd suddenly pulled out of my hands, holding them behind him before tossing them away. "I warned you about being disrespectful toward your Fist leader, but female infants don't listen too well. Now you're going to regret it."

"Damn you, Rull!" I growled as he grabbed me, struggling to break the grip of his arms. I was in no mood to play games, but he didn't particularly care. He laughed as he pulled me tight against his leathers, giving me no opportunity to kick, but then the laughter died, his fist was in my hair, and he was kissing me the way he had before that odd trouble between us had started. It was something I'd been missing, something I'd thought I'd never have again, and I kissed him back with all the loneliness and misery I'd been feeling since I'd left him and the others. I'd been so afraid they wouldn't want me back again, so afraid I'd never find them even if I managed to get free to go looking...

"Well, now, that's what I call a properly enthusiastic greeting," he murmured when he finally let the kiss end, still holding me up against him. "It makes me more than glad we came after you, even beyond the fact that we'll also be there to fight beside you. By Evon, I missed you, you impertinent female infant."

"Not nearly as much as I missed you," I countered, enjoying the feel of his leather where the shirt didn't cover me. "I know I shouldn't have left that way, but by the time I got over being mad it was too late to turn back. Obviously I've been too fuzzy-headed to ask this before, but - Why are you all here? I had the terrible feeling I'd never see any of you again."

"That would be the day," he said with a snort as I raised my head to look at him, his hand not at my hair sliding down the back of me. "You may be an infant but you're still one of us, and you don't give up one of your own that easily. And besides, I had a pressing reason to come even if the others didn't. I wanted to apologize to you for what I said - and explain why I said it. You feel so damned good, I know I was right coming after you."

His hand had found the bottom of the shirt and had gone under it to the bare flesh beneath, his touch as familiar as his face and a good deal more arousing. He'd had enough time to learn his way thoroughly around me, and when I gasped and tried to push free he only chuckled.

"The last time we were together you really wanted this" he murmured, holding me still again while he continued to stroke me. "Are you trying to say you're not interested any longer?"

I wasn't able to say much of anything, barely able to squirm around in an effort to dislodge his hand, and then I was down on the bed on my back with him leaning over me. He was able to reach me a lot more easily that way, and while his right hand went back to stroking and his left took my hair again, his lips came down to stiffened nipples that the shirt had fallen away from.

"I love a woman who's uninterested," he said, using his lips and tongue between and around the words. "It's so much fun making her interested, or at least trying to. I don't seem to be getting very far with you."

The hell he wasn't, and the hell he didn't know it. I moaned as I tried pushing his face and hand away, nearly drowning out his chuckling, but I was lost and just trying to keep from admitting it. Rull had almost always done that to me, using what he'd learned through the years to roll over any objections I might have, and I'd never been able to resist him. With all he knew he was just about the best I'd ever tried, and right then I needed his attentions badly.

"Evon broil you, what are you waiting for?" I finally gasped out, burying my fists in his hair as I began feeling the first of those shuddering chills he always brought. "If you take much longer, you'll end up stroking a corpse."

"With you, you can bet I'd notice the difference," he answered, his heavier breathing turning his voice husky. "Let me go, woman, or we'll both end up done."

It was really hard unknitting my fingers from his hair, but after a moment I managed it and he didn't waste any time. As soon as his swordbelt was gone he yanked his shirt off over his head and threw it away, then did no more than drop his lower leathers before coming back to me. He was absolutely enflamed, possibly even worse off than I was, and he surged into me with a groan that was all desire and nothing of technique. I grunted at the unexpected ferocity of the impact, beginning to rise up in protest, but his arms came to hold me while he thrust furiously, and his lips ended anything I might have said.

After a long while the mindless need seemed to loosen its grip on him, and he was able to return to his usual way of sharing sex. By the time it was over my body had been soothed and satisfied too, but I had also become even more aware of just how long a day it had been. When he let me go I just lay there on

the frilly yellow bed cover, and he made a soft sound of amusement and smoothed my tangled hair back.

"It looks like old age is catching up to you, too," he said, looking down at me from where he lay propped up on an elbow to my right. "If I recall correctly, you used to have more enthusiasm left over. I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"I'm just tired," I answered with a brief headshake, reflecting privately that I hadn't been so much hurt as - unexpectedly disappointed, it almost was. Despite the less than usual beginning of our time together, Rull was still the best around; thinking there was - someone - who suited me more was stupidity, the imagination of an overtired mind, and nothing to waste time considering for very long.

"If you're tired, then you'd better get as much rest as you can before we leave," he said, putting a hand to my middle and stroking gently. "I think you understand now how much

I really did miss you, and once this is all over I want to talk to you about a decision I've made. Trying to fight the decision was what caused me to jump on you the way I did before you left, but I'm not fighting it any longer."

He leaned down to touch his lips softly to mine, obviously getting ready to leave, but I couldn't let him do it. He'd said so much that it had become not enough, and I had to find out what he meant.

"Rull, I don't understand," I said, putting my hand to the muscled hardness of his arm. "What decision are you talking about, and what does it have to do with me?"

"Softy - once this trouble is all finished with, you'll be coming back to the Company and the Fist, won't you?" he asked, something really strange like reluctant eagerness behind the words. The sobriety in his eyes was just as strange, making him look very young and vulnerable and almost frightened. "I suppose I'll have to talk to your father first, to see how he'll take it, but I won't change my mind even if he disapproves. If we have to, we can all join a Company that's hired out in another kingdom in another country, and that way it won't matter how mad he gets."

"Rull, I still can't understand what you're talking about," I protested, for some odd reason glad that I was lying down. "I want to come back to the Fist once this is all over, but - Rull, I've been betrothed to someone, and I may have to marry him."

I hated saying the words like that, admitting out loud something that was almost made more real by the voicing of it. Rull seemed to freeze when he heard them, and when life and movement returned a moment later, he was no longer young and innocent.

"Who is he?" he asked, the demand hard and harsh and flat, his light eyes showing all the ice left over from the freezing. "Your father had no right doing that even if he is a duke. Who's the man?"

"He's - supposed to be a son of Duke Trame of Arthil," I answered, almost afraid not to speak. I had never seen Rull look like that before, and the chill in his eyes had no trouble reaching my flesh. "I've met him and I despise him, but I may have to marry him anyway. The situation is more complex than I can tell you, but my father's doing it because he needs an heir. I'm determined to think of a way out of the mess, but - Rull, what's wrong?"

"Wrong?" he asked, taking a deep breath that suddenly brought back the man I'd known so long. "Nothing's wrong, you just surprised me. - So you met the twerp and you can't stand him, eh? Well, don't you worry your head about it, we'll find a way out together. And after that there won't be anyone to stand between us."

"Between - us?" I repeated, my mind whirling in confusion as I stared up at him. "You do mean 'us' as in the Fist, don't you? You hate getting involved in anything permanent with a woman, so you can't mean - us."

"Infant girl, there's still a lot about men you haven't learned," he said, a grin starting as he raised a hand to stroke my face with one finger. "Some men spend most of their time running away from serious involvements, but one day they look up and see a woman they don't want to run from. At first it makes them nervous and they might even decide they're going soft in the head, but they still can't get their feet moving and don't even want to. They're caught, just the way you caught me, and that's the decision I made. I want to be caught, and as soon as we've left this place behind us we're getting married."

"Married," I echoed, feeling even sicker than the first time I'd heard that word, days ago from my father. "But - What about the Fist? And the others, the others will be upset. Jak and Foist and Ham..."

"Our Fistmates won't be anything but happy for us," he interrupted with a laugh of pleasure. "My marrying you will keep you in the Fist until we can find a new fifth, and then you'll be able to step aside. That very night I'll pour your cup of Blue juice myself, and then we'll see how long it takes to get the first of our own Fist started. Oh, Softy, you don't know how I can't wait."

He pulled me to him and hugged me really hard, and then he decided he'd better go before he made me even more tired man I already was. I lay there just staring up at the yellow silk of the canopy over the bed while he dressed, was given one last kiss, and then he was gone with the door closed behind him. Only then did I close my eyes with a shudder, and turn to bury my face in the cover I lay on.

We're getting married, Rull had said. I've arranged for you to be married, my father had said, you have to marry me, Kylin had said.

