

Princess Brat

Chapter 1

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Derand du Bahr, High King of the Federated Kingdoms of Arvin, strode along the hall of the palace in Sollera, one of his neighboring kingdoms, trying very hard not to laugh. The minor official he followed scurried ahead of him and his escort as though pursued, and those people they passed stared at him and his men as though they were seeing their own deaths coming. Granted they wore black leather beneath the ring mail of their light protection and they all had swords, but a single man and an escort of twenty was not the usual sign of a full-scale invasion.

"I would guess that these people are not fighters, my king," Listan murmured from his place at Derand's right. Listan was Derand's advisor and good friend, and he trusted the man completely. "They stare at us as though they expect to be eaten for lunch."

"Yes, they've always been that way," Derand agreed in a matching murmur. "But they're also very pleasant people, which is why my father signed that compact with King Ostrin all those years ago. My father and Ostrin are close personal friends, and my father wanted to make sure that these people never have to stand alone against invading forces."

"The chances of that happening are now a good deal less likely," Listan said, the words filled with satisfaction. "Is that why we've come here? To reassure the good friend of your father?"

"For that and another reason," Derand agreed with a private smile. "I've also come to collect my bride."

"Your *what*?" Listan nearly yelped, then he regained control of himself. "What I meant was, I hadn't known you were planning to look for a bride here. The women in our own lands will be crushed."

"Not as crushed as they would be if the point was never brought up," Derand told him dryly with continuing amusement. "And the point I mean is that I'm not *looking* for a bride here, I already have one. I was married to the only daughter of King Ostrin many years ago, when she and I were both still children. She was a lot younger so she might not even remember, but I do. My father really wanted the match, and I saw no reason not to agree. I still see no reason."

"Yes, I wish I were as close to my own father as you are to yours," Listan said with a sigh. "He never stopped supporting and believing in you, even when you began the

conquest of the independent kingdoms in our country. Everyone expected you to fail, everyone but him. When you began to take the kingdoms over one after the other, he was the first to pledge you his allegiance and backing voluntarily. Now he's a ruler under you as High King, and seems to be delighted about that."

"Not seems to be, he really is," Derand corrected with a smile. "He also never stops bragging about me, but has somehow managed not to alienate my brothers from either of us. They're as strongly behind me as he is, so I owe him more than I can ever repay. If he wants this alliance through marriage to work, I'll make sure that it does. I need a wife to give me legitimate heirs anyway, so it might as well be the woman he chose. And from the glimpses I've gotten over the years, she's grown up to be pretty."

"That's a help," Listan said with a thoughtful nod. "A pretty woman makes getting heirs much more pleasant. What's she like beyond that?"

"I have no idea," Derand answered with a shrug, then gestured to the double doors they had almost reached. "That's where I'll be meeting with King Ostrin, and I won't be long. You and the others can either wait out here, or let them show you to a place with chairs and refreshments. There's very little chance of our being attacked in this place."

"I'm sure you're right, but we'll still wait here," Listan said with ironbound politeness, that protective look strong in his eyes. "Waiting won't kill us, especially since you won't be long."

Derand simply shrugged again and nodded his agreement, knowing that argument would be useless. Listan had certain ideas about how to protect him, and those ideas weren't about to change. The man's inflexibility had kept Derand alive on more than one occasion, so he'd be a fool to *want* to argue. Even here, where the people were all so gentle and pleasant

The official Derand had been following paused at one of the doors, glancing back with worry. When he saw Derand coming forward alone he seemed somewhat relieved, but not completely. Even so, he opened both doors, stood to one side, and then cleared his throat.

"His High Majesty, King Derand du Bahr of the Federated Kingdoms of Arvin," the man announced, and then he bowed. Derand walked past him to look around, and the first thing he saw was King Ostrin coming toward him. The older man was smiling broadly, the smile Derand remembered so well from all the times he'd visited here. Ostrin was still a handsome man with his dark red hair and light eyes, and also still seemed to be fond of his best friend's son.

"Derand, how wonderful to see you again," Ostrin enthused, his hand outstretched as he approached. "You've grown quite a lot in reputation since the last time you were here. You're due congratulations for what you've accomplished, of course, and I don't mind adding my own to what your father must have already said. The kingdoms of Arvin have been in need of uniting for many years, but no one before you was ever able to accomplish it."

"It wasn't all that difficult to do," Derand said with a grin as he joined grips with the older man. "I just pointed out that people would stop calling us savages once we were a single, united country, and they fell all over themselves in their hurry to join. They must be as sick of being called that name as I am."

"I heard there was a bit more to it than that," Ostrin said with his own grin, his grip almost as strong as Derand's. "I'm told the fighting was intense to begin with, but the strong and decisive way you handled it told others that trying the same themselves would be futile. And now you're High King, and have come to pay an old ally a visit. How long can you stay?"

"Not long at all, unfortunately," Derand admitted with a sigh. "I'd love to sit down and put my feet up for a while, but I have to be on hand at home in case someone decides to start trouble. But I'd like to see Gardal while I'm here, to remind him that our generation will be signing a pact of our own some day. And, of course, to find out how he's doing."

"He's doing extremely well, but I'm afraid he's not here right now," Ostrin answered, looking as disappointed as Derand felt. "You and my son got to be good friends over the years, and I know he'll be disappointed that he missed you. Lately he's been acting as representative of our kingdom, taking the diplomatic trips that I've always hated having to make. Since he'll be king in my place some day, I saw no reason to keep him from taking an active role right now."

"You and my father have similar ideas about that," Derand said with a nod of understanding. "My oldest brother is doing the same for *him*, and my other brothers haven't been forgotten either. So it seems that my visit will be even shorter than I expected it to be. I hate to collect my bride and run, but – "

"Your bride!" Ostrin all but yelped, cutting off the rest of what Derand had intended to say. "I forgot all about that! Oh, dear"

"What's wrong?" Derand asked, disturbed by the way the man now looked really stricken. "Isn't she here? Has she come down with some sort of illness? You look as though the end of the world has arrived."

"Possibly, in a manner of speaking, it has," Ostrin replied cryptically and vaguely, then he gestured to Derand's left. Two chairs and a small table holding refreshments stood there, and Ostrin touched his arm. "Let's sit down for a moment, and we can discuss this more comfortably."

"What can there be to discuss?" Derand asked as he joined Ostrin in walking toward the chairs. "Either Elissia is here and all right, or she isn't."

"There's considerably more involved than that," Ostrin replied with an apologetic glance before joining Derand in sitting down. "I mentioned the matter to your father a year or so ago, and he decided to let the thing be *your* decision once all your campaigns were finished. Now that you're here, I find myself the least bit reluctant to talk about it."

And Ostrin did look reluctant, that and a bit shamefaced. The older man filled two silver goblets with wine and handed one to Derand, apparently struggling within himself. Derand took the goblet silently, having quickly decided to let Ostrin get to what he had to say without pushing the man. He respected Ostrin too much to add to the man's discomfort, and a moment later Derand's patience was rewarded.

"As you may have noticed the times you were here, Elissia has grown into a beautiful young woman," Ostrin began, his gaze more involved with the wine in his cup than with watching his guest. "She's my only daughter, you know, born after my two youngest sons died from that fever. Her mother and I were so delighted to have her, and she was such an adorable little girl"

"Yes, she was," Derand said in support when Ostrin's words trailed off. "I also remember her as being high spirited, especially at our wedding ceremony. She didn't want to 'play that game,' but then she changed her mind."

"She changed her mind because her mother bribed her into cooperating," Ostrin said with a deep sigh. "I didn't know that at the time, and didn't even find out for quite a while afterward. By the time I noticed how strong-minded and independent she was, it was too late to change things. And she doesn't remember the wedding ceremony as anything but a vague game played once when she was very young. About a year ago she told me the kind of husband she expected to have found for her, and that's when I got in touch with your father."

Derand sipped at the excellent wine in his cup, hearing the words "strong-minded" and "independent" echoing in his thoughts. People usually used other words than those if they were being frank, so Ostrin's use of them wasn't a good sign. And the girl also didn't remember that she was married

"Just for curiosity's sake, what kind of man is she looking for?" Derand asked, glancing up to see that Ostrin's gaze now rested on him. "If it makes things easier for you, you might want to tell her that *I'm* that sort."

"I don't think that would work," Ostrin disagreed with another sigh. "She said she wanted a man no more than an inch or so taller than she is, and one who enjoys tending his garden more than anything else. She also wants him to be someone who smiles most of the time, and someone who has a completely agreeable nature. Derand, since the marriage hasn't been consummated, it doesn't have to stand. Your father and I are willing to nullify it, so you might want to take advantage of that. No matter how hard I try, I can't see Elissia being the kind of wife you *ought* to have. You've earned the right to some peace in your private life, even if you have it nowhere else."

"Is she really that bad?" Derand asked, deciding to be more direct. "Forgive me, my friend, but you almost sound as though you're afraid of her."

"Afraid? No, don't be silly." Ostrin spoke much too quickly, adding a strained and insincere laugh. "She's my daughter, after all, my sweet girl child, so how could I

possibly be afraid of her? It's just that I dislike confrontations, and she's really very strong in her opinions. Why don't you speak to her yourself? That way you can form a decision based on fact, rather than wonder if you're doing the right thing."

"All right, I'll take that bit of advice," Derand conceded, but privately kept all other concessions to himself. "Why don't you invite her to join us?"

"A wise decision," Ostrin said with a smile filled with too much relief for Derand's liking. "I'll send a servant."

The older man turned and beckoned over one of the servants who stood out of earshot on the other side of the very large room. They were waiting to serve the two kings without intruding on their private discussion, and one of them came forward quickly when summoned.

Derand listened to the instructions Ostrin gave with only partial attention. It disturbed him to see the man so bothered by the thought of Derand's claiming his daughter, and there was an uneasy question involved in the matter. Was the girl really that stubborn and headstrong, or had her father decided that he wanted someone other than a bloody-handed conqueror for her husband?

The second possibility wasn't entirely out of the question, but the first was almost as upsetting. Had his father's best friend been living all these years under the heavy hand of a female tyrant? If so, would it be honorable to simply abandon him as he'd been told he could do? And what would his father think about the whole thing?

Ostrin chatted as they waited for his daughter to arrive, but Derand's mind wasn't on the conversation even though he contributed to it. Questions and demands kept jumping out of his thoughts, at least until the hall door was opened and a girl strode in. Derand joined Ostrin in rising to his feet, more than a little surprised. At first glance the girl seemed to be wearing a perfectly ordinary ankle-length dress in brown and gold, but a second glance revealed the divided skirts of a riding dress with matching boots beneath.

But the girl's clothing was the least of it. She, herself, was worth more than a second look, with her rounded figure and beautiful face. She also had hair of a lighter red than her father's to go with large green eyes, something he hadn't remembered about his bride. The glances he'd gotten of her over the years hadn't shown how really desirable she'd become, and Derand wondered why he hadn't seen her more often during those years. He'd certainly visited there often enough

"Father, you wanted to see me before I go riding?" the girl asked as she approached, the smile on her face gentle and attractive. "Did you need something?"

"I needed to tell you that we have a guest, Elissia," Ostrin replied while Derand suddenly realized that the girl hadn't even glanced at him. "You remember Derand du Bahr, don't you?"

"Of course I remember him," the girl said from where she stopped, about five feet away.

The smile she wore hadn't changed, and she still hadn't acknowledged Derand's existence to the point of noticing him. "I appreciate being informed about these things, Father, but now I really must get on with what I was doing. Do enjoy your visit."

And with that she turned around and headed back toward the door, obviously intent on leaving! Ostrin darkened with embarrassment as he glanced at Derand, clearly not having pictured the girl causing him *that* much humiliation. Ostrin was a really gentle man, Derand knew, but he was still a man and a king.

"Young woman, you come right back here!" Ostrin snapped, his voice almost a growl. "The day will never come that I allow a guest under my roof to be slighted so badly, not to speak of by a member of my own family. You *will* display decent manners, or I'll know the reason why!"

"If you wanted to know my reasons for acting that way, Father, you should have asked," the girl replied after stopping a few steps away. She'd also partially turned back toward them, showing she still wore that smile. "I try to display decent manners for civilized visitors, but don't believe in wasting them on savages. You may not have noticed, but until now I've taken the trouble to stay away from them when they invaded our peace and serenity. And since my behavior disturbs you so badly, I'll just resume the practice."

And this time she did leave, despite Ostrin's outraged shout of "Elissia!" She closed the door quietly behind herself as though no one had said a word, and Derand simply gazed at that door until Ostrin had emptied his wine cup in a single swallow and had turned to him.

"Derand, I really do apologize for having put you through that," Ostrin said, the words clearly filled with pain. "I knew she would probably do *something* objectionable, but I never dreamed she'd go *that* far. Do you understand now why I made that offer? If I'd only noticed her behavior when she was still young enough for something to be done about it"

"Ostrin, my friend, you make her sound ancient," Derand said with a laugh before turning back to pick up his goblet. "She's not even close to being ancient, so there's a lot that can be done with her. And doing those things could well turn into my favorite pastime."

"You still want her?" Ostrin asked with incredulity, obviously having heard the last of Derand's words despite the way he'd murmured them. "If I were in your place, I'd turn and run and keep running until I'd put leagues between us, but you don't seem to see it the same. Would you mind telling me why that is?"

"Possibly because she won't be my daughter," Derand answered with the amusement he couldn't hold back on. "She'll be my wife, and even she knows what that means. It's the reason she spoke that way, trying to get me to turn my back and walk away. She insulted me on purpose in an attempt to get rid of me, but it isn't going to work."

"You're certain she did that on purpose?" Ostrin asked, now looking skeptical. "I've seen her do things almost that outrageous before, and it's always seemed part of her nature."

"It may have *become* part of her nature because she was allowed to get away with it," Derand pointed out, trying to be gentle despite needing to speak the truth. "She gets her own way by acting outrageously, and I'll wager gold that she's never been punished for doing it. Have you ever once taken her over your knee and spanked her bare backside because of something she did?"

"Of course not!" Ostrin replied, his expression showing mild shock. "Even my sons were never punished like that, so why would I treat my daughter so?"

"Possibly because your sons take after *you* but your daughter doesn't," Derand countered, feeling sorry for the older man. "She isn't sweet and gentle and reasonable, and so needs more of an incentive to behave in a way decent people find acceptable. I'm going to supply that incentive."

"It's hard to understand why a man would accept a woman like Elissia when he doesn't have to," Ostrin said with a sigh and a slow headshake. "But it's also hard to understand why a man would begin a struggle like the one you started in your country, even if the uniting needed to be done. Do you really *enjoy* having strife and warfare in your life?"

"It gives me something to occupy my time," Derand answered with a laugh. "Without it, I might get into trouble. So, would you mind if we went after her right now? Waiting until she gets back would give *her* the first battle."

"Of course we can go after her if you really want to," Ostrin agreed at once despite the confusion in his expression. "But may I ask what are we going after her *for*?"

"We're going to give her official notification that she's my wife," Derand explained gently, now keeping his amusement on the inside. No wonder this man hadn't had a chance against the girl "Once that's done I can take over as the person she has to obey, and also reply properly if she doesn't. If seeing the thing disturbs you, you can certainly turn away or walk out. I won't be insulted."

"I'll most likely *have* to leave," Ostrin said with another sigh. "I know Elissia needs a strong hand to teach her not to be so unmannerly, but I'm afraid I haven't the heart to watch it being applied. You really don't mind?"

"Not at all," Derand assured him as he replaced his goblet on the table. "Now, has she gone directly to the stables, or is possible that she went somewhere else entirely?"

"I would have assumed that she went to the stables, just as she said she was going to do," Ostrin replied with raised brows. "What makes you think she might have gone elsewhere?"

"It's come to me that if *I* didn't want to be summoned somewhere a second time, I'd go where a summons couldn't reach me," Derand explained as they moved toward the door to the hall. "The second time the invitation might not be as polite, and guardsmen might even be involved. With that in mind, I'd choose a place no one would expect me to be."

"If you're right and she isn't in the stables or her apartment, I think I might know where that is," Ostrin mused. Then he turned and gestured to two of the servants. The men hurried over, and he sent one to the stables and one to his daughter's apartment. He also told them to meet him in a certain corridor and to run, and run they did.

"We can take a pleasant stroll while we're waiting for them to report," he told Derand with a smile. "If you're right and she's made herself disappear, we'll be in the proper place to see if my guess is correct."

Derand agreed with a nod and accompanied Ostrin into the hall, where he told his people to wait until he got back. Listan wasn't happy about that order, but this time it was Derand who refused to be argued with. What was most likely ahead of him was a private matter, and Derand meant to keep it one for as long as possible. If the girl forced the issue, that would change, but until then the matter was between the two of them.

Or, possibly, among the three of them. Ostrin, the third person involved, walked beside Derand with a rather unconcerned and placid expression on his face. He knew what was in store for his daughter and he'd said he couldn't watch, but at the moment he was taking Derand to where he thought his daughter might be hiding.

That in itself could possibly be understood, but not so the fact that the man didn't seem upset by it. If Ostrin considered helping Derand a matter of honor, he would have had to guide him no matter how he, himself, felt. But honor didn't explain why Ostrin wasn't upset by having to do so. That was the point confusing Derand, that Ostrin didn't seem bothered. By rights he ought to be, unless

Unless it really had been Derand he'd been most concerned about. It seemed unlikely that a father would be more concerned about his daughter's husband than about the girl herself, but it was necessary to remember what the girl in question was like. And how little success the father had had in coping with her. Now that Derand had refused to have the marriage annulled, Elissia was no longer Ostrin's problem. The poor man must find the relief of that fact exquisite, which once again made Derand feel sorry for his father's closest friend.

Ostrin led Derand through various corridors, and when they got where they were going Derand suddenly thought he knew what Ostrin had in mind. He kept the idea to himself, though, and joined Ostrin in waiting for the servants to arrive. It wasn't long before the two of them showed up, and the rate of their breathing said they'd continued to run even once they were out of their king's sight.

"Take a moment to catch your breath," Ostrin told them when they tried to gasp out their reports. "If you end up passing out from lack of air, I'll have to wait even longer to hear what you learned."

The two men nodded and worked to restore themselves, and in little more than the mentioned moment they were again able to speak.

"Your Majesty, I was told that the princess hasn't been seen at the stables," the first

finally announced. "A servant came only a minute or so before I did to say that her horse should be unsaddled, but she herself never showed up."

"But she also hasn't returned to her apartment," the second chimed in. "Her maids insisted that she's gone for her ride, and I found no reason to disbelieve them."

"Thank you," Ostrin told them warmly. "You may now return to your ordinary duties."

The two men bowed first to Ostrin and then to Derand before leaving, and once they were gone Ostrin turned to his guest.

"So now we'll see if I guessed correctly," he said with a smile turned sad. "If not, we'll go to Elissia's apartment and I'll speak to her maids. She could well have told them to lie if someone came looking for her."

"That would have been *my* next guess as well," Derand agreed with his own smile of commiseration. "If she isn't in Gardal's empty apartment, then she's gone back to her own to tell her maids to lie."

"So you do recognize this part of the palace," Ostrin said with a nod. "Yes, with her brother gone off on the kingdom's business, his empty apartment would be the perfect hiding place. Shall we take a look?"

The question was more of an invitation to join in, so Derand followed Ostrin to Gardal's apartment. Derand had spent any number of enjoyable hours there with his friend, and the outer reception room looked deserted with all the servants busy elsewhere. Ostrin crossed the room and entered the first of the inner, private rooms, and Derand almost stepped on his heels when the man stopped short. But the reason for his stopping was perfectly clear. Elissia rose quickly from the chair she'd been sitting in, and for an instant she looked disconcerted.

"May I help you, Father?" she asked once the instant was past, clearly back in control of herself. "I usually spend a short part of every day here in Gardal's favorite room, just to keep it warm for him, so to speak. When he comes home he'll hate it if the room is too cold from having been unused."

"This isn't your brother's favorite room, girl, and I think you know it," Derand said when Ostrin remained silent. The older man's expression said he felt touched by an unexpected and thoughtful gesture, and Derand could see that Ostrin needed to hear the truth. "You came here to plan your strategy for the next battle, but that's already been joined – and you've lost. Your father has something to tell you which will prove the point."

"You've just proven an entirely different point," the girl returned before Ostrin could speak, not in the least flustered. "We've never liked the idea of battle around here, but obviously you do. Can't you see you're making us all miserable by insisting on staying? Why can't you do the decent thing and leave?"

"Oh, I intend to leave, and rather quickly," Derand assured her with a faint smile, more than aware of how her words had affected her father. The man now believed that his

daughter was suffering, and he clearly knew he'd be adding to her misery. That girl was an expert at playing the man, showing she must have had a good deal of practice.

"Yes, I'll be leaving first thing tomorrow morning," Derand went on blandly as he watched the girl closely. "But before you congratulate yourself on your victory, you ought to know that you'll be leaving *with* me. It's become the right time for you to start living with your husband."

"You think there's a chance I'd ever marry *you*?" the girl asked with a very unladylike sound of ridicule. "I don't even like to see savages from a distance; marrying one is completely out of the question. And don't think you can talk my father around in spite of my objections. Even if he were so cruel as to agree to sell me into a life of horror, *I* would never agree. But he isn't that cruel, so you have no hope at all."

"I hate it when a woman smirks, even on the inside," Derand commented, seeing the veiled amusement in her beautiful eyes. "That talk about a life of horror has your father writhing in guilt, but you already know that. It was the reason you mentioned it to begin with, to keep him firmly under your thumb. He should have learned to recognize the signs himself by now, but he's too good a man to believe that his beloved daughter would constantly lie to him for her own purposes. Since I happen to be really fond of him, I'm glad his trials are now over."

"Why do you refuse to understand that his trials won't be over until you and your people are gone?" the girl countered, in the process walking closer to put a supporting hand on her father's arm. "We were happy until *you* showed up with your demands, and we can be happy again once you leave. Right now you're making my father miserable, and I refuse to allow that. If you won't go by your own decision, I'll call the guard and let *them* help you."

"Have you ever heard the expression, 'More nerve than an aching tooth'?" Derand asked her, not quite able to believe she'd said what she had. "I stand here as your *father's* guest, and you have the brass to threaten to have me thrown out? And we won't even mention that *my* kingdom is slightly larger than this one – "

"You see, Father, now he's threatening to bring armed forces against us," the girl interrupted with what had to be the most unreal sadness Derand had ever encountered. "I know you thought of him as your friend, but you should be able to see now that he isn't. Tell him to be on his way, and that any agreements he thinks he has with you aren't valid any longer."

"Derand, this might not be the best time to pursue the matter we were discussing earlier," Ostrin said slowly, the man's hand patting his daughter's where it still rested on his arm. "I think the way needs to be prepared a bit more carefully, so that no one involved comes to any harm. Can you return here at a later time, say, in about two or three months? By then I'll have been able to – "

"By then she'll probably have you declaring war on me," Derand interrupted, looking down at the girl with one of his less friendly stares. She, however, showed nothing but a

bland gaze, even though a man in her place probably would have trembled.

"I think that statement means he intends to make the trouble seem like *our* fault, Father," the girl said at once, taking advantage of Derand's almost-blurted comment. "That no one will believe the contention doesn't seem to bother him, but please don't be upset. I know you really thought he was as decent as his father, but knowing the truth is much safer – even if it *is* more painful. Why don't we – "

"No, I don't think we'll have any more suggestions out of you," Derand said quickly, interrupting before she could talk her father into having him hanged. "Ostrin, there are only two questions you have to answer right now. If the answer is no to either of them, I'll leave without anyone forcing me into it. The first question is, are you still a man of honor? And the second is, if so, do you mean to stand behind your sworn word?"

The girl tried to say something immediately, but Ostrin raised a hand to silence her. The expression on his face was one of pain, but Derand had had no choice about putting him in that position.

"You strike at me shrewdly, son of my best friend," Ostrin said at last, his tone filled with defeat. "Yes, I do still happen to be a man of honor, but there are some things even such a man finds impossible to do. I'll stand behind my word, but you'll have to be the one to tell her."

His hand closed briefly on his daughter's arm as he sent her a look of helpless compassion, and then he strode from the room without a backward glance. The girl called out, "Father!" just before he disappeared, and when he didn't stop or answer she turned on Derand with an expression filled with exasperation.

"I hope you're proud of yourself," she accused with small fists cocked on rounded hips. "You've probably just undone about ten years of work, and all for nothing but your own ego. Does that make you feel as important as you think you are?"

"What are you talking about?" Derand demanded, now completely lost. "If you mean that I've saved your father from you, then – "

"Is that what you call it?" she cut in with a bitter laugh. "*Saved* him? You forced him to do something he didn't want to, which hasn't happened since I began to support him. Now he's right back to being pushed around the way he always used to be, and he can't even argue. If that's your idea of being a friend, I'd rather be surrounded by enemies."

"You've been *supporting* him?" Derand echoed, beginning to get a glimpse of the true situation. "If that means you've been forcing him to do things according to your own point of view, you have a lot of nerve accusing *me* of using force."

"All I've ever done was lend my father strength to keep others from walking all over him," the girl stated, still glaring up at him. "People always come here expecting to be able to push him around, and then they get annoyed when I don't let it happen. Just as I'm not going to let it happen this time. Whatever it is you've decided he's going to do,

you can just undecide on it. He's not going to be your pawn no matter *how* big a kingdom you rule."

"So that's why he feels the way he does about you," Derand said with a grin born of sudden understanding. "You've been making him act against his nature, so he feels uncomfortable and intimidated. He may be disturbed over what I'm doing, but I'll bet he breathes a sigh of relief when he sees you leaving with me. Or he will once you tell him how you really see things."

"He already knows how I see things, I'm not going *anywhere*, and even if I were it would *not* be with *you*," she stated, now folding her arms as she stared up at him. "What I *am* going to do is speak to my father again, to help him forget that he's afraid of you. Once I've accomplished that I also mean to talk him into having you locked up, so you'd better leave while you still can. Everyone is entitled to a fair warning, but that's the only one you'll get."

And with that she began to circle Derand in order to reach the door, the threat she'd spoken more like a sworn oath. Derand felt the urge to close his eyes and rub them, an effort that might help him believe a girl was treating him the way no man within reach would have had the stones to do. Ostrin's attitude toward her became more and more clear with everything she said, but this was no time to let her go off on her own.

"No, the person you have to speak to first is me, because your father asked me to tell you what *he* was supposed to," Derand said at once as he caught her arm to stop her. "There's something involved here that you don't seem to remember, and it makes a very big difference."

"What am I supposed to have forgotten?" she asked, her tone showing clearly that she didn't believe there *was* such a thing. "That your father and mine are longtime friends, so you should be allowed to act as you please? I really don't think so."

"Your father and mine *are* longtime friends, which is why they had us married when you were a small child," Derand told her. "Your father said you had to be bribed by your mother in order to go through with the ceremony, but you did go through with it. You're my wife, girl, and the reason I'm here is to finally claim you."

"Have you been drinking?" she asked with a small laugh of disbelief. "If you expect me to swallow that nonsense, you're more likely out of your head. I'm not married to anyone, and what's more I don't ever intend to be. Right now my father needs *me* more than he needs a political match, and after him my brother will be in the same position. I don't know what your game is, but – "

"It isn't a game," Derand stated, not about to let her talk herself out of believing him. "It's the unvarnished truth, so you'd better get used to the idea. You and I are married, and starting tonight we'll be acting like it."

"Over my dead body," she stated in turn, looking at him as if he'd crawled out from under a rock. "Or, better yet, over yours. That should tell you what will happen if you try

to come anywhere near my apartment, tonight or ever. Now, let go of my arm."

"Do you always spend your time threatening people who are bigger than you?" Derand asked, finding himself really curious. "If you do, then it's a wonder you've survived even this long."

"Oh, I never threaten," she answered with a smile. And then, without warning, she kicked him hard enough in the leg to make him flinch and reach for the bruised area. He also let go of her arm, which made her smile widen. "I just promise, and then usually keep the promise. Remember that if there's ever a next time."

Once again she turned toward the door, obviously meaning to leave the way she wanted to, but Derand had had enough. A man would have paid for the assault and insult with his life, but Elissia was a woman. She might later decide that she would have *preferred* to pay with her life, but that was too bad about her.

"You and I aren't as done as you seem to think," Derand growled as he caught her arm again and began to pull her over to a chair. "You've been allowed to run the lives of everyone around you for much too long, not to mention acting as you please and getting away with it. You're about to pay for that kick, and if you ever try it again you'll pay twice as hard."

"Let go of me, you big oaf!" she said in a near growl of her own as she was brought helplessly with him. "If you didn't want to be kicked, you should have kept your hands to yourself. You – Oh!"

Her argument ended abruptly when she was pulled face down across Derand's lap, but she also began to struggle harder.

"Don't bother trying to get out of this," Derand said dryly as he got a good grip on her. "You were told that I'm your husband, so I have a right to do more than put a hand on your arm. I'm about to show you what some of that 'more' entails, a pleasant chore I expect to have to repeat over and over again. If you decide you'd like to avoid that, you can do it by behaving yourself."