Wasn't there anyone in the world interested in what I wanted? Even just in passing? Rull had been ready to kill the man I was betrothed to, without making any attempt to find out if I wanted him dead. Kylin had said the King would ruin my father if I didn't go through with the marriage, and wouldn't care that the refusal was mine. The Law didn't allow for a woman's refusal, so even the Law didn't care. No one cared, and no one would ask, and I wished I had never been born. I didn't want to be an uncared-about female or a narrow-minded, one-sided male, or even a duck swimming in a lake. I wanted to be no one and nothing, and if I were really lucky I'd find that very desirable state before the end of the fight at the castle.

Kylin was able to keep his foul humor mostly under control until he was on the road to Gensea, but as soon as the monotony of the long ride began it was like a floodgate opening. He was still far enough away from the city for attack from bandits to be something of a possibility, but he had no time or patience for considerations of that sort. If anyone was foolish enough to attack him, they would not live long enough to realize the terrible mistake they'd made.

"Charity!" he growled under his breath, still seething from having had to be grateful and pleasant when all he'd wanted to do was curse at the top of his lungs and dismember dangerous living things with his bare hands. He'd never had to take charity in his life, not even when he'd first left home with nothing but his sword and a bow, but with his purse empty except for a few coppers he'd had absolutely no other choice. He'd needed a horse and he'd finally gotten one, the only one charity would supply.

"Horse!" he muttered with a deeper growl, glaring down at what he was riding. Nag would have been a good deal more like it, and only Evon's grace had kept it from being an ancient nag. The thing was a dirty gray in color with a black mane and tail, and it was just possible Kylin would have made better time on his own two feet than he was making on his mount's four. If he'd been able to pay for a horse it might

have been a different story, but with no more than a few coppers in his hand...

"You have to see it from their point of view," Veslin had said after showing him the only mount that had been offered for his use. "They're grateful to you and the girl for having helped them with their problem, but they still have to think about their own survival. Very few of them can afford to be out the price of a good horse, which would happen if for some reason you weren't able to send the silver you were ready to promise. If I had the money I would be more than happy to lend it to you, but I'm just a guest in Indris' house. Why don't you ask my daughter? I'm sure she spends very little only because she'd like to have something to leave her sons when she's gone."

Sure, Kylin thought morosely, everyone spends very little so they'll have something to leave to sons who are earning Blade and fighter pay - and who might not live to inherit it. Indris probably wouldn't have hesitated giving him the silver, but where would that have left her, especially after the lavish meals she'd been providing for her guests? And what would happen to her if he did indeed end up dead before he could repay the debt? He wasn't a man who could ask a thing like that of a woman, not even for the best of reasons. Veslin didn't seem prepared to ask the favor for him - not that that would have made it any better - and Kyfin had had the strangest feeling that the priest of Evon was particularly pleased with the joke of a horse he had brought back.

Which left him riding a nag with only a single gait, one best described as a stumble rather than a trot or canter or gallop. Kylin wasn't even sure the horse would make it to Gensea, but the horse appeared to be totally unconcerned. It continued along the road in its stumble, unimpressed with everything around it including its rider, sticking to its same, uneven pace. Kylin began thinking again about the Laws governing cold-blooded murder, and was grimly pleased to remember that they didn't usually apply when a Blade was the victim. Blades and Fighters were supposed to be able to take care of themselves, especially when it was one Fighter contemplating the murder of one Blade.

If the Blade lived long enough for the Fighter to murder her. Kyfin felt that tightening in his middle again, that churning, gnawing fury he'd been feeling ever since he woke with a knot on his head. What in Evon's name had made the woman do that to him? And then simply take off, without waiting for the escort? His left hand curled into a harder fist around the reins, his mind writhing under the lash of the only reason that would come to him, the only reason supported by everything that had happened. The woman who was meant to be his wife was so repelled by him, that she would rather risk her life than stay anywhere near him.

"What am I going to do?" the young Fighter whispered, all anger and rage drained out of him, all other concerns buried by that single, most important one. He'd given his word to go through with the marriage, and he knew how badly Duke Rilfe needed an heir, but what about the girl? Tisah, his Tisah, the sort of woman who had only inhabited his dreams until he had actually found her at Gensea, a woman he would happily give his life for - and a woman who loathed the very sight of him, the least touch of his hand.

"But why?" Kylin demanded, unaware that he spoke aloud. "Why does she hate me so?"

They had begun growing close, he knew they had, but every time he had started believing the warmth couldn't help but blossom, it had suddenly died out instead! It was almost as though she really did like him, but refused to allow herself to admit it. Or to show him any sign of it. But did it matter why she was doing it? Wasn't it enough to know that she wanted no part of him? Could he spend the rest of his life inflicting himself on a woman who, for whatever reason, despised him to her very soul?

"I'll have to have to talk with Duke Rilfe," Kylin muttered, ignoring the way his head had begun to throb just a tittle. "It isn't some character I'm pretending to be that the girl hates, it's me. If we can't find out why, or finding out why doesn't change anything, he'll have to choose another heir. I'll stay there and help

until he does, making sure nothing happens to Tisah, and then I'll - leave."

Leave. Turn his back on the woman he'd dreamed about all his life, letting another man possess what should have been his. He hated the very thought of it, felt the knife twist deeper inside him, but what choice did he have?

The pain in his left palm flared as the leather rein bit into the wound there, but Kylin paid no attention to it. The bandage was gone, just as the girl who had bandaged the wound was gone, and a little more pain simply didn't matter.

Thanks to the creeping pace of the horse he rode, Kylin didn't reach the city until after dark. Since he was going directly up to the castle he didn't particularly care that the city gates were closed, but when he tried to take the road leading around and up he was given a nasty surprise. The members of the City Guard camped just off the road passed along the bad news, then offered to share their fire with him until morning if he wanted to join their growing force. He asked them if there was any word concerning the whereabouts of the lady Sofaltis, was told there wasn't, then thanked them and rode back into the night. He knew better than to believe their attack force would get anywhere, and he needed some time to think.

Once Kylin was out of sight of the Guardsmen, he doubled back and picked his way through the dark until he wasn't far from the road where it lay above the city. His mount located a patch of grass and began munching contentedly, ignoring its rider who took the food sack Indris had provided and sat down with it near a boulder. A fire, which might be seen by those in the castle or the Guardsmen camped below, was definitely out. The food was already cooked, the night air was warm enough, and Kylin didn't need light to think by. What he needed were facts, but unfortunately there weren't many of those.

The Duke and his younger daughters were being held hostage in the castle, and no one knew where the lady Sofaltis was. Kylin considered that good news rather than bad, since it was Sofaltis those "rebels" wanted in exchange for the Duke and the little girls. If Sofaltis were in their hands they would already be gone, needing no more than a threat to the safety of their captive to be sure they would not be followed in force. His Tisah had reached the city safely and was still free, he was willing to stake his life on that.

But how long would she stay free? Even if the city officials didn't talk themselves into believing the Duke was far more important than one of his daughters, he was willing to bet Sofaltis would not hesitate to offer herself in place of her father and sisters. She wouldn't be pleased when Kylin did his damndest to keep that from happening, but he was prepared to sacrifice her very high opinion of him in order to assure her safety. Her father would want it that way, and Kylin more than agreed with him.

The only problem was, that might very well cost the Duke his life. Kylin bit into the cold meat he'd taken from the sack, chewing thoughtfully before swallowing, then automatically reached for the bread and cheese also in the sack. They had all believed Duke Rilfe would be safe until the proper, biased man had been named his heir, but apparently Nimram had made a drastic change in his plans. Why the change, and what could they possibly hope to gain by coming out in the open like that? Why did they want Sofaltis so badly, and even above that - what could be done to save Duke Rilfe and his daughters?

Kylin was sunk so deeply in thought, the hours slid past without his even noticing. He drank occasionally from the waterskin that had been given him with the food, but his mind was too busy reviewing everything he had heard about and learned as a King's Fighter for the intervals of refreshment to be more than automatic. It was difficult to take a castle even with a good-sized army, but individuals had been known to broach the stoutest of walls on their own; what he needed to do was recall the details of those times, and compare them with the situation he currently faced.