The girl snarled wordlessly as she continued to struggle, fighting to regain her feet. Derand ignored her efforts and began to raise her skirts, then he cursed silently. He'd forgotten she was wearing a riding skirt, and there was no effective way of getting it raised. The girl had gotten lucky, but only for this one time. If the situation ever recurred, he'd strip her naked before putting her over his knee.

But she was in that position right now, so there was no sense in putting off her first lesson. She voiced another "Oh!" of shocked surprise when his hand came down with the first smack, but she couldn't have felt it too strongly through all that cloth. But she did feel it, which her renewed struggles showed.

"You'll be getting away lucky this first time," Derand told her as he added a second and third smack. "The next time I have to do this your bottom will be bare, and you won't sit

down for the rest of the day at least. You *will* learn to be a good little girl, or you'll spend the rest of your life standing up."

"You miserable savage, let me go!" the girl demanded, her voice filled more with desperation than command. "You're hurting me and you have no right!"

"I have every right," Derand countered, still smacking the rounded bottom that now squirmed with every stroke. "I'm your husband, and it's a husband's duty to teach his wife what she needs to know if her father didn't. You will *not* get away with insulting or disobeying me, so don't ever think you will. And I'm not hurting you, I'm punishing you. You'll soon learn the difference."

She snarled something under her breath and tried again to fight free, but her strength wouldn't have been a match to his even on his worst day. He continued to bring his hand down hard on her backside, determined to leave a lasting impression, and finally succeeded. When she tried to shield her aching seat with a hand, he captured her wrist and held her arm out of the way, then went on with his chore.

The girl finally fell silent except for an occasional "Oh!" muttered under her breath or swallowed, and Derand took that for a good sign. She'd stopped trying to oppose his will with her own, showing that the first lesson had been spanked into her. That she refused to let herself cry out wasn't quite as good, but eventually she'd surrender the stubbornness as well. Derand gave her a final five spanks, each of them hard enough to make her draw in her breath, and then he released her.

"So now you know what to expect from me," he said as he rose to his feet. The girl stood rubbing her bottom with one hand, making no effort to look up at him. "If you behave yourself we'll get along without a problem, but if you don't we'll have more sessions like this one. The choice is completely yours."

A few minutes earlier the girl would have made some sarcastic remark to that comment, but now she just stood rubbing herself and making no effort to meet his gaze. Yes, she'd learned the lesson all right, and with less trouble than Derand had been expecting.

"You'll join your father and me for dinner tonight, and afterward we'll retire to your apartment," he went on in the delightful silence. "If you try any of your tricks on your father you'll regret it, because I'll put you over my knee and bare-bottom paddle you right on the spot with everyone watching. I've decided that we'll spend a day or two here before leaving for home, and you'll behave as a courteous guest rather than as the ruler of the world. Have I made myself clear?"

Her nod was rather more curt than Derand would have liked, but he really had only just begun with her. In a little while she would be just as polite and well mannered as the next woman, or she would definitely be more sore.

"Good," Derand said, letting her hear his satisfaction. "I'll escort you to your apartment now, but I won't be staying – and you won't be leaving again until it's time for dinner. And don't make me come looking for you unless you enjoy the idea of needing to sit on a

cushion. You'll find it very embarrassing and even more uncomfortable. Let's go."

He waited for her to precede him, which she did without even a moment's hesitation. As he followed after, he decided that his married life promised to be much more peaceful than anyone - including him - had expected.

Princess Brat

Chapter 2

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Elissia would have stalked into her apartment, but stalking would have done nothing more than add to the outrage perpetrated by the savage. Her dignity was even more bruised than her bottom, and she would never forgive him for doing that to her, never! Though her bottom was bruised enough, a fact that Elissia had confirmed by a quick peek into a standing mirror. The skin, which should have been a creamy white, was a dull dusky red.

Her servants, being well used to her needs and wants, took one look at her mood and then disappeared. They knew without being told that she needed to be alone, and it was a good thing for them that they did. It wasn't one of *them* she wanted to dismember slowly and painfully, but if they'd stayed within reach they would have paid for someone else's mistake.

"And he *will* find out that what he did was a mistake, the worst of his life," Elissia growled to herself as she lay on her stomach on her bed. She had no choice about lying like that, even though it reminded her much too much of the up-ended position the savage had put her in. He'd had the nerve to take her across his knee and spank her, striking her offered bottom again and again with a hand that felt like aged wood. At first she'd thought the time would be no more than humiliating because of the riding skirt she wore, expecting the heavy material to protect her from his brutality. But as the time passed and his hand kept striking her bottom, she discovered that the skirt was very little protection after all. He'd brought a throbbing ache to her seat that she'd never before experienced, and one she'd be certain she never experienced again.

As Elissia's bottom throbbed she closed her eyes and lowered her cheek to the bedcover, feeling worse than she had in many years. She'd carefully closed the bedchamber door behind her, which would serve to keep her privacy intact. At least until *he* decided to come in. Then her privacy would be a thing of the past

"It can't be true, it just can't be," she whispered to her bedcover, remembering what he'd said about their being married. She did have some vague memory of a time when her mother had given her sweets to play a game with other grownups, something her mother had never done before or since. But that couldn't have been a marriage ceremony, not when she didn't *want* to be married! Men expected their wives to obey them, and she just wasn't built to do that. "Better dead than wed" was an old saying among certain women, and now she seemed to be finding out how true it was.

"And since he means to take me away from here, it doesn't even *matter* if I end up

dead," she muttered, raising up on her elbows to stare at her hands. "If I can't be here to help Father and Gardal, what purpose will my living have?"

None, was the only answer to that question, a bitter answer she'd been forced to accept many years earlier. Girls were useless for anything but having babies, she'd been told by the son of a guest, and even for that the girls needed men. Elissia had hit the nasty little snot and then had knocked him down, but afterward she'd looked more closely at the world and had been forced to admit that he was right.

Women of the lowest class cooked and scrubbed, women of the wealthier class hired others to do that for them, and women of the nobility didn't even have to do the hiring. And none of them contributed to the world in any way other than having their babies, and even for that they needed men. The thought of so empty a life had appalled Elissia, but there had been nothing she could do about it until she realized that her father and brother needed her help. She'd given that help gladly, but now a savage had come to carry her off and she'd never be allowed to be of use again.

Tears came then, the tears she'd refused to give the savage the satisfaction of seeing. He'd used his beastly strength to force her down on his lap, and then he'd beaten her until the ache in her bottom was a constant reminder of just how savage he really was. She hated that ache almost as much as she hated *him*, but escape didn't seem possible. Even if she ran away and he *didn't* follow, where would she go? This was her home, and all he had to do was wait until she found she was helpless in the outer world and was forced to come back.

Sobs added themselves to the tears running down her cheeks, brought about mainly by the realization that her father hadn't even taken the trouble to warn her. It had come to her that if the savage had been lying about the marriage ceremony, he never would have announced his intention of moving into her apartment. Her father might have trouble standing up for *himself* against those who were stronger than he was, but he'd never hesitated in his defense of *her* even if it was just words he'd used.

So that meant the savage might even be right about how relieved her father would be to see her go. That was the part which hurt the most, to think that her father considered her a burden rather than useful. Had she been fooling herself to think otherwise? Would her brother hate her help as much as their father apparently did? Maybe it *was* a good thing that her life was almost over. She hadn't done as much with it as she'd believed she had

The crying refused to stop, and the longer it went on the deeper Elissia plunged into depression. Even the possibility of finding some slow and painful way to kill the savage wasn't capable of raising her spirits again, and she continued to cry until she fell asleep. In her dreams she found herself stumbling past everyone she knew or had ever met, and every single one of them, man and woman alike, turned their back to show they had no interest in knowing her. Even the savage turned his back, to make sure she understood that their marriage was political and something he'd done to please his father. No one else wanted her around, not for any reason at all.

A gentle but insistent tapping at her door brought Elissia awake, an escape from the torture of dreams into the worse horror of reality. Her bottom still throbbed some, but the news brought by one of her serving girls was far more painful.

"Please excuse the intrusion, Your Highness, but His Majesty the High King was here a short while ago," the girl offered diffidently. "He oversaw the arrival of his belongings and their arrangement in one of the other bedchambers of your apartment, and then left word for you before he departed again. He said to remind you that the time for dinner was approaching, and you ought to be dressing. I've already prepared a bath"

With the depression back and even heavier than it had been, all Elissia could do was nod and walk to the bathing chamber. Every servant in the apartment seemed to be watching her with worry in their eyes, but that mattered just as little as everything else in her life now. The savage had moved into her apartment with her father's blessing, so what further confirmation of her conclusions did she need?

Some of the girls tried to draw her into conversation while she bathed and dressed, wanting to lighten her mood the way they often did. One of the girls, noticing her darkened backside, tried to lighten Elissia's mood by relating her own trip over her brother's knee just the previous night, seemingly sharing it with the other girls. Two of the others, who had not noticed Elissia's punished bottom, chimed in with stories of their own. One girl related spying on a particularly unpleasant sister-in-law as she had received a punishment over her husband's knee. The young wife had been spanked severely with a limber, polished rod, but the incident was regarded as more amusing to the women than anything else. As they spoke, Elissia's mood only darkened. She'd been very sheltered, she realized, from the reality of women's lives. Her own women apparently were subject to such punishments on a regular basis.

Finally, she could stand no more and snapped at them to keep their tongues within their heads. The looks of crushed shocked she received in return were tragic. Only rarely had she ever taken a bad mood out on the people who looked after her, and the time or two it *had* happened she'd apologized afterward. To her it was the only proper thing to do, but the servants had seemed to consider the doing something special. Those occasions had made them even closer and more loyal to her, possibly even closer than her own family.

But their company and support was something else she would soon be leaving behind, which turned her even more unresponsive. By the time she was completely dressed for dinner two of the girls were crying, but Elissia couldn't comfort them. Comfort was a commodity gone from her world, and one which was unlikely to ever reappear.

Everyone was already in the salon outside the small dining room when Elissia got there, happily engaged in pre-dinner conversation. Her father and mother stood with two realm nobles and their wives, people who had clearly been invited so they might meet the most special guest. The savage stood with them, joining their laughter, obviously having already eased their disquiet and charmed them. The scene was nothing Elissia wanted to join, so she just stood herself to one side of the room and waited for dinner to be announced.

After a minute or so Elissia's thoughts went wandering, taking her away from the pain of reality into the realms of fantasy. In the waking dream her brother Gardal returned unexpectedly, discovered what was being done to her, and announced his intention to oppose it. The two of them had always been close, and more than once they'd supported each other in the face of what they considered unacceptable. Despite the fact that Gardal and the savage had become friends over the years, her brother still stood up to the man and refused to let him claim her. He needed her with *him*, Gardal would say, and the savage, faced down by the two of them, would turn and slink back to his realm of constant warfare –

"Didn't you hear the announcement telling us dinner is ready?" a voice suddenly said, banishing the warmth of fantasy acceptance. "I thought I'd have to go looking for you after all, but a servant said you arrived some time ago. I'm glad to see that you're already learning to obey me, but you should have come over to join everyone else. Let's take our places at table now."

He offered his arm as if he were a gentleman instead of a savage, but Elissia took it without comment. It no longer mattered what he was and wasn't, or even what *she* was or wasn't. Nothing mattered, not any longer.

"You're looking really lovely tonight," the savage said after a moment as they followed the others into the dining room. "If you'd come over to join the rest of us, I could have bragged about the beauty of my bride. I'm probably the envy of every man in the realm now."

Elissia let the savage's words flow past her, pleased in a small way that they had no power to add to her pain. Beauty in a woman usually meant she was considered even more useless than the rest, and the savage had taken the opportunity to remind her of that. But there was very little difference between being mostly useless and completely so, and that made his attempt a wasted effort.

The seating arrangement in the dining room was, of course, the usual one. Her father took his place at the center of the board, with her mother and his other guests to his left. The savage, his most important guest, was seated to his right, with Elissia to the savage's right. It was the best place to be as far as Elissia was concerned, as far away from the others and their happy conversation as it was possible to be. Her father hadn't even tried to speak to her, an action that stated his position even more clearly than words. Her mother hadn't said anything either, but that wasn't surprising. Her mother was a very gentle woman who was completely incapable of handling anything involving confrontation; it would have been a surprise if she *had* said something.

Servants began to bring out the food, and everyone seemed to find it necessary to mention how good it was. For Elissia it might as well have been straw, since that was the way everything tasted. After trying to swallow some of it she gave up the attempt, and simply sat toying with what was on her plate. Her mind wanted her to go searching for fantasy again, but that would have been even more of a wasted effort. The real world was where she had to live, at least for a little while

Distraction claimed her for a time, and she returned to an awareness of her surroundings to discover that her almost untouched plate of food had been replaced with a dish of dessert. It was cherry cobbler, one of her favorites, but tonight she had no stomach even to look at it. But it did mean that dinner was almost over, and that was when Duke Rolan got to his feet. He and Duke Abtrean, the second of her father's guests, had always seemed to approve of her and her efforts on behalf of the kingdom, and Elissia had usually felt pleased when the two men visited. When Rolan spoke, though, she was able to see that he and Abtrean were no different from everyone else.

"I would like to propose a toast," Rolan announced in very jovial tones. "Let's raise our glasses and drink to the health and happiness of the bride and groom who are finally about to begin their life together. May all the best things in life come quickly to High King Derand and his queen, Elissia."

Happy sounds of agreement came before everyone echoed, "To High King Derand and Queen Elissia," and then they probably drank. Elissia found no reason to look at any of them, so she didn't.

"Thank you, one and all," the savage said after a moment, as though he'd been waiting for someone else to speak first. "My queen and I appreciate your good wishes, and we'll try our best to make them come true."

"With all of us wishing for it, they *have* to come true," her father said, also sounding oddly jovial. "Now let's return to the salon and visit for a time."

Everyone seemed to consider that a very good idea, so they left the dining room in the same way they'd entered it. The savage had presented his arm again, but once they reached the salon he left Elissia to join the other men around the servant offering brandy. That gave Elissia the opportunity to leave the room before anyone had the chance to demand that she stay. She needed to go back to her apartment and be alone for a while, away from those who were obviously enjoying life. All too soon the savage would follow her there, and that would be the end of the only small pleasure she had left.

Once Derand delivered his bride to her apartment, he went looking for Ostrin. The king had gone to his own apartment, Derand learned from a servant, and had asked not to be disturbed for a while. That meant telling Ostrin what had gone on between Derand and the girl after her father left would have to wait for a time, but that might be for the best. Ostrin had been upset enough; there was no real reason to add to it immediately.