Since he hadn't yet remembered anything worth serious consideration, Kylin was surprised when he

suddenly found himself distracted. He moved stiffly against the boulder at his back, looking up at a dark sky that told him more than half the night was gone, then felt it again. There was a tightening-around his lower left arm, from his wrist upward, just as though someone had wrapped a hand around him and closed the fingers more tightly to get his attention. He raised his arm to look at it, expecting to see nothing in the dark -

And saw, instead, a ghostly silver glow, one he was crazily willing to bet was a bright gleam's version of a whisper.

"The silver bracer!" he breathed, well beyond mere surprise. "I'm still wearing the silver bracer!"

But how? Even as his mind demanded an answer to that question, he knew with absolute certainty that it was no accident. It might be possible to forget the presence of a bracer like that for a short while, but not for as long as he obviously had. And Veslin. The priest of Evon couldn't help but know he had it, but he hadn't mentioned it even once. What had he said to Veslin when he'd heard that child's tale about Evon's panoply? Something about how unlikely it was that anyone meant to have the special bracers would simply stumble over the priest entrusted with their keeping?

Sure. Unlikely and a child's tale, nothing that could possibly happen in the real world.

"Blessed Evon, for a god you have the worst timing I've ever seen," Kylin muttered to the bracer, distantly wondering if the deity was likely to take offense. "I'd be a fool to try denying I've been chosen, but how can I simply walk away from this -"

His words broke off as he felt that - grasping - again, only this time it was sharper, and in a way more urgent. Kylin frowned, moved his arm just a little, and was rewarded with a squeeze that couldn't be anything but a definite affirmative. Something was going on in the dark that the bracer seemed to want him to know about, and it was clearly prepared to take him to that something. Another explanation could be that he'd lost his mind, but when you came right down to it, he'd rather be crazy than forced to sit helplessly by, doing nothing while innocent people suffered.

"And come to think of it, why shouldn't that trash up there be what I'm supposed to fight against?" he asked softly as he got to his feet, feeling not in the least absurd. "I apologize for not being very bright, Evon, and also for what I said. Unless I really am crazy, your timing couldn't be better."

Left arm out ahead of him, right hand loosening his sword in its scabbard, Kylin moved the bracer around slowly, felt a squeeze, then walked carefully ahead through the dark.

## **Chapter Fifteen**

It wasn't much of a surprise to learn that Oeran knew every unofficial way out of the city there was. Not everyone knew those ways, in fact most didn't, and those who had the information were also responsible for its safekeeping. No one really cared for the idea of having bandits or enemy forces of any sort suddenly showing up in the middle of the city, slaughtering anyone they came across, stealing everything not bolted down, and generally making life extremely unpleasant. For that reason private departures from the city were available to those who could pay the price, but departure was all they got. A blindfold and ear plugs hid most of what needed to be hidden, and deliberate confusion took care of the rest.

Getting five people out that way wasn't easy, but Oeran did it alone without complaint. I had the feeling that if it had been just me he wouldn't have bothered, but with my Fistmates involved he'd had no choice. He was on his honor, so to speak, and although most of us grumbled over the necessity - or the time wasted because of it - no one went so far as to refuse. We made what plans we could, then followed our host to the shadow of a warehouse in another district entirely, had blindfolds put on and ear plugs of wax

inserted, then stumbled along the rest of the way.

When we were finally unwrapped again, we were a respectable distance from the city's wall. I looked around as my eyes readjusted to sight, seeing the torches on my father's castle up ahead and a small campfire a distance off behind and to our left. The night was quiet except for the sounds usual to it, and I was grateful for the strength I'd gotten back from the very short time I'd slept. I'd be able to do everything I had to, and would worry about other problems at a more convenient time.

"All right, where do we go now?" Oeran asked me in a very soft voice, putting the blindfolds and ear plugs in his pouch rather than simply throwing them away. "Do you have any idea how far away we are?"

"I think it's more over that way," I said, gesturing to the left as my eyes went back to the pile of stone that was my home. "I always looked back to see where I was supposed to be and wasn't, and then I would enjoy a quiet, private laugh. This doesn't feel like the right angle."

No one bothered pointing out that I was working on memories from almost half a lifetime ago; we all knew that, especially me, and if they didn't do the job we were wasting our time out there. Oeran simply nodded and led off with the shielded lantern he'd brought along, picking his way over stones and around boulders, me coming after him and the others behind me. My borrowed boots were a fairly good fit, which was one point of luck in our favor; walking over that ground was hard enough even without any added problems.

With the number of large boulders just about growing out of the slope, I also didn't get any questions on why finding the hidden entrance was so difficult. It stood to reason that it was supposed to be difficult - if not impossible - to locate from the outside, and despite the relative nearness of the doors to the castle, in emergencies they should be very effective. No enemy force could camp on terrain like that, sloped with only patches of grass among the stones, pebbles and boulders; escaping at night, especially after a successful entry into the castle, should be more than possible.

Only we were more concerned with getting in than out. The night air was cool and fresh, reminding me of times filled with little in the way of real worry and trouble, encouraging me to put fingers to the boulder I stopped near after we'd wandered around a while. The stone was both rough and smooth to touch, weathered down but also pitted and torn from whatever had originally tumbled it to its stopping place on the slope. The jewels of my childhood, I remembered with a smite, more precious to me than rubies and diamonds and sapphires were to the adults of the world. I had known that secret place so well, how could I have forgotten -

And then I was back to that time again, standing alone in the dark in nightgown and boots, breathing in the delicious scent of something that none of my brothers could ever have. Let them go hunting with our father while I was left behind, I had something better than hunting where there was even an arrow. An arrow of stone, pointing away from my place of emergence, showing me the direction in which true freedom and adventure lay -

"That's it," I breathed, suddenly excited, turning to the others. "The smaller boulders and bigger stones were arranged in the shape of a large arrow. Going downslope, very definitely downslope, a small cleared area with big boulders all around above it. I had to step around the side of mine to see the castle, but I could see the arrow as soon as I came out."

Oeran and my Fistmates stirred with renewed hope, and then we separated to look for the landmark I'd remembered. I continued along the slope in the direction I'd been going, trying to get the castle into the proper memory place, and then I made a small sound of annoyance with myself before settling into almost a full crouch. That was the height I'd been looking at it from way back then, which made quite a

bit of difference. I couldn't see quite enough of the castle like that, which meant we were just a little too far downslope. I straightened again and signaled the others, then led the way up.

It was Ham who finally found my arrow, and we all shared in his grin when we joined him. The stone-dotted head, visible even in the moonlight, pointed away from one boulder that would have been the fletching on a real arrow, and looked like nothing but a jumble of rocks except from right behind it. We could have overlooked it as easily as found it, and I don't think I was the only one who said a few quiet words of thanks to Evon for his help. He had helped us find the place, but hopefully we'd be able to take it from there atone.

The footing was a little more uneven than I remembered it, and we had to throw a good number of small rocks out of the way in order to make room for the pry bar, but the lantern helped us to see what we were doing so it wasn't long before the bar was in place. Jak forced it into the ground under the bottom front edge of the boulder, and I held my breath while he and Foist leaned on the bar, trying to coax movement out of a door that possibly hadn't been opened for more than a decade. If it hadn't been opened it would be hard to open, but if it had been opened it probably wouldn't open at all. I had time to get that far in the confused groping of my thoughts, and then, with a reluctant groan and a scrape, the front section of the boulder moved out toward us.

After that Ham's fingers were able to reach the edge of the door, and a moment later we were bending under the braced inner bar to get into the tunnel proper. Oeran went first with the lantern, Rull followed immediately behind with me after him, and then Foist, Jak and Ham. I was ready to just keep going, but Jak put a hand to my shoulder.

"It isn't polite to leave doors open behind you, especially when you're coming in uninvited," Jak pointed out in a very soft voice, "How do we close that rock again from in here without the brackets to pull on?"

"There's a chipped out handhold at the bottom of the door on the right," I whispered back, torn between doing the right thing and getting on with the real reason we were there. "That's how I got the thing closed when I was using it on a regular basis. The way the hinges are hung makes it easy."