For that reason Derand went instead and got his men, then had them follow him back to the rooms they were quartered in. He called servants in to pack his belongings while he sat down and spoke to Listan, knowing he had to be firm.

"So I'll be moving in with my wife for the rest of the time we stay here," he finished up his explanation as to why his possessions were being packed. "You can add two men to the guard stationed outside the king's family wing, but no more than two and they're to defer to the local guardsmen as much as possible. They'll know who does and doesn't

belong in that wing, so there won't be any trouble about stopping the wrong people."

"I'd rather have trouble over stopping the wrong people than put your life at risk by leaving your back unprotected," Listan stated, his tone sour. "Let me make that four men at the very least, and then I'll be able to get some sleep tonight."

"If anyone tries anything serious, four men will be as useless as two," Derand pointed out, determined to be reasonable for as long as possible. It would be good practice for when he had to speak to his bride again "But where four men would feel bound to stand and fight, two would be wise enough to split up and spread the alarm. One would come to me and the other to you, and then all of us could get some exercise. Can't you see the sense in that?"

"Maybe," Listan grugged, hating the idea but finding himself forced to agree. "I just don't feel comfortable in this place, where even the men wearing weapons don't seem to know what to do with them. We'll be leaving tomorrow as planned?"

"We may stay an extra day or two," Derand said after deciding there was no sense in putting off telling the man his plans just to avoid possible argument. "My bride isn't happy about her new place in life, and it might be best to get her used to the idea before we leave for home. If people back there hear her threatening my life, it could make for problems."

"She threatened your life?" Listan asked with brows high, an odd expression on his face. "Were you locked in a dungeon or chained hand and foot at some time, and you just forgot to tell me about it?"

"She doesn't seem to need those trimmings before voicing her threats," Derand said, surprised to find himself amused. "She's got more nerve than most of the *men* in this kingdom, but what she lacks is the good sense to go with it. She doesn't know when it's downright foolish to push someone stronger than you, but she's in the process of learning."

"I hope she learns quickly," Listan said, his tone now dry. "If I have to post guards in your bedchamber to keep you safe from her, I'll then need someone to keep *me* safe from *you*."

"There isn't *anyone* who would be able to keep you safe under circumstances like those," Derand countered, a grin breaking through the scowl he'd been trying to maintain. "And the situation isn't as amusing as we're both taking it. I don't enjoy sleeping with one eye open, but that's what I'll have to do until I make her see reason. She was pretending to be cowed when I took her back to her apartment, but after thinking about it I've decided I was being premature in believing my problems with her are over. They're more likely only just starting, but for some reason I seem to be looking forward to it. Just as if it's a game I'll be playing, and one I expect to have fun with "

"That could be because most women throw themselves at you rather than challenge you," Listan said when Derand's words trailed off. "If you didn't consider challenge fun,

you'd hardly be in the place of High King now. So you like that better than meek adoration, and expect to have fun with it. I can't say I understand why you feel that way, but it's not a surprise that you do."

"If you look at it that way, I suppose it isn't," Derand agreed, smiling to himself. Yes, the girl would give him plenty of challenge, and the trick would be to make her do things his way without breaking her spirit entirely. If he did it right she would be an unending challenge, and what more could a man with his temperament ask for?

That thought really lightened Derand's mood, so much so that he went with the servants when they were ready to move his belongings to the girl's apartment. It was just possible that she was in the process of disobeying him, and that would call for a response on his part. The game would be a lot more fun for him than for her, at least in the beginning. After that well, she might learn to like it as much as he did, and share it with him voluntarily. Now *that* was something to look forward to

The servants in the girl's apartment were considerably more quiet than Derand had been expecting. One of the men showed him where he could put his possessions, a bedchamber separate from the one the girl used. Derand decided to accept that for the moment, since he and his bride would probably need some time away from each other at first. It would not be the same once they got home, but for now it wasn't likely to cause additional problems.

Once his things had been put away to his satisfaction, Derand dismissed the servants he'd brought with him. That left only the servant who belonged in the apartment, and that man seemed disturbed about something. He stood silently to one side of the bedchamber, obviously distracted by his thoughts, so Derand decided to ease what was most likely on his mind.

"My being here isn't an intrusion, you know," he said to the man, immediately drawing his attention. "Your mistress has been my wife ever since we were children, and the time has come for us to be together. Your king is my father's friend and mine as well. I would never dishonor him in his own house under any circumstances."

"Thank you for telling me that, Your Majesty," the man said with a bow of respect. "We've become used to being treated as confidantes rather than as mere servants, and it will please the others to see the practice continued. And now I understand why my mistress behaved as she did. I know for a fact that she had no idea she was married."

"She must have screamed and broken things for quite some time," Derand commented, amused by the idea. "But I heard nothing when I got here, so she must have finally run out of breakables. How long did the tantrum last?"

"There was nothing like that, Your Majesty," the man answered soberly, looking at Derand with pain in his eyes. "When she returned she went straight to her bedchamber and closed the door for privacy, but we've learned how to keep an unobtrusive eye on her. When one of us checked on her a few minutes later, she lay on her bed sobbing her heart out. The crying went on and on until she fell asleep, and even then it didn't seem to

end completely. Her sleep was disturbed rather than easy, and continued to be so the last time we checked."

"She was crying?" Derand said, nothing of amusement left in him. He didn't want to believe that, but the man was obviously telling the truth. She hadn't let *him* see her tears, but that was only to be expected. Tears instead of a tantrum Finding out she was married had touched the girl more deeply and strongly than they'd expected it would, so it was clearly time to give her some support. The game could be continued later, once she was back to herself.

So Derand gave instructions to the servant that were to be acted on a bit later, instructions that made it seem he knew nothing about the girl's tears. Then he left the apartment and went straight to her father. Ostrin was still being protected by orders about not being disturbed, but when Derand insisted, the servant reluctantly agreed to speak to his king. It took another few minutes, but finally Derand was shown into a small sitting room where Ostrin awaited him.

"I'm almost afraid to ask how it went," Ostrin said once the door was closed behind Derand. "No, let's be more honest than that. I *am* afraid to ask, but I'll do so anyway. I'm still responsible no matter *how* it went."

"If you insist on considering it a matter of responsibility, you won't be able to help her," Derand stated without showing the pity he felt for the man. "She put up a brave front for *me*, but her servants tell me she cried once she was alone. Finding out about being married was a real shock for her, and we have to do something to help her accept it."

"She cried?" Ostrin asked with a frown. "I wouldn't have expected *that* from her, but you're absolutely right. We do need to help her find acceptance, and a small dinner party might accomplish that. If she sees how happy we all are for her, it might change her mind."

"Why a small party rather than a large one?" Derand asked, pleased to see Ostrin rise to the occasion. "Most women love to be the center of attention at a party, and as the bride involved, that's what she'll be. She won't have the enjoyment of a full wedding party that all women are entitled to, so why not a large ordinary party instead?"

"I don't think a large party would give her the pleasure you believe it would," Ostrin said with a headshake. "Some of my nobles have the ability to see misery where no one else would even suspect it, and then they do their utmost to add to it. Even their being sympathetic would make things worse rather than better, so I'll just invite two of the people she's grown rather close to. They'll be glad to help raise her spirits, and they can be counted on not to say something to set her off – in any way."

"Since you know her and the people involved better than I do, I'll take your advice," Derand acceded, feeling a bit of disappointment himself. "But once she and I get home, *I'll* give her the big party she deserves. None of *my* subjects will play games with her misery, not if they want to continue breathing without pain."

"It does help when people know better than to try your temper, doesn't it?" Ostrin said with something of a smile. "I sometimes wish / were the sort to be looked at in that way, but wishing will never make it so. I'll have messengers sent to Rolan and Abtreaan at once."

Derand waited until that was done, then he and Ostrin talked for a while. Ostrin asked what Derand meant to do now that the previously warring kingdoms were united under a single ruler, and Derand told him. Arvin had been lagging behind its neighbors in many ways because of the constant warfare, but now that it was over things would improve enormously.

"My new realm is very rich, and will be even richer when her gold no longer has to pay for fighters and the weapons for them to use," Derand said at last. "Not to mention having even more gold wasted on the need for rebuilding things destroyed by the warfare. A lot of my new subjects are unhappy about having peace forced on them, but once they start to benefit from that peace they should quickly change their minds."

"And find that they never want to indulge in warfare again," Ostrin said with a nod. "Yes, peace is a much more pleasant state of affairs."

"Not quite for everyone," Derand disagreed gently after sipping the wine he'd been given. "Some people can't be happy unless they have something to fight against or for, and a number of the kings now under my rule happen to fall into that category. For that reason I intend to institute a kind of competition among the kingdoms that they can give their attention to, one that has multiple sides. There will be rankings in the different areas, from best to worst, and those rankings will be made public."

"What sort of areas will there be?" Ostrin asked with what seemed like real curiosity. "I've never heard of anyone doing anything like it."

"I suppose we'll be the first," Derand granted with a nod. "The areas will cover everything I can think of, like cattle or grain production, schools and thriving businesses, and levels of prosperity enjoyed by the lower classes. We'll also have warfare, of course, but on a much smaller scale and without the large number of casualties. If meetings at arms are scheduled and carefully presided over, they should satisfy the restless while doing minimal damage."

"I'd be pleased if you would let me know how that idea does," Ostrin said, apparently intrigued. "If it does well it might spread to other realms, and one or two of them are almost as badly in need of it as your own realm. They – "

Ostrin's words broke off when a knock came at the door, but it was only a servant announcing the return of the messengers sent to the nobles invited to dinner. Both dukes had sent their agreement to the invitation, so they would have their small party without any difficulty.

Ostrin excused himself at that point in order to see about giving the necessary orders, so Derand also left in order to spend some time with his men. He'd meant to give Listan and

the others a tour of the palace to familiarize them with it, and now was the best time to do that.

The tour took a number of hours, and when it was over Derand sent a servant to fetch the clothing he wanted from his new bedchamber, and then used his old one to bathe and dress. Avoiding his bride until the party was able to bring her back to herself seemed like the best idea, so he went along with it. Women's tears usually had no effect on him, but tears from *this* girl at a time when he was supposed to know nothing about them. Well, she was also his wife, and as such was due at least a small amount of courtesy.

And there was also the game between them to consider, a game he wanted to continue with. As he adjusted his black velvet tunic in front of a mirror, Derand was pleased he'd remembered that. It wasn't as though he was beginning to feel anything for a girl he'd married to satisfy his father and hers and one he'd just really met, it was just the game he was interested in. If he couldn't continue with that, the marriage would be just as dull and boring as he'd expected it to be.

Satisfied that he'd made his thoughts so clear in his mind, Derand adjusted the black and silver ribbon on his long, dark hair before turning away from the mirror. He usually wore black more often than any other color, having noticed how people reacted to those who wore it. The color was supposed to signify the wearer as someone who was harsh and heartless in his treatment of others, someone it was best not to oppose. Since the belief saved Derand quite a bit of trouble he would otherwise have to handle with that very harshness, he wasn't about to argue with the outlook.

Privately, though, he couldn't quite understand how the color of clothing was supposed to have anything to do with a man's willingness to do damage to others. He would be just as dangerous to face in battle or individual combat if he wore pink from head to toe, but Derand in pink would cause laughter rather than wary caution in anyone who looked at him. People were really strange in their beliefs, but that didn't mean the beliefs could be discounted.

But that was all the time he had for philosophical concepts. A servant knocked and entered to say that King Ostrin requested his presence in the dining room's salon, so he followed the servant there after telling Listan to keep any guards he posted out of sight. Listan grumbled but agreed, and that let Derand walk into the salon with an easier mind. Insulting these people with the presence of bodyguards would also have managed to make them very uneasy.

Duke Rolan was a large man, both tall and heavy in body, but as mild as Ostrin in his speech and gestures. Duke Abtrean was shorter and not quite as round and he spoke more expansively, but the attitude behind his words matched that of the other two men. After Ostrin introduced his guest to his nobles and the men and their wives had bowed or curtsied, his expression turned a bit more solemn.

"As I told you in my message, my lords, I need you here to support Elissia," he said to the two dukes then. "I believe you know that she and the High King were married as children, and Derand has decided that the time has come for them to begin a life

together. The only problem is Elissia had no idea she was married, and the revelation has been very much of a shock to her."

"Oh, dear," Duke Rolan said, the words mild in comparison to his expression and Abtreat's. "I can only imagine what her reaction was, and feel rather relieved that I wasn't here to see it. How did you think we might help, Sire?"

"Her reaction wasn't the expected one," Derand interrupted to put in, more than aware of what the man must be thinking. "She really was hit rather hard, and must now think she's facing a fate worse than death. If all of you can reassure her, show her that you're happy for her, she'll begin to understand that this is only what all women go through and nothing to be upset about."

"It says quite a lot for you as a man that you're concerned about her frame of mind, Your Majesty," Duke Abtreat commented, approval clear in his gaze. "King Ostrin has spoken of you often, and it's good to see that his estimation of you was correct as usual. I, for one, will be pleased to show Elissia how happy I am for her."

"As will I," Rolan agreed with a matching smile. "I've almost come to think of her as one of my own daughters, so her happiness is rather important to me. But how is your father, Your Majesty? We haven't had the pleasure of his company in much too long a time."

"My father is busy reorganizing his kingdom," Derand replied with a smile of amusement, more than satisfied with the reactions of the two men. The girl did mean something to them, and their help ought to be invaluable. "Now that the constant warfare is over, he can implement all the plans he's never been able to get to before."

Derand went on to describe some of those plans, one or two of which could be considered downright silly. Derand's father knew that as well as anyone, but he still meant to see if he could make them work. One of those ideas, that women's skirts be shortened to mid-calf length, set all the men chuckling while the women pretended to be embarrassed. A number of the women in his father's kingdom were outraged, but even more seemed to like the idea. If the new style took hold and managed to spread, there would be very few men who weren't grateful for the improved landscape.

The talk turned to other amusing things then, and there was a good deal of chuckling and outright laughter. Derand joined in with most of his attention, but part of him wondered why the girl hadn't yet appeared. She should have been awakened in enough time to bathe and dress, which in turn should have let her be with them already.

He began to turn, to gesture a servant over and send the man to find out what was keeping her, when he suddenly discovered that sending anyone after her was completely unnecessary. The girl *had* arrived, but she stood alone in complete silence to one side of the room. She wore a gown of cream-colored lace that was exquisite, but it seemed that only her body stood there. Her spirit and soul had apparently disappeared elsewhere, and that disturbed Derand. He completed the gesture of calling over a servant, and when the man reached him he stepped aside with him for privacy.