Jak turned away to our other two Fistmates, "but door-closing was an activity I had no interest in. I moved past Rull and Oeran, who had stopped to wait for the others, drew my blade, and headed up the close, dark tunnel toward the door I had really been aching to reach. I was used to moving through that tunnel in the dark so my feet didn't hesitate, but a moment later a faint glow lit the stone in front of me. Oeran and his lantern, along with most of the others, had caught up to me, and we went on the rest of the way together.

I had wanted to be the first one through the wall and into the castle, but hadn't been able to argue the point that the one needing the smallest opening should be first. If there were guards around there was less chance of their being alerted that way, most especially since the wall opened behind a heavy hanging. Oeran's shoulders may have been wider than mine, but there was no doubt that he was more slender and could fit through a narrower opening as long as he went sideways. My palms itched while he blew out the lantern then leaned on the stones of the second doorway, moving as slowly and quietly as it was humanly possible to do. He also had his sword tight in his fist, and once there was a slit of lighter darkness just big enough for him, he disappeared through. I had deliberately set my mind into the patience of a stalking pattern, knowing how important it would be to stay calm while waiting, and was therefore faintly surprised when Oeran was back just about immediately.

His terse gesture brought us all out after him, one at a time and without sound, to find the corridor of the family wing silent and deserted. Ham came last, having closed the wall behind him, and then we split into the two groups of three we'd settled on earlier, one to each side of the corridor in single file. I led off in

front of Rull and Fotst on the right with Oeran leading Ham and Jak on the left, but for the moment everyone was following me. Oeran had actually visited the castle a couple of times over the years and was sure he could find the lower cells where Traixe and his men and the Guard were probably being held, but first I had to get him out of the family wing to a part of the house he knew. Visitors were often taken all through the castle when they first came as guests, but no one was taken through the family wing.

We prowled from one corridor to the next through the deepest silence I'd ever experienced there, even when compared to the times my father had taken my brothers and most of the fighters on hunting trips. Most of the small torches were unlit and there wasn't even a whisper of sound, not of servants moving around seeing to their chores, not of Guards walking or changing their posts, nothing. Even the air felt heavy and half awake, less the quiet of night than the complete lack of living beings to stir it, and I had to clench my teeth to keep from shivering. What if they had decided to kill my father and sisters, and simply bluff their way to what they wanted without needing to worry about escapes and rescue attempts? What if I was too late to do more than begin to revenge my blood? What if-

I stopped for an instant to force those thoughts out of my mind, then went on again with only that faint hesitation to show what my emotions had tried to put me through. If my family was dead then the ones who had done it would follow behind them, more slowly and painfully than their worst nightmares had ever hinted was possible, and not before they had told me who was ultimately responsible for what had been done. Then it would be their leader's turn, and I would show him things I'd learned from Blades who came from the eastern mountains, things that were passed on in shuddering whispers by those who hadn't, like the mountain dwellers, grown up with them. Someone wanted me rather badly, but when they got me they would be as far from pleased as it's possible to get.

We reached the end of the family wing and moved out into more public parts of the castle, still meeting and hearing no one, and then Oeran paused to wave a hand at me. That was the signal that told me he now knew where he was, and it proved to be true. At the next intersecting corridor he led his group to the left, which would get them to the stone stairway leading down to the cells it was his job to find. If the cells were empty he would have something of a problem - and so would we - but that could be worried about if and when it happened. My primary concern was finding the hostages - assuming they were still alive - and getting as close as possible to them before anyone was released. After that simple chaos would look like calm, and three swords would be able to do as much damage as thirty.

At the intersection Oeran took to the left, I led the way right. If my sisters were being held in their apartments there would have been guards in the family wing, so that meant everyone was more or less together. If I had been running things for the enemy I would have done it just that way, keeping my sisters close to my father but not exactly with him, so that if he made any trouble they could be killed before he had a chance to reach them. I think that if my sisters had been boys my father would have tried anyway, but he had the same strange outlook so many men seemed to have. Death is acceptable and honorable if it comes to men and male children, but the thought of the same happening to girls is appalling and horrifying. That's because women are child-bearers, I could almost hear Veslin saying in my mind, more important to the race and therefore, unfortunately, more restricted. It may not be fair, but that's the way it is... the way it is... the way it is...

Roll's hand on my shoulder stopped me in midstep, bringing me back from a distraction I couldn't believe I'd fallen into. I was either more tired than I'd believed or I was an idiot, letting my mind wander when - When there was the sound of voices ahead! Excitement surged through me at the proof that my guess had been right, that my father and sisters were being held in my father's wing of the castle, where there was easier access to other parts of it. Voices and shadow movement were coming from the partially opened door leading to the smallest of the private dining halls, the one that held a board seating no more than twenty-five. The door was ajar but there were no guards in front of it, showing how safe the enemy

felt there in the heart of my home - I felt my lips twist and then peel back from my teeth, the snarl rising up in me, visual but silent. Feeling safe is not the same as being safe, a truism the enemy was about to learn.

Rull obviously wanted to take over the lead from that point, but I moved away from his hand and ahead before he could step in front of me. We weren't in the Company, we were on my home ground, and our Fist was temporarily broken anyway. I thought I could feel him cursing in the whispered breath of no-sound that trailed me as I ghosted forward, but that was no place for an argument and he knew it as well as I. I hugged my right wall of the corridor, being careful of where my shadow from the torches fell, and in moments was sliding up to the door to the dining hall. From that close the voices were a good deal more distinct, and when I went down to my knees and peered around the door edge, I could see as well as hear.

"... won't do either of you any good," the louder voice was saying, a voice that would have been more familiar without the ring of absolute authority it was then maintaining. "Why suffer needlessly, when we already have part of the information? Give me the rest of it, and then we can wait quietly for your ransom to be paid."

"My lord Duke has nothing to say, and neither have I," Traixe stated from where he stood between two guards, the calm, steady words worlds more impressive due to the fact that he wasn't standing on his own. The men to either side of him were the ones holding him up, necessary in view of what Traixe had been put through. His brown leather shirt was gone, some of the wounds gouged into his hard body were still bleeding, and a number of the burn marks looked as though they were beginning to suppurate.

My father sat in the large, ornate wooden chair meant to head the board in that dining hall, but the board had been pushed back and to the right of the door I peered through. His chair stood almost in the middle of the room to the left, and when his fists clenched I could see that he was tied to the arm rests by the wrists. His face was expressionless, but the hatred pouring out of his eyes was strong enough to melt the stone of the walls, a hatred that should have done more than annoy his captor. I could see that the man was not only a traitor but a fool, to have served my father for three years and yet not have learned anything about him.

"Really, Duke Rilfe, you're usually a good deal more reasonable than this," Sir Fonid protested, the annoyance the traitor felt sharpening his voice. "Do I have to have Traixe flayed before your eyes before you'll tell me what I want to know? You're making him suffer for nothing, trying to hide the locations of tunnels I already partially know about. The secret is out, so you no longer really have anything to hide. Tell me where the rest of them are, and I'll have your man here taken to the healer."

"My man there, as you call him, knows better than to expect healing from you," my father grated, his body still except for the way his wrists pulled at the leather holding them. "He won't survive this any more than I will, especially if we tell you what you want to know. You'll then be behind my heir's guard the same way you slipped behind mine, and he won't have any idea that you're there. I won't give you his life on a platter, and neither will Traixe."

"Your heir," Sir Fonid said with a snort of derision, glancing to his right to where Traixe was being held erect. "You won't have an heir until the elder of those two girls reaches an age to marry, and then the choice of who it is will belong to whoever is appointed her and her sister's regent. By then all of this will have been forgotten, and if the proper choice is made I won't need to use the information you give me. At this point there's very little chance that the proper choice won't be made, but I prefer playing it safe. Tell me what I want to know."

"You act as though my daughter Sofaltis were already dead," my father said, his tone suddenly brittle as

he ignored Sir Fonid's demand. "I won't believe she's dead, so what you've said is..."

"No, of course she's not dead, nor will she be," the traitor interrupted, now impatient enough to gesture the thought aside. "Our leader has other plans for her, much more important plans than providing you an heir through marriage, which is why we attempted to disrupt the ceremony. But none of that is truly your concern. What does concern you is the question I've asked, the answer to which I will have this very moment. If Traixe's pain fails to move you to a reply, we'll see if the same may be said with your youngest daughter in his place."