"How long has Princess Elissia been standing there?" he asked the man, keeping his voice low. "Did you see her arrive?"

"Yes, Your Majesty, I did see her arrive," the man answered at once. "She arrived a number of minutes earlier, but made no attempt to join everyone else. Would you have me tell her that you'd like to speak to her?"

"No, I'll tell her myself," Derand answered just as another servant announced that dinner was ready to be served. The announcement hadn't seemed to reach the girl wherever her inner self had gone, so he might as well use *that* as his reason for speaking to her. He moved over to stand not far from her, and when it became clear that she hadn't even noticed his approach, he spoke.

"Didn't you hear the announcement telling us dinner is ready?" he asked, and she started just a bit to show that she'd finally returned. "I thought I'd have to go looking for you after all, but a servant said you arrived some time ago. I'm glad to see that you're already learning to obey me, but you should have come over to join everyone else. Let's take our places at table now."

He offered his arm, and after the smallest hesitation possible she took it. He'd tried to put warmth and approval into his voice, an effort to bring the life back to her pretty face, but it hadn't worked. She hadn't even responded to his comment about her obedience, which he'd been sure would have gotten her angry. Nothing seemed to touch her, and that wasn't good.

"You're looking really lovely tonight," he said after a moment as they followed the others into the dining room. It wasn't a lie, and maybe *that* would reach her. "If you'd come over to join the rest of us, I could have bragged about the beauty of my bride. I'm probably the envy of every man in the realm now."

That time he got a small reaction, but not the one he'd been expecting. She flinched as though she'd been touched with the point of a knife, and then even that was gone. Rather than add anything else, Derand decided to keep silent. He had no idea how he could have hurt the girl with what he'd said, but didn't care to take the chance of doing it again. Better to keep quiet and hope she came out of it on her own

But she didn't. Everyone worked very hard during the meal to keep up a lighthearted conversation, but they might as well not have bothered. The girl made no effort to join in or even to listen, ate almost nothing of the food put in front of her, and didn't even touch her wine. When Duke Rolan made his toast Derand hoped she would acknowledge it, but when she didn't he was forced to do it himself. At that point she seemed to hear what was going on, but showed no interest in commenting or reacting.

Escorting her back into the salon changed nothing, but Derand hadn't really expected it to. He left her for a moment to get himself a glass of the brandy he'd begun to feel a real need for, and when he turned back it was to discover that she'd gone. No one else seemed to have noticed that departure, but once they did all the happy enjoyment dissolved into nothing.

"That couldn't really have been Elissia," Duke Rolan protested, his wife showing a film of tears in her eyes. "I've never seen her that quiet and detached, and I hope I never see it again."

"I was certain she would respond when Rolan pointed out that she's now a queen," Abtreaan said, sounding and looking as downhearted as the rest of the group. "Any other woman alive would have brightened at the very least, but I don't believe she even noticed – or cared if she did notice. So what else can we do?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," Ostrin responded, clearly one step removed from tears himself. "I can't bear seeing her like that, but I don't know what to do to change her back to the way she was. Possibly she'll pull out of it after a good night's sleep."

Ostrin made no effort to look in Derand's direction, but Derand knew the man's last words were meant for him. Under other circumstances he might have resented the intrusion, but right now he simply nodded.

"I've already come that same conclusion myself," he admitted more heavily than he liked. "Actually, it's no more than a hope, but it's certainly worth trying. If you'll all excuse me now, I'm going to retire. My lords and ladies, it was a pleasure to meet you."

Derand barely noticed the bows and curtsies as he turned away and strode to the door, his mind occupied with more important matters. He would see how the girl behaved tomorrow, and if there were no changes he would have to rethink his position. If he took her with him as she was, she wasn't likely to live very long. Annulment of the marriage might turn out to be his only option, and if that were true then he'd do it. But he wished he understood why he felt so horribly disappointed

Elissia awoke slowly, at first not understanding why her people hadn't gotten her up at the usual time. Then she remembered what had happened yesterday, and the depression returned to her. It wasn't as heavy as it *had* been, but it was certainly still there.

"And probably will never leave again," she muttered as she got out of bed. For some reason it seemed more than a little late in the day, and when she went to a window and looked out she found her impression had been right. It was closer to lunchtime than to breakfast, a circumstance brought about by how long it had taken her to fall asleep. At first she'd been certain her "husband" would come for his due, so she hadn't even tried to sleep.

After quite a lot of time had passed it became clear that he *wasn't* coming, or would appear, after a few more hours, too drunk to accomplish anything. That was hardly a crushing disappointment, but sleep had still taken its time to arrive. And now here she was, faced with another day she had no interest in living through.

Elissia left the window after a few moments of staring out without actually seeing anything, rinsed her face and hands in the water basin, then began to dress. Her maids usually helped with that, but their help wasn't really necessary and she didn't particularly

care *what* she looked like. A black skirt and gray tunic fit her mood, even though both items were made of silk. Something rougher and uglier would have been more appropriate, but she didn't happen to *have* anything like that. At a different time she might have made plans to acquire what her wardrobe lacked, but now

Once dressed she left her bedchamber, intending to send for a pot of tea. But Demmin, who'd been in her service longer than any of the others, managed to speak first.

"Your Highness, His Majesty your father left a message to be delivered once you awoke," Demmin said, his dark eyes filled with concern. "He asks the favor of your company at lunch, as he wishes to speak with you."

Elissia felt the smallest flash of annoyance at hearing that, but being annoyed was pointless. Her father wanted her gone from his kingdom, and there was nothing to be done about it. If having her listen to more of why leaving was such a good thing made him feel better, she might as well consider it something she owed him and let him do it. After all, it would hardly be going on for much longer.

Lunch was being taken in one of the small, informal dining rooms, and Elissia arrived to find no one but her parents and the savage already there. A buffet table had been set up with dishes of food and pitchers of drink, so she walked over to pour herself a cup of tea. That was when they all noticed her arrival, it seemed. Once she had her tea and turned away from the buffet with it, she found her father standing not far away and staring at her.

"Are you all right, Elissia?" he asked then, his expression showing what was certainly supposed to be concern. "Are you feeling better after a good night's sleep?"

"Certainly, Father," Elissia answered, paying more attention to her tea than to the conversation. "I'm fine."

Her father hesitated, as though expecting her to add to what she'd said, but there wasn't anything to add. The silence dragged on for a moment, and then her father sighed.

"My dear child, I can't bear to see you like this," he said, sadness and defeat of some sort clear in his voice. "After lunch we'll discuss the marriage – and the possible ending of it."

Elissia would have exclaimed aloud in surprised delight – if she hadn't noticed that note of defeat. Her father really did love her, it seemed, and had decided to keep her out of the clutches of the barbarian even if it meant needing to endure her presence himself. But that would solve only part of the problem, leaving the rest for her to see to on her own.

"Thank you, Father, I'd appreciate that," she said, forcing herself to show something of a smile. "But don't worry about having to suffer because of your thoughtfulness. I'll make sure that you don't."

That brought a frown to his face, but before he could speak they were interrupted. One of the palace servants came running in, and then hurried over to them.

"Your Majesty, you must come quickly," the man said breathlessly. "Two members of Prince Gardal's escort have returned, and they're badly wounded."

"What?" her father exclaimed, all other thoughts forgotten. "Where are they?"

"With the physician," the servant replied, then immediately began to lead the way out of the room. Elissia's father followed at once, of course, but Elissia was right behind him. If something had happened to Gardal no, she refused to believe that. Something *had* happened, but her brother was all right. He just *had* to be

It took only a few minutes to reach the physician's precincts, where the activity had reached a level of frenzy. Everyone seemed to be hurrying around, and it took more than a moment before they were noticed. The new arrivals made no effort to intrude, of course, not when there were probably lives at stake, but finally someone came over to them.

"One of the men seems to be out of danger," the medical assistant told them after bowing to his king. "The other is much more seriously hurt, and Dr. Marday is using all his journeymen to help. The first has been demanding that he be helped to your receiving room, Your Majesty, as he has something of importance to report. Would you care to follow me?"

Elissia saw her father gesture without speaking, so the assistant led off toward one of the rooms used to care for the sick and hurt. He entered the room first rather than standing aside to let everyone else go first, and the reason for that became quickly apparent. The man lying with bloody bandages on the bed tried to get to his feet to bow, but the medical assistant, who had already moved to his side, refused to allow that.

"Don't be a fool, man," Elissia's father said at once when he saw that. "You can stand and bow once those wounds are healed. Just tell me quickly what happened and where my son is."

"He's been captured," the man croaked out, pain clear in the lines of his face. "Distal and I are the only ones of the escort still alive, and it took us much too long to get back here. There were three times our number, Your Majesty, and we don't even know who they are."

"Are you sure they weren't Prince Waysten's men?" Elissia asked at once. "I've never trusted that man, and disliked the idea of Gardal visiting him. It would be to Waysten's advantage if my father had no heir, since he's long wanted to add our kingdom to his own."

"Taking over my kingdom would not be as easy as all that," Elissia's father stated, just as he always had. "But discussion on that point is for another time. I want to hear about everything involved in the attack."

"We were on our way out of Prince Waysten's city when it happened," the wounded man

said, clearly struggling to stay conscious. "Prince Gardal was all but ignored during his time at the palace, and had managed to speak to Prince Waysten only once and that for no more than a few minutes. Prince Gardal decided he was wasting his time so we left, and we were almost to the city's gates when they fell on us. They were dressed all in black and showed no insignia, and they knocked out Prince Gardal before putting the rest of us to the sword. Then they disappeared again, and a minute or two later most of the gate guard rode up. They did some searching, but couldn't even find the direction the attackers had taken."

"I don't like the sound of that," another voice put in, and Elissia turned her head to discover that the savage had followed them. "My elite guard wears all black, and when they're not in the midst of battle they also don't show any insignia. Is someone trying to suggest that *I'm* the one behind the kidnapping?"

"Waysten would like nothing better than to have people believe that," Elissia said firmly when it looked like her father was about to deny the suggestion. "He's been looking for an excuse to expand his kingdom ever since his father fell ill and he was named regent. If he makes people believe that the Federated Kingdoms now has designs on the other kingdoms around it, he just might be able to get those other kingdoms to unite under *his* banner. Then he'll attack the Federated Kingdoms with the excuse of doing it before *they* decide to attack. After that he'll take over his allies one by one until there's no one left to oppose him as High King of everything."

"He's a fool if he thinks I'll just sit back and let that happen," the savage said with a sound of scorn. "I think it's time I paid a visit to this Prince Waysten."

"And *I* think we need to discuss this," Elissia's father said before Elissia could announce that *she* meant to go after her brother. "My son's safety is at stake here, after all, and that has to take precedence over everything else. You rest easy now, my friend, and let your wounds heal. Your message has been safely delivered, and you have my eternal gratitude for accomplishing that. If not for you, I would know nothing about my son's plight."

The man nodded and tried to say something, but he'd come to the end of his strength. Elissia saw him fall back unconscious, and the medical assistant bent to him immediately.

"He should be all right," the assistant said after a moment, his full attention still on his patient. "He should have passed out long ago, but refused to let it happen. Now that he's been relieved of his burden, he should be able to get the rest he needs."

"Make sure he wants for nothing," Elissia's father said, then led the way out of the room. They made a small and silent parade back to the dining room, but Elissia's mother was no longer there. Elissia realized she must have returned to her apartment and taken to her bed when she heard that her son was in danger, and that was the first thing Elissia's father took care of. He sent her word that their son still lived, and then he walked to the buffet and began to choose his meal.

"The first thing we're going to do is eat, and then we'll talk about what happened," he

said to Elissia and the savage as he directed a servant to fill his plate with what he pointed out. "It isn't possible to be lucid and rational on an empty stomach, so we're not even going to try."

"All right, Father, I'll agree to that," Elissia said, suddenly realizing that she was very much in need of food. "But as soon as we're done I'm leaving. Talking about the problem here won't do anything to find Gardal."

"*You're* leaving?" the savage said, staring at her in an odd way. "What do you expect a woman alone to be able to accomplish? My men and I are slightly better equipped to handle this, so we'll be the ones to take care of it. We'll find out who's holding Gardal and get him back, and then whoever's behind this will find his plans ruined."

"Prince Waysten's behind this, and you and your men will be useless," Elissia pointed out before following her father to the buffet. "Do you think anyone will cooperate with the people they believe took Gardal in the first place? When I get there I'll ask a few discreet questions, and by the time I get the answers my father will have an armed force waiting outside the city. This is our problem, so we'll be the ones to take care of it."

"So in your opinion I'm not involved in any way at all," the savage said, the beginnings of annoyance to be heard in his voice. "My own opinion doesn't happen to match yours, especially when you consider the fact that you haven't even asked my permission to go off on this jaunt. Or didn't you expect me to think I had a say in that?"

"What say could you have?" Elissia asked over her shoulder after gesturing to what she wanted of the food. "Our marriage is about to come to an end, and none too soon to suit *me*. That means that what I do is none of your concern, so you needn't worry about it."

"Ah, I see," the savage said, his tone showing nothing of satisfied understanding. "Your father mentioned the possibility of ending our marriage, so you've decided to take the idea as something already done. Well, it isn't done, and it isn't *going* to be. I'm the one who's heading out after Gardal, and you'll wait here for me to get back. Is that stated clearly enough for you?"

"More than clearly enough," Elissia responded stiffly without turning again to look at the man. He was nothing but an unreasonable savage, and arguing with him would have been a waste of breath. Instead of arguing Elissia would take her food back to her apartment, and as soon as she'd eaten she would change her clothes and leave. When he found her gone he could whistle, but she'd be too far away to hear it. After all, even if he hated the idea, what could he possibly do about it?

Princess Brat

Chapter 3

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Derand was almost too annoyed to want to eat, which was something of a surprise. He *never* lost his appetite over *anything*, but the girl had almost made it happen. At first it had looked as though hearing about the end of their marriage wasn't going to make a difference to her, but then they'd been told about what had happened to Gardal. *That* had made a difference, and more quickly than Derand would have believed possible

"She's gone again," Ostrin said when Derand brought his own plate to the table after refusing the help of a servant. "But at least she took her food with her."

"I'm not sure if that's a good thing," Derand said, stopping in the middle of picking up his fork to consider the matter. "She said she understood that I wanted her to stay here, but she didn't actually say she'd obey me. You don't think she'd go so far as to leave anyway, do you?"

"Of course not," Ostrin assured him quickly, looking as though he actually believed what he said. "She may be a bit undisciplined in general, but she certainly knows she's required to obey her husband. And she looked a good deal better toward the end, didn't she?"