Again Rull's hand came to me as I stiffened, a mild reaction compared to the twisting agony to be seen on my father's face. Rull was trying to make sure I'd noticed that the "rebels" holding Traixe and standing around in the room were tan-leathered mercenaries rather than clumsy ex-villagers in homespun, but I'd already seen that for myself and dismissed it as a problem. Nothing and no one was going to keep me from freeing my family, and giving Traixe the spilling of other blood due him. I began to gather myself - and an interruption came from an unexpected source.

"Sir Fonid, really, everything you've said is quite unacceptable," a voice I knew protested, and then he walked into my line of sight from the right side of the room. The man Timper, who had brought me my father's letter, still dressed in tights and tunic and looking like a pompous page.

"This is none of your affair, man," Sir Fonid snapped in greater annoyance, barely turning his head in the direction of the one who approached him from behind. "Go back to your place by the children, and keep silent."

"I do believe I've kept silent long enough," Timper answered with a sniff, his familiar disapproval of things more than obvious. "I strongly doubt that our blessed leader would approve of harming innocent children, and you may be certain he will hear of your intentions on the point. As for the lady Sofaltis, she will most certainly not be made to leave these halls. This is her home and she will remain here, far from those who have taught her such unladylike habits."

"So you believe you know the intentions of our leader better than I?" Sir Fonid asked with poisoned sweetness, this time turning full to face the other man. "You, a thickheaded messenger boy incapable of performing even the simplest of tasks? The girl was to have been taken at the last of the inns before the two of you reached the city, but even sending a message to our people at the proper time was beyond you - as was holding her there until they arrived. Do you deny that?"

"Through no fault of my own, I fell ill the night of our arrival," Timper replied stiffly, what I could see of his left cheek beginning to turn red. "When your man came to me instead, I told him which room was the girl's. Is the fault to be mine that he had no stomach for facing alone a girl who was armed? He set out to make the attempt, then abandoned it to fetch his followers instead. In the morning I meant to pretend to still be ill, holding the lady there with concern until the others might arrive, but her eagerness to be home led her to depart extremely early, leaving me no more than a message of her intentions. When I learned of her departure, I was very upset."

"You were very upset," Sir Fonid mimicked, looking Timper up and down in disgust. "And the night before you were too ill to help my man against not a girl who was armed, but a Blade of a Fist! What help you might have been I couldn't begin to imagine, unless it would have been to distract her attention while your betters took advantage of that distraction. And you may give your thanks to Grail that the girl's escape from the wagon taking her north was due to the negligence of those in charge of her, not to the rescue of those who followed a trail left by a badly damaged wheel. Your denial concerning that odd occurrence fails to strike me as wholly truthful, as I'm certain it would strike our leader if he were told of it."

"And I'm certain our leader would agree that the girl's proper place is here," Timper returned, still stiffly embarrassed but making no attempt to deny the charge leveled against him. "She cannot be central to our leader's plans for she is no more than a woman, and has not the leader himself taught that a woman's proper place is in a man's home?"

These other, unacceptable, concepts must surely be yours, part and parcel of your fear of the girl. I, however, feel nothing of such fear, therefore will I accept my clear duty and keep the girl here - as my own wife."

"Ah, so that's the way the wind blows, does it?" Sir Fonid said with a laugh and a sneer, the understanding in his expression heavy with ridicule. "Your - certainty - about all of these matters, not to speak of your odd illnesses and doings, all stem from the fact that you want the girl for yourself! How it pains me to tell you, boy, that the burning in your loins has warped what little intelligence you began with. One such as you would never be allowed the wedding of the daughter of a Duke, even if she weren't meant for other things. You've overstepped yourself far more than you know."

"How dare you," Timper choked, his outrage actually tightening his hands to fists at his sides. "I am a gentleman, Sir Fonid, far more than you can truthfully lay claim to, and have been a loyal follower of the leader and Grail a good deal longer than you. I will have no upstart intruder speak to me of overstepping, most especially one so honorless as you. Did you not have a need to imagine reasons to wish the lady Sofaltis away, I am convinced you would have raised not a single finger to keep her from being sacrificed in marriage to that - that - "

"Devil of a Duke's son?" Sir Fonid finished for him, the words low and filled with loathing. "I despise all of the nobility, but most especially do I despise those who think themselves better than we who are clearly their superiors, in intellect if nothing else. Petty nobles such as you, boy, one at least who need no longer be tickled to his fancy."

Timper seemed ready to pursue the argument, but whatever he would have said was lost as Sir Fonid reached to the dagger sheathed at his belt and slowly began drawing it. Not even someone as innocently overbearing as Timper could have missed Sir Fonid's intention, and he didn't miss it. The young courier hesitated almost no time at all before starting to back away, but once again the scene was interrupted. From what seemed like a good distance away I heard the sound of a scream, echoing faintly from the stone of the walls with even fainter sounds of battle behind it, and those in the hall were able to hear the same. Sir Fonid stopped in the middle of his advance, cocked his head with a look of astonishment on his face, then snarled with searing hatred and began to turn to the mercenaries in the room. It didn't take much to know he was about to order his hostages slain, but that's what we were there to prevent.

As fast as I straightened and began running into the room, it still wasn't so fast that Rull and Foist weren't already moving with me, three minds and swords with the same thought and intention. Again everything began happening so rapidly it was difficult separating and following it, nothing but flashes here and there sketching in the whole of the picture. Sir Fonid whirled toward us without being able to give the order he had been about to, but the mercenaries didn't need orders to know that they had a fight on their hands. The two holding Traixe dropped him as they began reaching for their weapons, the others in the hall coming alive even faster, but we who were attacking still had the reaction edge on them. Rull headed left, toward the largest block of mercenaries. Foist to the right to the corner where my sisters sat on crude pallets, trembling together in fear, and I-I went straight ahead and only slightly left toward my father, Traixe-and Sir Fonid.

The chief traitor still stood with his dagger in his hands, the snarl of hatred just about etched into his face, but this time he wasn't facing a helpless Timper. I could have told him how much good a dagger was against a sword, but I had no urge to talk to the man and even less urge to waste time on him before

those two mercenaries behind him were taken care of. My father and Traixe were still in a good deal of danger, so changing that had to be my first objective. I reached Sir Fonid, coming in close enough to lure him into swinging clumsily with his inadequate weapon, knocked it down with the flat of my blade, then arched up in a backswing and clipped him hard in the temple with the fingerguard of my sword. He dropped like a rock loosed from the battlements, and then it was me against the two mercenaries.

Fighting alone against two swords can be tricky, but no more than that if the two you're facing aren't used to fighting together. I breathed a little easier when the first clash of blades showed me the two probably hadn't even talked much to each other, let alone fought in tandem, and I felt a faint smile forming at their expressions of frustration. They'd had the time to kill their two hostages before I reached them, had decided to wait because it was only a girl who was coming at them, and then discovered that the girl's weapon had the ability to move them around and away from the men they'd been guarding. Slashing hard and swinging purely on the offensive, I'd driven them away from where they'd been to stand with my back to my father and a Traixe struggling ineffectively to get to his feet. At that point I went more on the defensive, intent on holding at the very least until the now-free House Guard and fighters made it through the rest of the intruders and got to the dining hall.

"Traixe, untie me!" my father hissed frantically from where he sat, his words low in a clear attempt not to distract me. The mercenary on the left came in then, trying for a backswing to catch my blade long enough for his friend to finish me, but his friend wasn't expecting the move and was therefore too far to my right. Instead of using my weapon I twisted right myself, brought up the bracer to catch the swing and stop it, then ignored the jarring crash to my left arm to twist back and lunge hard with my point into the fool's unprotected middle. He'd taken the chance of opening himself wide in order to reach me, and was rewarded by being able to rest from the fight - permanently.