"Yes, and I don't understand why," Derand said, beginning to taste the food he'd chosen. "When you first told her that the marriage might be over, it didn't seem to pull her completely out of the depths she'd fallen into. Only the attack against Gardal did that, and then she was right back to the way she was originally. Isn't there ever going to be a middle ground with her?"

"I'm the last one to ask about that," Ostrin said with something of a smile. "I haven't understood my daughter since she first began to walk and talk. I'm sure she loves me and knows that I love her, but that's as far as it goes."

"Which isn't nearly far enough," Derand said with firm decision. "As soon as we're through eating and talking about the problem of Gardal's rescue, I'll go to her apartment and sit her down for a conversation. I may even use the promise of letting the marriage be annulled to get her to talk to me, but that might not be the truth. Depending on what I learn, the marriage will probably remain in effect – especially now."

"What do you mean, especially now?" Ostrin asked, apparently having no idea what Derand was talking about. "Why are you acting as if something has changed?"

"Only because something *has* changed," Derand responded, annoyed with himself for expecting Ostrin to understand on his own. The girl might have understood, but her father was too kindly a person to think that way. "If your heir has been taken captive, that puts your daughter in a very difficult position."

Killing Gardal will mean that you need Elissia to secure yourself another heir, and whomever you marry her to will be that heir. If someone ends up married to her even without your permission, that someone will then be considered your heir – especially if you have a fatal accident shortly after the marriage ceremony is completed."

"But *you're* married to her," Ostrin protested, now looking even more confused. "How can anyone think about marrying her when she's already your wife?"

"Not many people seem to know about that marriage," Derand pointed out. "If they did, Elissia would never have found it so shocking. Someone would have mentioned it to her long ago, so we have to assume that whoever took Gardal prisoner also doesn't know. Which is encouraging for the hope that he's still alive."

"You believe he's still alive?" Ostrin asked, his open, honest face showing the painful beginnings of hope. "I've been saying he is, but somehow I can't make myself believe it."

"Oh, they definitely wanted him alive," Derand hastened to assure the man, not having realized that he'd missed this point as well. "If they'd decided to have him killed right away, they would have done it during the attack. They seem to have some use for him, maybe even beyond the possibility that your daughter isn't as easily available as they think she is. No, at the moment he's safe, but how long that continues remains to be seen. We have to get him away from the ones holding him, and that as quickly as possible."

"You sound as though you have a plan to find and free him," Ostrin said, for the moment apparently having forgotten about his food. "Please tell me if that's so."

"I have a plan *of sorts*," Derand stressed, refusing to mislead the man. "I'll have a better idea once I can look around the place where he was taken, but I do have an idea to find out where he is. And before you ask, I'll say I'd rather not discuss it. You can't be disturbed over something you don't know about."

Ostrin opened his mouth, apparently ready to insist, but then he simply shook his head.

"I believe I'll take your advice about that," he allowed with a sigh. "They say that desperate situations call for desperate measures, but I've never been very good about being able to do that. I don't want to abandon my beliefs, but with my son's life at stake"

Derand nodded his understanding, and they both went back to eating. It isn't easy to abandon the beliefs of a lifetime, but the fate of your child often outweighs a consideration like that. Afterward you're always a different person, so Ostrin was wise to stay out of it. What Derand planned to do was perfectly within his nature and usual doings, so there would be nothing of the traumatic happening to *his* sense of self.

They took their time finishing their meal, and then Ostrin went to see if his wife was awake. The woman usually took refuge in sleep if something disturbing happened, he told Derand, and he had no intention of waking her. She needed the refuge, and would probably continue to need it until Gardal was safely home.

Derand himself went back to his own wife's apartment, taking his time walking while he tried to decide

what to say to her. The girl was back to being argumentative and aloof, and hearing the wrong thing could turn her more than stubborn. She'd need to be closely guarded while he was gone, and he didn't want her trying to avoid that. If the one responsible for taking Gardal got his hands on *her*, Gardal's life would be measurable in minutes.

Walking into the apartment showed Derand two of the servants, one tidying and the other standing ready to do whatever would be necessary. When the man saw Derand heading for the girl's bedchamber, he took a step forward.

"May I be of service, Your Majesty?" he asked with a bow. "Her Highness isn't available at the moment."

"She'll have to *make* herself available," Derand disagreed as he slowed his step. "I have something to discuss with her, which she already knows. And she's not Her Highness any longer. As my wife, she's Her Majesty."

The man started as though he'd forgotten about that, but Derand had stressed the point for a reason. If Gardal's kidnappers had spies in the household, word about Elissia's being married would reach them most easily through the staff. Gardal would then be in a much safer position, and the situation would give *him* a better chance to find where Gardal was being held.

"Excuse me, Your Majesty," the servant said with another bow. "Referring to her as a princess has become a habit over the years. But the fact remains that she isn't available. She left the apartment a short time ago."

"Left to go where?" Derand asked at once, an empty feeling suddenly appearing in the pit of his stomach. "She was supposed to stay here and wait for me."

"Most likely she misunderstood, Your Majesty," the servant responded, his tone trying to soothe. "From the clothing she wore she apparently intended to go riding, but not among others. She would never have dressed like that if others were involved."

"Dressed like what?" Derand asked through his teeth, trying to hold tight to his temper. There was no misunderstanding involved, not in any direction. "Do you mean she wore her riding skirt?"

"No, Your Majesty, not a riding skirt," the servant said. "She wore trousers and a tunic, along with an old cap. She sometimes goes out that way when she wants to be alone. People don't recognize her, so she has time to herself."

"Was she carrying anything with her this time?" Derand put next, his suspicion growing stronger. "Something like a large pouch or a set of saddlebags?"

"Why, yes, it so happens she *was* carrying saddlebags," the servant admitted, his expression showing surprise. "How did you know?"

"Just a lucky guess," Derand growled, fists on his hips as he fought not to curse out loud. That miserable female had taken off on her own, disobeying him without a second thought. "Send someone to alert my men. Tell them we'll be leaving here in about ten minutes, and they're to meet me at the stables."

The servant bowed his acknowledgment of the order even as Derand strode to his bedchamber and inside. It would take only five minutes to pack his belongings, and the other five minutes would be enough to tell Ostrin what was happening. He would ride after the girl at a gallop, and when he caught up with her she would not be very anxious to sit a saddle again for quite some time.

Once Elissia was through the gates of her city and on the road to Ramsond, Waysten's city, she urged her horse into a gallop. The gate guards hadn't recognized her with her hair stuffed up under the cap, and neither had anyone else. Her clothing was loose enough to give the impression that she was a boy, and she'd taken the trouble to move and sit her horse the way real boys did. It was something she'd practiced, and it had never come in handier than today.

"Which means I ought to be well ahead of that savage," she murmured to herself as the wind tried to pull the cap from her head. "He'll probably follow when he finds me gone, but by the time he gets to Ramsond I'll already have the information I need."

And her father would undoubtedly have the guardsmen she'd asked for waiting outside the city. She'd left a note for her father telling him that she would return with Gardal, and had asked that guardsmen be sent to help her free him. Gardal was her beloved brother, and she couldn't have just waited for someone else to try something on his behalf. Especially since that someone else wasn't likely to know the best way to find things out. Or to get around the unvoiced accusation leveled against him.

"He's a fool if he thinks that that's all there is to it," Elissia murmured again, wondering how he'd accomplished as much as he had. If Waysten had gone to the trouble to suggest that the savage was responsible for Gardal's kidnapping, there would certainly be other things that had been – and would be – blamed on him. Expecting to just ride in and ask about what he wanted to know Elissia shook her head. A man like Derand du Bahr shouldn't be that innocent.

But he also seemed to be innocent in other ways, Elissia realized as she finally slowed her horse. They were far enough away from the city gates that continuing to gallop would do no more than waste the strength of her horse. She'd left her favorite stallion behind, knowing he would bring too much attention to her. Instead she'd taken a mount that looked like he might be used as a plow horse, his roughly uneven brown coat giving no hint of the stamina and heart it hid. She would let him rest in a trot for a while before they galloped again, and that way she would make very good time.

"All right, so I can't distract myself completely by thinking about my horse," Elissia muttered, finding it impossible to be dishonest with herself. Derand du Bahr had turned out to be something of a surprise when she'd stopped to think about it, mostly while she'd been changing her clothes and packing. The suspicion had suddenly come to her that he'd deliberately refrained from trying to share her bed the night before. She would have preferred to think that his actions had been her father's idea, but unfortunately that didn't fit. Leaving her alone in her misery had been his doing alone, and she really didn't understand that. He couldn't possibly have any feelings for her, not when their marriage had been their fathers' doing and not his own, and yet the way he acted

Elissia shook her head to dismiss the entire question, knowing that none of it really mattered. The man might have stayed away from her the night before, but this morning he hadn't hesitated to give her orders in a matter that concerned her more than it did him. And he'd also lied to her about not ending their non-marriage. Her father would never have mentioned an annulment if the decision hadn't already

been made, so who did he think he was fooling by pretending it hadn't been? And that was probably why he'd stayed away from her, to be certain there would be no difficulties about the annulment.

The sudden realization refused to make Elissia feel as good as it should have, so she pushed it out of her thoughts. She had more important matters to concern her at the moment, like the finding and rescuing of her brother. That was enough to take anyone's full attention, and she meant to make sure that it took all of hers. Other thoughts could be left for another time, when she had nothing better to do than think about where she would go when she left her father's palace. And she *would* leave, just as soon as Gardal was safely home. Her father had suffered enough because she'd refused to see the obvious.

The rest of the afternoon went by in something of a blur, and dusk had already fallen when she reached the roadside inn. Impatience wanted her to pass it by, but that wouldn't have been very intelligent. She could be expected to keep going in order to lose any pursuit there might be, so stopping instead became the wiser decision. And riding at night could bring unnecessary trouble, in addition to tiring her mount to the point of losing him for good. No, she did have to stop, and would be sure to get back on the road as early as possible.

A stable boy came out to take her mount when she rode up, and she gave the boy a copper along with the instructions that the horse was to be ready at dawn. She'd gathered some gold, silver, and copper to make the trip more easily accomplished, but she'd have to watch her expenses. She hadn't had much in the way of coin, not having seen a need for it. Now that the need was perfectly clear, she didn't have the time to accumulate more.

Elissia sighed to herself as she carried her saddlebags into the inn, making sure to walk in the proper way. She also roughened her voice after making it higher, wanting people to think her a boy trying to pretend he was a fully-grown man. The innkeep seemed to accept that with nothing more than an indulgent smile as he gave her the key to one of his cheapest rooms. Elissia hid her own smile as she followed one of the inn girls toward the back of the inn, where her room was located. Cheap was exactly what she'd wanted, and as tiny as the room turned out to be it also had a stout lock. It would serve as a place to sleep until it was time to be on her way again.

After leaving her saddlebags in the room, Elissia locked the door and retraced her steps to the front of the inn. She needed to get something to eat, and once she had she would go straight to bed. Morning would come early, and she meant to be ready for it.

The inn's dining room had a fair number of people at tables, but it was still possible for Elissia to find a small table of her own. She ordered tea to drink while she waited for the food, which wasn't long in coming. Obviously it had been kept warm rather than being freshly cooked, but it wasn't bad in spite of that. The meat of the stew had been chopped into thin slivers that were tender and tasty, and even the vegetables benefited from the thick brown gravy. The bread was soft enough and came with plenty of butter, and if it wasn't fancy at least it was filling.

Elissia was almost through eating when the sound of someone's gasp made her look up. She expected to see something dropped or spilled, and it took a moment to realize that the gasp had come because of two men who were standing in the room rather than sitting. One stood near the curtained and draped windows and the other at the door leading into the kitchens, their black leather and armor making it perfectly clear what they were. By then Elissia had realized that they couldn't possibly be

alone, so she didn't bother to look around. Swallowing frustration and anger wasn't as easily done as swallowing food, but she did it anyway as she pretended to go back to her meal.

"Your obedience to orders needs some serious practicing," a voice said dryly from her left. "This isn't what I call doing it right."

"It feels right to me," Elissia commented after taking a sip of her tea, making no effort to look up at the man. "If you don't agree, I'll just have to keep doing the same until I have it down."

"That isn't as funny as you seem to think it is," he growled, then reached down to wrap a big hand around her arm. "Let's go to my room and discuss it."

He pulled her out of her chair with almost no effort, and Elissia had no choice about letting herself be dragged after him. The way every man in the dining room paid close attention to his meal said none of them was prepared to interfere, so making a scene would have been worse than useless. She was pulled out to the inn's entrance area and then to a set of stairs and up them, a clear indication that her pursuer had already taken rooms there.

When they reached a door about half way down the hall her captor paused to unlock it, and then she was pushed inside. It was immediately clear that this wasn't one of the inn's cheap rooms, as there were another two doors besides the one they'd entered by. And the room itself was three times the size of her own, which probably meant that one of the other doors led to servant's quarters. As the savage closed the door behind them Elissia saw the two men from the dining room, now stationing themselves outside the door in the hall.

"Aren't you allowed to travel alone, or are you just afraid to try it?" she couldn't help asking as he turned back to her, interrupting whatever he'd been about to say. "If I were you, I'd resent being treated like that."

"I see we aren't finished with the amusing dialogue yet," he said, his folded arms and the expression on his face telling her that amusing was the last thing he'd found her comment to be. "Don't forget to let me know when you feel ready to act like an adult instead of a child."

"If acting like an adult means letting someone ruin my brother's rescue, I'll never be ready," she retorted, immediately folding her own arms. "But I might be mistaken about that. Why don't you hold your breath while you wait to find out."

"Hasn't it occurred to you that charging off to Gardal's rescue is exactly what his kidnappers *want* you to do?" the man demanded, ignoring the rest of what she'd said. "If they manage to get their hands on the both of you, Gardal will die immediately and your father won't live all that much longer. Is that what you want? To see most of your family killed?"

"I know that capturing me is probably what they have in mind, but it isn't going to happen," Elissia assured him, letting her expression show what she thought about his worries. "And even if by some chance it does, that won't help their plans. In order to get anywhere Waysten would have to marry me, and that I'll never let him do. Threatening Gardal's life won't help them, not when I know he'd be killed as soon as the ceremony was over. If necessary I'm willing to kill *myself* to keep Waysten from winning over my family, but I don't think I'll find it necessary."

"I can't help noticing that our own marriage wasn't mentioned anywhere in among all those plans," the savage commented, obviously still far from pleased. "Don't you consider *that* a snag in Prince Waysten's plans?"