I jerked my blade free of the falling body in time to keep the second mercenary from chopping me down, and once he'd disengaged and fallen back a short way I risked a fast glance behind me before returning my attention to my remaining opponent. The afterimage in my mind showed me the picture of my father fighting the leather tying him to the heavy chair, the air filled with the waves of his silent cursing, Traixe stretched out unconscious not a foot from him. His old friend had tried to free him, that I knew even without having seen it, but he just hadn't had enough strength left. The mercenary came in again then, giving me no chance to try doing the thing myself, I thought, and then I understood his real reason. Three of his blademates were abruptly attacking with him, ones who had apparently gotten past a hard-pressed Rull, and they were no longer looking grim and frustrated. Four was usually enough to finish off one, and then my father would be their prisoner and hostage again.

In no more than seconds the sweat was rolling into my eyes, nothing but the presence of the bracer and the inability of the four to fight properly together keeping me alive. I had nicked one of the three newcomers in the first furious exchange, but that had done nothing more than make the others a bit more cautious. It was ironic that the four now seemed to be treating me with the same respect they would have given to a male opponent, an equality that couldn't have come at a worse time. I felt like cursing and laughing both, but there wasn't breath enough for either response. It was swing, block, parry, defend, back a step and start all over, my left arm screaming in pain from the blows it had taken. My whole body felt beaten, the very air I gasped in making my lungs ache, all of it telling me I wouldn't be standing for much longer. If it had only been my life I might have welcomed the approaching end, but it wasn't only me and I couldn't give up and a sword swung at me that I couldn't hope to stop and that would be it and -

But it never reached me. Another blade stopped it, a longer, heavier blade than any of the rest of us were using, and then it was fighting on my side, and I had an instant to breathe before going back to it. An instant to see what I already - somehow - knew. It was Kylin beside me, the kill-lust blazing so strongly

from his eyes that the four mercenaries seemed to flinch back even before his weapon began swinging. After that it was his sword they had to contend with, and a moment later mine beside it, and that was the well-known beginning of the end. Three of the mercenaries were already down with the fourth trying to run when the House forces appeared in the doorway, unshaven and filthy and badly kept, but armed and more than simply furious. The mercenary was cut down without being given a chance to defend himself, and then friendly forces were pouring into the hall, overrunning everything in mercenary tan.

The fighting was over in no time at all, but there wasn't a bedlam in the kingdom that could have rivaled the output in that hall even once it was. Everyone seemed to be looking for more blood to spill, an attitude I would have shared if my left arm hadn't been hurting so badly, and the strength I'd thought I'd regained hadn't disappeared somewhere. I stood for a moment with both arms hanging at my sides, the sword still in my right hand more a dragging weight than a weapon, then remembered that my father hadn't yet been untied. It took a small amount of effort to turn, but that was all the effort I had to expend. Even as I watched the leather was cut away from his second wrist by Kylin's blade, and my father pushed out of the chair to clap the man who had released him on the shoulder in thanks, then he turned to me. A quick hug showed I was still more or less in one piece, and then I was freed so that he might step over to Traixe's unmoving form and go to one knee. A muttered, "Thank Evon," told me the Fighter was only unconscious, and then my father was up and pushing his way through the crowd toward where my sisters should be. I followed him with my eyes until the swirling mob had swallowed him, and then turned back to find that I was being stared at.

"Are you all right?" the big man who had saved my life asked, not having moved from his place beside the wooden chair. "Is any of that blood yours?"

I didn't bother looking down at myself to inspect the splattered results of my efforts to exterminate mercenaries. What I did do was shake my head,

"According to those traitors, you're not one of them," I said, feeling confused as well as dizzy and tired. "I was sure you were, but I must have been wrong, I'm sorry -"

"You thought I was one of the enemy?" he asked when I ran out of stupidly inadequate words, his face lighting with a dazzling smile instead of tightening with insult. "So that's why you kept acting that way, and why you did all those..."

He had finally begun to step forward toward me, but his advance and his words were cut off together. Somehow my father had gotten the mob moving to a purpose, and part of it went to tend to Traixe while a larger section of it swirled around me. An instant later I found myself beside my father and my sisters, the poor, frightened little things clinging to him, but he still had an arm free to put around my shoulders. With grim-faced fighters surrounding us I was wordlessly urged to go with them, and as tired as I was I had nothing left to argue with.

It took my father and me quite some time to get my sisters settled down, and by that time the house's loyal servants and the ancillary families had also been released from where they'd been locked up. The girls' women attendants insisted they were just a little shaky, nothing that would keep them from seeing to their charges again, so we left them with those charges sunk into an exhausted sleep - and armed fighters stationed inside the room as well as outside it - and went to my apartment. Someone had been efficient enough to light the lamps in my reception room, which meant my father was able to go directly over to a tray holding a pitcher and goblets.

"Thank Evon. Traixe told me no one had supplied you with decent, adult refreshments," my father said with his back turned, his hands busy with the pitcher and cups. "If I hadn't given immediate orders to change that, we'd have to go all the way to my own apartment before finding what we've more than

earned. Are you sure you're all right?"

He turned toward me then with the filled cups in his hands, his expression serious and his eyes troubled. I smiled faintly at how familiar that question was becoming, leaned back in the chair I had already collapsed into, and nodded my head.

"I haven't been this tired since before last year's snow," I said, accepting a cup with my right hand. The pain in my left arm was easing up again, but not so much that I was ready to use it without good reason. "Once I've had more than three hours of sleep I'll be my usual brave and exciting self, but I haven't yet asked about you. Did they hurt you?"

"Only my dignity and pride," he answered with a snort, pulling a straight chair closer before sitting on it. "That low traitor Fonid came into my apartment with your sisters and two of his cronies, daggers at your sisters' throats. I had the choice of surrendering myself and every Guard and fighter in the house, or watching my children die. If it had been myself alone - But it wasn't just me, so I did what I had to. They didn't do any more than tie me after I was disarmed, keeping me healthy as a bargaining chip, I thought, and then those mercenaries appeared to help out with securing the castle. I had no idea you'd gotten away from the ones who had kidnapped you."

"It was more through Evon's luck than skill," I admitted with a snort of my own, sipping at the excellent wine my cup was filled with. "It took me a while to get back, and when I did I found those idiots from the city were getting ready to attack the castle in a lamebrained attempt to rescue you. I couldn't let that happen, so I got a few people and came ahead of them."

"Those were your Fistmates, then," he said with a satisfied nod, enjoying the taste of his own wine. "I won't ask where they came from, I'm just glad they did. And that fifth man is from the city, I remember meeting him a time or two. How in Evon's name did you six get into the castle?"

"Let's just say we'd be wise to be grateful for my - unusually active childhood," I answered - or evaded, which was a good deal more like it. I knew my father would be finding out soon enough exactly what I'd done, but I was in no hurry to rush the time. After being grateful, I was certain he'd find occasion to be something else entirely.

"We'll go into that in a little more detail once we've all had a chance to rest," he said, the look in his eyes suddenly very familiar. He knew he wasn't going to like what he heard, but he was still feeling too relieved and happy to want to exchange that for shouting. Changing the subject seemed like a better idea, so that's what he did. "I take it you've learned a little more about Kylin over the past few days. He rode out after you when we found you'd been taken, and since he showed up back here in the middle of the fight, I'm assuming - What's the matter?"

"It just occurred to me that you weren't surprised at seeing the way he can handle a sword," I said slowly, straightening in my chair as the revelation came. "He cut you free and you thanked him, just as though you approved of him - and always had. And you had to know he wasn't a Flower. He was still wearing that ridiculous red swordbelt, but he'd changed into brown boots instead of the red. If you knew he rode after me, you also knew - exactly what, Father?"

"That he's a King's Fighter," my father answered heavily, more than a little guilt darkening his complexion and causing his gaze to wander around the room. "Trame and I had had it all worked out in case the enemy came after me as we suspected they might, but we hadn't expected them to change their plans. We knew something had gone seriously wrong when you were kidnapped, so there was no longer any need for Kylin to pretend to be anything other than what he was. Sofaltis..."

"A King's Fighter!" I repeated, my tone causing my father to flinch even as apology appeared in his eyes.

"Not a Flower but a King's Fighter, and you and Traixe knew it all along! That line he fed me, about how you were all ready to sacrifice everything you had and order me not to marry - was that your idea too, Father? Was I supposed to get so choked up with gratitude that I went meekly to the slaughter like a good little lamb? Or maybe I should say blindfolded, untrustworthy little lamb. How brave and noble of you to share the truth with me now."

I discovered I was on my feet again, tiredness burned away in the flames of rage. They'd all known, but I hadn't been important enough to share the secret with.

"I didn't keep the truth from you because I didn't trust you," my father protested, also rising to look down at me. "I was trying to keep you safe, girl, a desire you'll understand once you become a parent yourself. And of course he's a King's Fighter. Did you think I'd choose less than the best for you? And even above that, he was attracted from the first minute he saw you. Once you give him a chance..."

"He'll what?" I snapped, the rage growing so high in me I was sorry I still wore a sword. "He'll sweep me off my feet, make me fall madly in love with him, cause me to want to open my own throat on the altar of expediency? Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you. Father, but I'm not in the mood to be your sacrificial offering. If you want a King's Fighter for an heir, you can adopt your precious Kylin. Come morning, I'm heading back to my Company."

I turned away from him, so filled with bitter disappointment that I couldn't bear it, but his hand came to my shoulder to keep me from moving any farther toward my bedchamber.

"Sofaltis, you won't be out of danger until you're married," he said, his tone weary but as gentle as the grip that held me. "I can see now I should have told you what I was doing just as Traixe urged, but it's too late for second guesses or regrets. I love you and I'm as proud of you as it's possible to be, but I can't allow you to refuse the marriage. Even if the Law did let me abrogate the contract I'd refuse, because I must see you safe. As soon as Traixe is on his feet you'll be married to Kylin and then he'll be declared my heir, just as the contract requires. All I ask after that is that you give him a chance to make you happy."

The fingers on my shoulder squeezed just a little and then they were gone, footsteps taking them to the door and out. I stood there for a moment, caught up in a whirlwind of the vilest emotions, and then I put my cup aside and strode to the door after him. The argument wasn't over, not by a long shot, and I wanted my father to know it. I reached to the latch and pulled on it then pulled again, but it was no use. My father had left and I was locked in.

## **Chapter Sixteen**

That far underground the stones were damp and green and slimy, the only light provided by sputtering torches, but none of the men in the room were overly concerned with their surroundings. If they had been they would have been more upset by the smears and small pools of blood, or by the metal instruments caked a dark, reddish brown. Even the man strapped to the wooden table wasn't taking notice, but that might have been because he was now unconscious. Before he'd fainted, however, he'd been screaming.

"I think I believe him," Traixe gruded from the chair he sat in, gesturing back the man who stood beside the body on the table. "If he hasn't told us everything he knows he probably never will, but I think he has. Doing anything more to him will be pleasant, but I don't expect it to be productive."

"I agree," Kylin said, brought back to attention by Traixe's words. After hearing how desperately the enemy had been trying to get their hands on Sofaltis, his mind had been busy thanking Evon for letting him get into the castle in time to keep it from happening again - that or worse. If someone in the girl's group

hadn't been in too much of a hurry to close the outer tunnel door properly, or if he hadn't had a guide to lead him to it... "At this point he's starting to make things up, just to avoid the agony. I've seen it happen before."

"Then he doesn't know why Nimram wants Sofaltis," Duke Rilfe growled, clearly unhappy. "After his boasting I was hoping he did, but he was just following orders. Get the girl no matter what you have to do to accomplish it, and bring her to me. The tin-bound brass of the bastard!"

"A bastard, yes, but with a bear-trap mind," Kylin said, beginning to match the Duke's growl. "Since it would have been "rebels" who took your daughter, there would have been no link whatsoever to him and his priests. If someone found out he had her, he would claim his people had "found" and "rescued" her, which would make them heroes. The only question left is, what in Evon's brightest hell was he going to do with her?"

"If we're very, very lucky, we'll never know," Traixe said, pushing himself to standing with some difficulty. He'd insisted on being there to direct Fonid's questioning, but the balance of the night and half a day's rest hadn't really been enough to restore him to health. "If it's all right with you, my lords, we can hold the ceremony tomorrow."

"It's fine with me, Traixe, but I can still swing a sword," Kylin said, taking care not to glance at Duke Rilfe. "Are you sure you want to officiate while you can't?"

"If necessary, I'll protect him," the Duke put in in frustration, then slammed a fist down on the heavy wooden table. "Evon broil that girl, I'll have her hide if she tries anything during the ceremony! Did you hear what she did this morning?"

"I heard she sent half a dozen of Traixe's fighters running to get a locked door between them again," Kylin said, helpless to keep the grin from his face. "Prancing in with a tray of food and forgetting she was still armed - Are they usually that suicidal, or were they just tired from having been up too long?"

"You're on her side," Traixe observed, as amused as the pain in his body let him be. "If my lord Duke hadn't locked her in, you'd be short one bride on your wedding day. Would that make you happier?"

"The answer to that, my friend, is no," Kylin said with a laugh as he folded his arms. "If the answer was yes, I would have already broken her out of there. I am on her side, but if I let myself admit I know exactly how she feels, I'll lose her. I'll do my damndest to make it up to her later - after she's my wife."

"If she lets you live long enough," Duke Rilfe muttered, moving closer to Traixe to begin helping him out of the room. "I never thought I'd see the day I felt sorry for the man I chose to marry my daughter. If I were you, Kylin, I'd..."

Kylin let the Duke's voice fade away as he stopped to tell the Guards outside the door that the broken remains on the table were to be returned to the cell they'd come from. The Duke could decide later what he wanted done with the traitor, or Kylin himself would see to it if Duke Rilfe preferred - as long as it was after the wedding. Until then Kylin was too distracted with pleasant thoughts, thoughts, centering around his Tisah. And she was his Tisah, happily and definitely his. She'd thought he was an enemy and a traitor, and that's why she'd refused to let herself open to him. Now that she knew the truth everything in the world would be fine - as soon as he managed to get her calmed down. She would be safe and she would be his, and everything in the world would be fine. He chuckled as he headed for the upper world again, already beginning to whistle.

Oeran entered Rullin's reception room, unsurprised to find the other three Blades keeping his old friend company. They had sitting rooms of their own in the apartments they'd been given, but they, like he,

preferred to congregate where there was someone to talk to. Not that there was any talking going on. The small ex-Blade had seen final farewells with more life than that room showed.

"How's your arm doing, Foist?" he asked as he closed the door behind him, a little afraid he already knew why the silence was so thick. "And Ham, what did the healer have to say about your leg?"

"They're scratches, Oeran, nothing but scratches," Foist answered as he glanced up, showing the faint, cold smile he considered warm acknowledgement. "We appreciate your asking."

"I'm glad to see you four appreciate something," Oeran commented, moving closer to the chair where Rullin sat, "So far none of you has gone out of his way to be a very gracious guest. What's the matter, isn't the cooking and service up to your standards?"

"Damn it, Oeran, they have her locked up!" Rullin growled, raising cold eyes to the man he addressed. "Are we supposed to celebrate the fact that our fifth is a prisoner in her father's house?"

"Rull, he has the right," Oeran said slowly and distinctly, leaning into the glare he would have preferred backing away from. "And not only the right, but he'd be crazy if he did anything else. If the enemy went to such lengths to keep her from marrying, then marriage is the only thing that can get her out from under. Would you rather see her captured or dead?"

"You know we wouldn't," Jak answered, drawing Oeran's eyes. "We simply feel that there's no reason we couldn't protect her - until she's ready to marry someone who really cares about her."

"Damn it, I knew it!" Oeran exploded quietly, taking his turn at glaring, most especially at Rullin. "When my people told me you went to her room - Rull, use your head! She's not only the daughter of a Duke, she's his eldest daughter with all his sons dead or gone! He needs her to give him a legitimate heir, and that heir can't be a lovable but familyless Blade! She's being married to the son of another Duke, who also happens to be a King's Fighter. If you try stepping into the middle of that, your hide won't be worth a shaved copper. It'll be a tossup as to who gets your stones first, the Law or that bruiser."

"Anytime he feels up to it, he's welcome to try me," Rullin answered in a very soft voice, the look in his eyes bringing Oeran's head up. "I don't give a damn who he is, Softy doesn't want anything to do with him."