"You expect a temporary arrangement that's soon to be over to matter in all this?" Elissia asked with a sound of ridicule. "Why would it?"

"Because that temporary matter isn't over *yet*, and may not ever be over," he responded immediately, cat pouncing on a mouse. "But even if it *is* soon to be ended, it isn't over now. Your husband told you what he wanted you to do, and you disobeyed him. On top of that you refuse to listen to a single word of reason, so I think it's time you paid for all of it."

He moved forward fast to take her by the arm again, and Elissia found it impossible to avoid him or pull free. His hands were so disgustingly big that one of them wrapped completely around her arm, and it took only a fraction of his strength to move her wherever he wanted her. At the moment that happened to be next to a straight-backed chair, which he immediately sat down on. The next instant she was pulled across his knees, which made her yelp in protest.

"You miserable coward, let me go!" she shouted, struggling uselessly against his accursed strength. "Only a stinking coward would beat a woman, and if you try to do it again I'll make sure *everyone* knows what you are!"

"You're not going to be beaten, you're going to be spanked," he corrected calmly while ignoring her struggles as he lifted her tunic and reached to her trousers. He had to turn her sideways to do all that, but he had very little trouble accomplishing it. "And this time there won't be a skirt to protect you, so the lesson ought to be a bit sharper. If even that doesn't impress you, I'll find something even better for next time."

"Next time," she echoed with a snarl as he began to take her trousers down, helpless to keep it from happening. "If you do this, I promise you won't survive for there to *be* a next time!"

"I'll take my chances," he replied with what sounded like amusement, and then a big hand stroked her bare bottom. "This is much better than the last time. Your drawers were short and without any lace or frills, so they were easily taken down. That's what you'll wear from now on even when you're back in gowns. If I let you wear anything at all. I may want to see this behind of yours even if I'm not about to spank it."

Elissia screamed wordlessly with frustrated rage, at the same time choking on humiliation. He'd nearly stripped her naked and then he'd caressed her, and he had no *right!* He didn't want *her*, not for *any* purpose, so his treating her like that simply wasn't *fair!*

But then his hand came down on her bottom without any gentleness, and the smack nearly made her yelp again. He added more of the same in quick succession, one, two, three, and not yelping became even harder. The smacks hurt more than they had the first time, and he'd only just started. She quickly put her right hand back in an effort to protect herself, but he refused to allow that. He took her arm in his left hand and held it out of the way, then calmly went on with what he'd started.

By the time he was through, Elissia was twisting and kicking and fighting not to cry as loudly as she

wanted to. Her bottom ached to the constant smack! smack! of his hand coming down, and she was close to being desperate. His punishment was painful as well as being horribly humiliating, and if there was one thing she knew in this world it was that she never wanted to face the same thing again.

"Are you ready to apologize yet?" the beast asked as he paused in the torture. "If you are I'm ready to listen, but if I don't like what I hear we'll have to continue until you really are ready."

"I – I don't know what you want me to say," Elissia hedged, hating the idea of apologizing to the beast almost as much as having the beating continue. "Do you expect me to apologize for caring about my brother?"

"I expect you to apologize for disobeying me, and I expect to be told that it will never happen again." The beast's tone was flat with unshakable decision, not the least hesitation to be heard in it. "And I do recommend that you make the effort to convince me of your sincerity and truthfulness. You won't enjoy what happens if I don't believe you."

"How am I supposed to convince you of anything in *this* position?" Elissia wailed, almost to the point of true distress. She really did want to cry, and then she realized she was being a fool. Men weren't all that difficult to manipulate, especially when tears were used.

"I don't know what I can possibly say," she continued raggedly, finally letting the tears and sobbing come. "You won't believe that I've never regretted anything as much as having disobeyed you, and you won't believe that I'll never do it again. I don't know what to say, I just don't."

By then the sobs shook her body, and she let her head hang down without making any effort to hold it up. Crying was easy after what the beast had done to her, but she wasn't certain about how effective a ploy she'd used until the savage finally released her arm and turned her around in his lap.

"All right, I do believe you so you don't have to cry," the beast said, holding her to him and stroking her hair. "It's all over now, so you don't have to worry. Calm down and you'll realize that everything will be fine."

Elissia cried even harder at that, but only to cover her exultation. Her plan had worked perfectly, and she hadn't even had to lie. She would cry herself into exhaustion, and then she would fall deeply asleep.

And in the morning, before she tiptoed out to continue on her way *alone*, she would tie all the savage's clothes into complex and stubborn knots!

Derand held the girl until she fell asleep, the shuddering in her breathing easing but not disappearing entirely even then. Her clothes were still disarranged, but rather than risk waking her he carried her to the bed and put her down gently, then covered her with the quilt. When she woke she could see to her own clothes, and by then it ought to be less painful. He hadn't held back much as he spanked her, using his anger as a spur and thereby easing it.

But now his anger was all gone, washed away in the girl's tears. She'd obviously been trying again not to show them, but at last had lost the battle. There was no doubt she'd deserved that spanking, but now he was beginning to feel like a bully.

And that was something he didn't enjoy, so he pushed the thoughts away and went downstairs for a meal. His men would be free to eat once he returned, and until then they would make sure no one disturbed the girl. After the day she'd had she needed the sleep, and tomorrow they could talk – before he sent her back to her father under escort. She refused to understand just how much danger she was in, which made her position even more dangerous.

Rather than letting his anger at that flare again, Derand had his meal and then returned to his rooms. The girl lay in the same place he'd left her, apparently not having moved a single muscle while he was gone. His body let him know that it would have enjoyed having her awake, so maybe it was a good thing she still slept. If the marriage *was* to be annulled he had no right to touch her, but it was becoming harder and harder to remember that. He'd seen only one part of her bare, but that one part had made him want to see the rest. It was a shame she'd given in *that* easily

Derand shook his head hard to dislodge the nonsense, then he began to get out of most of his clothes. He would sleep all the way under the bed's two quilts while the girl slept between them, and that way he ought to be able to control himself. But that referred to his actions. His thoughts were another matter entirely, and as he blew out the lamp and made his way to the bed, he knew it would be a long time before sleep was able to conquer them.

Elissia awoke as easily as she always did when she had something to get up for at a particular time. The darkness beyond the windows said it wasn't yet dawn, but it ought to be close enough that getting out of bed was called for. She remembered just in time that she had to be quiet about it, which was a lucky thing. When she tried to sit up she found that the remnants of what the beast had done to her still made sitting uncomfortable. Her breath drew in silently rather than with a hiss, and then she had eased herself to standing.

That was when she noticed two things: her clothes and even her boots had been left just as they'd been, and the beast was asleep on the other side of the bed. She hated the thought of having slept in her clothes, but that was a good deal better than having had them taken. Making herself presentable took only a moment, and that length of time was enough for her to confirm one of her previous conclusions: the beast had no real interest in her. He'd shared her bed, but still hadn't tried to force himself on her. When a man doesn't even care enough to want to force himself on a woman, his disinterest goes well beyond the ordinary.

Accepting that didn't do a thing for Elissia's self esteem, but that was beside the point. Getting out of that inn without anyone noticing was much more important, so Elissia set about doing that. But first she located the beast's leather trousers and tiptoed over to them, then put a good knot in the legs. *That* should tell him what she thought about the way he'd treated her.

Her first objective after seeing to the trousers was groping her way into the second bedchamber. It was difficult to see in the dark, but most servant bedchambers had a back entrance so the servant could come and go without bothering his or her master or mistress. It took a few moments of feeling along the wall, but eventually Elissia found the door, unbolted it, and let herself out. The other door was being guarded by the beast's men, but this door led to the back stairs and was completely unwatched.

Slipping down the stairs to her own room took very little time, and so did collecting her saddlebags. At the same time she appropriated a cushion, which she'd probably need in order to stay in the saddle.

She was determined to go on her way no matter what, but the cushion would make it a bit easier.

The inn's night man took care of fetching bread and cheese for her rather quickly, and after she'd paid for the food she made her way out to the stable. Her horse was already saddled just the way he was supposed to be, so she gave the boy another copper, put the food in the saddlebags and the saddlebags on her horse, and then she was ready to go. But first she led her mount outside, to spare herself having the boy see her put the cushion in place. It was embarrassing enough to have to use the thing; having someone else see her do it would have been too much.

Elissia pretended to head for the road, but as soon as she was out of sight of the inn she turned into the woods and headed northeast. Gardal had told her about a little-used road in that area – more a cow path, really – that led to a hunting cabin that was free for the use of anyone who happened to be hunting in the area. Those who used it were supposed to either replace the supplies of food kept there, or leave enough silver to cover what was consumed. If Elissia found the cabin already being used she would have a problem, but if it stood empty it would do beautifully for a place to stop and let the beast charge ahead after her supposed trail.

As the sky began to take on color with the coming of the new day, Elissia's horse moved with more confidence through the woods. She let him move at his own pace, and it wasn't long before they found the cow path and turned left to follow it. Elissia hated the idea of having to delay for any reason, but the beast had given her no choice. He would charge ahead to the city, blunder into whatever Waysten might have set up to trap him, and then *she* would be able to enter without any trouble. One of her former girl servants had married a man from the area near Ramsond, and they now lived on a farm only a few miles from the city. *They* would be able to get her inside without anyone noticing, and then she'd be free to locate Gardal without anyone interfering.

Elissia kept going until it was somewhere around noon, and then she stopped to eat some of her bread and cheese. As hungry as she was she wolfed it down, but didn't give in to the temptation to eat more of it. If the cabin turned out to have nothing in the way of food, she'd be glad she hadn't made a pig out of herself. She also lay on the ground for a while to give her horse a chance to rest and graze, and when she remounted she found she no longer needed the cushion. She folded it awkwardly and stuffed it into one of her saddlebags, deciding to keep it even though she wasn't likely to have need of it a second time. If she never saw that beast again, it would be three years and seven days too soon.

Derand awoke slowly, still held delightfully by the dream he'd had. Without thinking he reached over to where the girl in his dream was sleeping, distantly wondering if he might bring that particular dream to life – and then sat bolt upright. The other side of the bed was empty, and touching his hand to the pillow showed there was no longer any trace of the warmth that would have been left. That meant the girl hadn't only just gotten up, so he had to find out where she'd gone. It couldn't have been too far, not after she'd given her word to obey him from now on.

The new day was just beginning beyond the windows, which meant he had no trouble looking through the apartment. The private sanitary facilities were empty and so was the servant's room – but that room's door was no longer bolted. He'd checked himself to see that it was before he'd gone to sleep, and now the bolt was open.

Muttering under his breath, Derand strode back to where he'd left his clothes. He'd been a fool to believe that girl, an utter fool who deserved to be beaten over the head for his foolishness. But when

he caught up with her, *he* wasn't the one who would be beaten. She'd learn the difference between that and a spanking, damned if she wouldn't!

As angry as he was, Derand had no chance to see the trap that had been left for him. He grabbed up his leather pants and began to force his leg into them as he always did – only this time his leg didn't go all the way in. His foot was stopped only a short way in, and trying to force his way past the obstruction only served to destroy his balance. He hopped frantically for a moment, trying to stay on his feet – or, rather, foot – but it was no good. He went down hard on his backside, and only then was he able to see the knots made with his pants legs.

The cursing he did then should have turned the air blue for miles around, especially when it took him time to unknot the pants legs. When he caught up to that girl again, he'd begin seeing to it that she spent the rest of her life standing up – even if she lived to be a hundred!

It took much too long for him to dress, but after that things went faster. He found out when the girl had left the inn, and also learned that she'd headed for the road toward Ramsond. Five minutes later he and his men were also on the road, riding hard in an effort to catch up to the most stubborn woman in the world before she got herself killed.

It wasn't quite sundown when Elissia found the cabin, and as luck would have it there was no one else around. A relatively small shed stood right next to the cabin, and looking inside showed Elissia a tiny stable with two stalls. There was also oats in a bin, so she unsaddled her horse, rubbed him down, then gave him some oats in the stall she'd put him into. Tomorrow she'd let him graze before they went on, but right now he deserved a bit of pampering.

Elissia found that the cabin itself had two rooms, not very large and definitely not very clean, but still useable in what she considered an emergency. She lit a lamp in the front room before closing the door, then carried the lamp through to the back room. With the large, crudely made bed it was obviously the cabin's bedchamber, so she unshuttered a window while she looked around. The room needed airing as well as dusting, sweeping, and scrubbing, but all she was equipped to do was the first.

The bed's mattress seemed to be stuffed with feathers, but it was completely bare of linens as well as pillows and quilts. At first Elissia thought that that was the way the hunters used it, but opening one of the two chests the room also held revealed sheets, pillows, pillow covers, and quilts. None of it was what might be called fresh, but despite the common cotton it was all made of it seemed to be fairly well kept. Did those who used the cabin actually wash the linen they used, or did a girl come by after them to see to the matter?

Elissia had no idea, and the second chest, being empty, did nothing to enlighten her. Putting the linens on the bed was a challenge for someone who had never done such a thing before, but somehow she managed it without making a total hash of it. Once the quilts and pillows were in place she thought about the need to wash the things after she'd used them, but that was completely out of the question. Even if she'd had the time to do something like that, she had no idea *how* it was done. She decided to leave a piece of silver rather than waste time fiddling with the unknowable, and hope that that would be enough. If it wasn't, there was still nothing she might do to change the situation.

Taking the lamp back into the front room, Elissia began to look around for what food there might be. Pots and pans hung on the wall near the hearth and various cabinets held sacks of odd looking things,

but none of it actually resembled food – or at least not food that *she'd* ever seen. Granted her knowledge of food came from sitting down to table or choosing from dishes on a buffet, but could the uncooked variety look so completely different from what it appeared like when prepared?

That was another question she found herself unable to answer, so she went to her saddlebags, removed the bread and cheese she'd saved, then sat down at the table to eat it. But she didn't put the food *down* on the table, not with the layer of dust it had accumulated. The skimpy meal satisfied her hunger only to a certain extent, but it would do until she could get to the next inn. There were inns and roadhouses and posting houses at fairly regular intervals all along the road to Ramsond, so she wasn't likely to starve.

She took a small drink from the water skin she'd also put into her saddlebags, hoping there was a stream somewhere near the cabin. What was left in the skin was warm and odd-tasting, and although it was better than nothing she would have enjoyed it more if it had been tea instead. She'd have to see to that at the inn she stopped at tomorrow. She should have thought of replacing the water with tea sooner, but now that she had she'd take care of it as soon as possible.