And I'll see to it that he doesn't have anything to do with her, Rullin thought, his fist clenching where it lay on the arm of the chair. Twerp might not be the best descriptive word for someone like that Fighter, but if he tried taking Softy away the best descriptive word would be dead.

"Can't the rest of you talk any sense into him?" Oeran demanded, looking around at the others of the Fist. "I'm willing to bet you're thinking about breaking her out of here, but don't you see that will just make it harder on her? She doesn't have a choice about this, something she'll accept as soon as she calms down - if you four don't try telling her she's right. She's probably sick over the thought of deserting you, of never being part of the Fist again. Do you really intend making it worse for her?"

"Rull, think about what he's saying," Foist advised after a moment of that heavy silence Oeran had found when he'd first come in. "You told us you asked her to marry you, but you also admitted she didn't agree in so many words. We'll go with you to talk to the Duke tomorrow, but if you don't get anywhere we'll call it off and go and see Softy herself. We'll all give her a kiss and tell her how much we'll miss her, and then get her to promise each of us a dance at the Feasting after the ceremony. Every one of us owes our lives and more to her, Rull; making her feel better about this is the least we can do in return."

Rullin put his palm to his mouth and rubbed at his face, sick himself at the thought of losing the woman he

called his infant female. He had no words to offer back to Foist or Oeran. He felt too empty, and for the first time he was really afraid. Would it end with his having to give her up? He knew he'd never find another like her, not if he lived a thousand decades, but he also didn't want to give her any more hurt than she already had. Be a good girl, Softy, he would say, and let that Duke's son give you the Fist that would have been ours. Don't think about us, we'll be fine without you. It's not as if we loved you -

When Rullin rose abruptly and strode out of the room, none - of the men left in it made an attempt to follow. They all knew why he had left like that, but weren't about to tell him he was too late. He hadn't left soon enough to keep them from seeing the glint of weakling tears in his eyes, a glint more than one of them didn't want to admit he could match.

I'd spent some time breaking up furniture after getting my father's note, discreetly pushed under the door rather than handed to me, but I'd only done it because it was expected of me. The note had told me that the next day would be my wedding day whether I liked it or not, and no one with ears in the entire castle was prepared to believe I would like it. They were right, of course, but none of them seemed to realize I usually did something about things I didn't like. What I did right then was break up some furniture, then take myself into my bedchamber for a little nap.

I didn't bother getting up again until it was deep night, a time when even our still-jumpy Guards and fighters would be more relaxed than wide awake. My father had locked me in, thinking he had me caged until it was time to nail me permanently to the floor, but there were still some parts of my childhood he didn't know about. There was a way out of my apartment other than through the door, and I was just about ready to use it.

"Many misspent youths turn out to be better spent than we know," I muttered as I moved around my bedchamber, making sure I hadn't left anything I really needed to take with me. I wore my own black leathers and boots again, and had found my Company medallion where someone had left it, on the table beside my bed. The medallion's chain had somehow been broken, but that didn't make any real difference. I would have packed it away in my pouch even if it had been whole, a gesture for my own benefit to finally let myself know that that part of my life was over. I would never be a Fistmate in a Company again, even if things worked out the way I intended them to.

"And they'd damned well better work out, or the next time they catch me they will chain me," I muttered, stopping to look down at the letter I'd written. I'd awakened from sleep that first night with the perfect solution all ready and waiting for me to notice it, which I'd done as soon as I'd sat up ready to start cursing. It was so simple it was beautiful, but it was also going to be tricky and depended on my getting out of the castle to begin with. That part, though, shouldn't be anything like as hard as it sounded, and would sure as hell be satisfying to the soul.

"*Dear Father.*" I recited, knowing so well what I'd said in the letter that I could repeat it by heart. "*As your loyal and obedient daughter I would never dream of disobeying you, so please take this as my full agreement to the marriage you've arranged for me. I will be delighted to join with the man of your choice - as soon as I return from a most urgent duty I've been called away on. I'm certain we all know matters of honor must come first, even before filial duty, and your disappointment at the delay is without doubt on the same scale as mine. I will return as quickly as possible, and until I do, I remain, your daughter, Sofaltis.*"

"But if I don't get away, I'll be your daughter, Mud," I said in a more normal voice, making a face at the letter. My father would explode when he saw it, going up like a volcano booted from below, and if he got his hands on me too quickly thereafter I'd be lucky if I lived long enough to be married. After a good night's sleep it had finally come through to me that my father did love me and trust me, and had only been trying to take care of a helpless female with his roundabout plotting. With that in view I was no longer

hurt, only mad as hell that he thought he could get away with it. I felt almost honor-bound to prove a very special point, to him and to everyone else involved, and maybe even to the Law. The King's Law said I couldn't refuse to marry, so I hadn't; all I'd done was put it off until I was able to bring home a very special reason to make it all unnecessary.

"If I can manage to find that reason," I muttered, resting my hands on my new swordbelt as I looked around again. My father had given me part of the answer himself, when he'd mentioned that the betrothal contract called for my "husband" to be named his heir. If one of my brothers suddenly turned up, the contract would have to be abrogated without prejudice, and a new contract, if any, entered into. That much everyone knew about the Law, but I also knew that a new contract would then be unnecessary - as well as not terribly desirable on the groom's part. He would still have my dowry, of course, but even a large dowry isn't the same as a Dukedom. And I thought I knew which way my brothers had headed when they'd first left home, something no one else who had searched for them knew about. They had been burning to see the eastern mountains, to find out if all the stories they'd heard were true, and if Evon were even partially on my side I might be able to pick up something of a trail -

"And then do Kylin out of what he's been promised," I said, staring down at the floor without seeing it. "You find the nicest ways to thank people for saving your life. He's certain to be grateful to you forever."

Or at least until I got back with one or both of my brothers in tow. It wasn't that I didn't want him to be my father's heir; he was certainly decent enough, it was just that I was so horribly caught up in the middle that there was no other way - No other way to avoid marrying him. Another aim guaranteed to make him feel really special. And he'd been trying so hard to set things right between us, even while I did everything I could to ruin them. He'd never understand that it wasn't him I was trying to avoid -

"Don't say it," I warned myself aloud, one hand firmly over my eyes. "Don't start telling yourself how it might not be all that bad with him, or your point's lost and so is your future self-respect. All three of them lied to you, your father, Traixe and him, "trying to trick you into something you wanted no part of. Are you going to let them get away with it, or are you going to show them how the game's really played? If they're free to use the Law against you, are you any less free to use it against them? If you're ready to give up without a fight, just say yes."

No, that was one thing I couldn't do. I took my hand away from my eyes as I straightened with a sigh, knowing I'd never be able to live with myself afterward if I simply gave in and let it happen. I would prove to them all that the choice was mine - whether they liked it or not.

I laughed shortly, knowing exactly how well they'd like it, but my decision was made. I had a window-slit waiting to act as my means of egress, and it had waited long enough. I'd used that way out of my apartment more than a few times as a child, and when I'd tried it again the night before I'd found that I could still just squeeze through. My gear couldn't go with me but my weapons could, and straight down below past an easily-climbed wall of carved building stones was a night-deserted courtyard. From that courtyard I could slip into the stables which, with the number of men down from the hard confinement and the fighting afterward, weren't being guarded. Once I had Bloodsheen saddled we would use the stables tunnel to leave the castle, and when the sun rose on my wedding day, that bunch of conspirators would find they were missing something.

I walked over to the window-slit and brushed the wall drape aside, but refused to ask myself what I would be missing. Just then I knew exactly what it would be, and I wasn't anywhere near up to facing it. Facing him. Kylin, the man I was supposed to marry. After everything I'd said and done to him, after all the times I'd hurt him, how could I just - go on with things as if they had never happened? The simple answer was I couldn't, and if that made me a coward then I accepted the calling without argument. I didn't have the courage to face him let alone marry him, and I knew that what had happened was

primarily my fault even though I'd had help making such a mess of things. If they'd just been honest with me, if they'd simply asked-

But they hadn't been honest and they hadn't asked, which left me no choice in what I had to do. I would go searching for my brothers - and do something else I knew I should remember but couldn't bring to mind - and would try to make it all come out right. Once I got back I could think about offering apologies that would probably never be accepted, but until then -