And that was it as far as settling in went. Her horse was taken care of, her saddlebags were with her, and the latchstring on the door had been pulled in. If she'd thought to bring a book she would have had something to do other than just go to sleep, but she *hadn't* thought of it. It had been a very long day, but sleep wasn't as enticing a thought as it should have been. What about considering how her rescue of Gardal would be best off going?

"Now, isn't this cozy," a voice said, making her jump to her feet with a small shriek. "A private inn, just for the two of us."

"How could you possibly have found me?" Elissia demanded, trying to get her heart to stop thundering around from the fright. It was the beast who stood near the door to the bedchamber, but he shouldn't have been within miles of that cabin.

"Obviously you were silly enough to think that you were the only one Gardal told about this place," the beast replied, coming forward to one of the crude wooden chairs near the table and then sitting in it. "When we met a traveler on the road who said he hadn't seen anything of a boy traveling alone, I had to stop to think where you might be. That was when I remembered about this cabin, and I actually got here right after you did. I saw the lamplight inside and found the window open in the back room, so I took that as a sign of welcome and came inside."

"You were mistaken about it being a sign of welcome," Elissia told him wearily before sitting down in her own chair again. "And I don't understand why this keeps happening. How am I supposed to save my brother's life if people keep getting in my way?"

By then she had the fingers of both hands over her eyes, not only to rub them but to blot out sight of the world. If she couldn't even elude one single man, how was she supposed to accomplish anything in Ramsond? She couldn't be *that* useless could she?

"Maybe this keeps happening because of all the lies you've told," the beast suggested with faint anger, answering a question that hadn't really been put to him. "If you ever began to tell the truth, the world would probably shift drastically in shock."

"I *would* have lied with my brother's life at stake, but I haven't had to," Elissia decided to point out, tired of simply going along with whatever he said. "And if you haven't noticed that, it's your fault rather than mine."

"Really," the beast returned flatly, the doubt in his voice more than clear. "What about the first time I told you that you would be staying in your father's palace? You agreed that you would."

"You asked me if I understood you, not if I would obey," Elissia corrected, finally letting herself look at him. "I agreed that I did understand, and that's all I agreed to."

He paused to frown in thought for a moment, then brought those dark eyes back to her face.

"All right, I'll grant that that may be true," he said with clear reluctance. "But that doesn't cover the lies you told last night. You made me believe you regretted disobeying me and that you would never do it again. Am I mistaken about that as well?"

"All I did last night was ask what I might say to make you believe me," Elissia told him with a sigh. "I admitted I had no idea how I might do it, but said nothing about actually feeling what you wanted me to. Apparently you refuse to understand that *nothing* will keep me from trying to free my brother, not even the possibility of losing my own life. That's another thing I don't know how to convince you of, and if you have any suggestions I'd be more than happy to hear them."

Elissia put her head back and closed her eyes, privately wondering just how much strength she really did have. How was she supposed to fight against the entire world before she even reached that vile Waysten?

"Don't start doing *that* again," the beast said at once, reaching across to put an oversized hand on her arm. "Letting depression take over is a form of giving up, and I thought you said you'd never give up. If you do, then I have the example of lying I was looking for."

"Since you're the one causing the depression, you have an awful nerve complaining about it," Elissia countered, opening her eyes and shaking off his hand. "If you hadn't decided to appropriate a woman who wanted no part of you, it would never have happened in the first place."

"If *you* hadn't decided you were exempt from the sort of political marriage most princesses are subject to, it also would never have happened." His retort was immediate, and a touch of annoyance was now clear in his manner. "Is that what was bothering you? The sudden need to share a man's bed and the fear that thought caused?"

Elissia studied him for a moment, wondering how he would take the truth. Most men would hate having it, and that might be for the best after all. If it bothered him enough, her annulment would be guaranteed.

"There's nothing about *that* to be afraid of," she said, deliberately showing a faint smile. "I never expected to be married, but I did get curious. So many of the girls raved about how marvelous it was to lie with a man, that I finally decided to try it. The experience wasn't marvelous at all, and in fact was a bit painful as well as boring, so I never tried it again. The one time was more than enough."

This time it was the beast's turn to close his eyes and rub them, his expression something that could only be called pained. He hadn't liked what he'd heard, and a moment later he shook his head.

"If your father ever heard you say that, he'd probably commit the first violence of his life," the beast commented, then those eyes were on her again. "Didn't anyone ever tell you that women are supposed to stay untouched until they marry?"

"People have always told me a lot of things, but most of them either weren't true or didn't make sense," Elissia pointed out. "On top of that, why would I have worried about a time that I never expected would come? There were no lines of suitors waiting for my father's approval, so why would I have expected to be married?"

"There were no lines of suitors because your father knew you were already married," the beast replied with a sigh, shifting in his chair. "Obviously he should have also made sure that you knew it, but should-haves never count. Don't say anything about this when you get back. There's no need to disturb him over something that can't be changed."

"I won't let you send me back," Elissia stated, making sure her voice stayed calm and reasonable. "Waysten *has* to have set traps to snare you when you show up, since it's highly unlikely that he arranged Gardal's kidnapping just to try taking over my father's kingdom. He does want my father's kingdom, but he's not stupid enough to try taking it without doing something about you and your father first. If he manages to displace you and take over as High King, he can then walk in and help himself to my father's kingdom any time he pleases. Can't you see that?"

"You're joking," the beast said with a small laugh of disbelief, staring at her as though she were insane. "I met your Prince Waysten when we were still boys, and it was perfectly clear that he wasn't up to anything important. He was a spoiled, greedy little fool, and – "

"And yet when he was old enough to take over, his father fell 'ill,'" Elissia finished when the beast's words simply broke off. "Why he didn't just kill him instead I have no idea, but it's been perfectly plain that *he's* the cause of his father's 'illness.' No one will admit out loud to believing that, but I'm sure they all know it as well as I do."

"He wouldn't have killed his father because it's politically smarter not to," the beast muttered, rubbing his face with one hand as he stared at nothing. "If a king starts to show aggressive tendencies toward his neighbors, they won't hesitate to call him to accounts. He is, after all, the only one responsible for his actions. But if a prince, acting as regent, does the same, who's responsible? The prince himself, or his father the king who might be giving him his orders? That question would make people hesitate before taking action, possibly until it's too late for any action to help. I didn't think Waysten was smart enough to know that."

"A lot of people have been underestimating him, but I'm not one of them," Elissia said, faintly surprised that the beast had bothered to tell her what she needed to know. "He'll have been horrified to hear that Gardal was kidnapped inside his very city, and he'll supposedly have people out searching for my brother's whereabouts. Those people in reality will be making sure that no official investigators get close to the smallest clue, so what the situation calls for is an unofficial investigator. And I can get into the city without Waysten being immediately told that I've arrived, so – "

"If Waysten *is* behind all this, is he likely to be keeping Gardal in his palace?" the beast interrupted to ask. "I would have said no, but now I'm not completely certain."

"It's highly unlikely that Gardal is being kept in the palace," Elissia replied, startled by the intensity of the dark gaze which had returned to her – and by the fact that he was actually asking her opinion. "If word ever got out that my brother was there, Waysten would have no neutral position to retreat to. If Gardal was kept elsewhere and he managed to escape or be rescued, Waysten would only have to claim to be overjoyed at the good news to be perfectly safe. Nothing and no one would be available to link him to the kidnapping."

"Yes, I agree," the beast said with a distracted nod. "As a boy I also considered him a sneak, and that's typical of the way a sneak would think. But now I have to change my own plans. I never thought anyone would try to mousetrap me like *this*, but the chances are too good that you're right. If he ever managed to defeat *me*, even my father would be neutralized. So how did you plan to get into the city without Waysten being told about it?"

Every time those hard black eyes came back to pin her with his gaze, Elissia found herself startled. She didn't know why this man was suddenly talking to her as though she were something other than a useless woman, but it felt incredibly good

"I know someone who lives on a farm not far from the city," Elissia admitted without hesitation. "I can count on her to add to this flimsy disguise I'm using, and that way I can get into the city without anyone recognizing me. And I also intend to have them quietly question their neighbors throughout the countryside. If Gardal is being kept on a farm instead of in the city, it won't take long before I know."

"So you do have a definite plan after all," he said, an odd kind of amusement behind the words. "You didn't just take off, you left with a purpose. But don't think your plan will go to waste because you're being sent home. I think it's a good plan, so I'll be incorporating it into my own ideas."

"If you send me home, you won't be *able* to use my plan," Elissia said through her teeth, wondering if anything in the world would move the beast from the single track his mind seemed to be on. "You don't know the people involved, and even if I gave you their names they would never trust you. Have you forgotten that Waysten has already started to blame *you* for the kidnapping? You won't find anyone willing to talk to you freely, and if you try to force them into talking they'll just lie because they'll think that lying will save their lives."

"You could be right," he conceded as he leaned back in his chair again, strangely unmoved. "It might turn out that no one will be willing to talk to me, but that won't be your concern. I can't trust you not to make trouble at the wrong time – or even not take off on your own – so you'll be going home whether you like it or not."

"Do you want me to give you my word that I won't leave on my own again?" Elissia asked at once when she saw the glimmer of hope. "I won't break my word once it's given, but *you'll* have to give your word about something as well: that you won't try to keep me out of things when it comes to rescuing my brother. *Someone* from my family needs to be there, just to show that we're not all helpless, and I'm the only one it can be."

"Let me think about it for a minute," he responded, an answer that would have been more encouraging

if he didn't seem to have already done the thinking. He put his hand to his chin and pretended to be considering the matter, but the speed with which his pondering time ended made Elissia believe he was definitely up to something.

"All right, I've decided," he announced after the moment, his expression much too neutral to be in any way real. "I'll let you come along with me under certain conditions, and those conditions aren't negotiable. Just how badly *do* you want to come?"

"You know how badly," she told him bluntly, refusing to beat around the bush. "What impossible conditions have you decided to ask for?"

"Hardly impossible," he disagreed mildly, still showing nothing but smooth and patient reason. "I never expect anyone to do the impossible, not even myself. What I want will be extremely unpleasant for you, but you do have the option of refusing. And if you do refuse, I'll have to tie you up until morning when some of my men can take you home. I won't give you the chance to disappear again, and there won't be any stops between here and your father's palace. That way I'll know you made it back safely."

"Tell me what you want," Elissia ground out, hating what he had in mind even without hearing the details. If he was taking the trouble to threaten her before mentioning the details, it had to be something really extreme.

"I want a number of things," he finally admitted, a gleam in those dark black eyes. "The first *will* be your sworn word that you won't disappear again, and you'd better plan to put it in a form that I'll believe. After that you'll be required to start a new habit: at least once a day, you'll come to me and ask me to give you a spanking. You'll have to ask nicely, and after you've had the spanking you'll ask me to lie with you and allow you to do your wifely duty. Do you think you can manage all that? If you can't, I'll look around for a rope to tie you up with right now."

Princess Brat

Chapter 4

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Elissia was too stunned to say a single word for a good deal longer than a minute, but the beast just sat there, patiently waiting for her answer. When her mind finally began to think again, she came to the only conclusion possible.

"You've got to be joking, and it's in terrible taste," she managed to get out, trying not to show how cornered she felt. "No one would expect me to agree to that, not even you."

"I'm *not* joking, and I think you know it," he rejoined, continuing to show very little more than calm patience. "You'll be required to ask me to give you a spanking, and after you've had the spanking you'll ask me to lie with you and allow you to do your wifely duty. Take another moment or two to think about it."

His generous offer probably came because of the knock on the door, Elissia knew, but she couldn't quite bring herself to wonder who it might be. She had other things to think about, like the fact that she did know he wasn't joking. It was obvious he would have preferred to send her home, but for some reason was giving her an option that would allow her to stay. *He* would certainly find her staying pleasant, but for herself

"Will you join me for dinner while you're thinking about your decision?" the beast asked suddenly, putting a metal platter of something down on the table. "You also have your choice of wine or water to wash it down, and although the wine isn't really the best it's at least drinkable."

He also put two medium-size drinking skins on the table, all of which told Elissia who had been at the door. He still has his men with him, and they were taking care of their king's needs. Just as their king was trying to take care of his own needs – at her expense.

"I don't know if I have much of an appetite left," she replied with perfect truth, examining the platter of food. "And what *is* that? It looks something like chicken, but only in a distant way."

"It's rabbit," the beast answered as he reclaimed his chair and reached for a piece that looked singed on the outside and bloody on the inside. "Don't worry, if you try it you'll like it, everyone always does. It tastes like chicken."

He seemed to find that comment amusing, but Elissia didn't. He was having a marvelous time at her expense, and she still hadn't decided whether or not to let it continue. If Gardal's safety hadn't been involved she would have been gone like a shot, but walking away now would be abandoning her brother and leaving him to the mercy of someone else's efforts to free him. Could she do that, even at the expense of her pride?

That question occupied her attention for the duration of the beast's meal, and he said nothing to distract her. When he'd eaten all he wanted he sat back with one of the drinking skins, so she decided to ask an irrelevant question.

"Why are you doing this?" she put flatly, really wanting to know. "Why aren't you simply sending me back, or keeping me to entertain you without the rest of it? Why are you determined to reduce me to less than nothing in my own eyes?"

"You won't be reduced to less than nothing," he answered at once, putting the skin aside to reach over and take one of her hands. "You've been allowed to go your own way too long, to make decisions and take actions without concern for anyone else involved. That isn't healthy for someone with your nature, so I'm going to try correcting the situation in as direct a way as possible. I don't have years to undo what the previous years have done to bring you to this point."

"So you're doing it for my own good," she summed up as she pulled her hand away from his, still speaking flatly. "That sounds very noble and fine, but I have a feeling you have another motive as well. You like my father and feel disturbed over his relationship with me, so you've decided to break me before giving me back to him. Well, you're wasting your time in more ways than one. Once Gardal is free I'll be leaving my father's house, and nothing you can possibly do will ever break me. I just won't let it happen."

"Breaking you is the last thing I want to accomplish, but it will be a while before you can believe that," he said, reaching for the skin again. "But does your statement mean you've decided to agree to my terms? You'll give your sworn word not to leave without my express permission, and then you'll do as I require?"

"With the only other choice being the abandonment of my brother, what else can I do?" Elissia countered, deciding she might as well get it said and over with. "It isn't as if you didn't know what my answer would be when you set those ridiculous terms, so don't pretend to be surprised."

"Oh, I'm *not* surprised," he agreed, satisfaction bringing a stronger gleam to those dark eyes. "As long as I know you're not likely to disappear on your own at any moment, I'll enjoy having you with me. Your sharp mind will be a great asset to my efforts, and as far as the rest of it goes it will definitely be my pleasure to help straighten you out."

He raised the skin to his lips again, hopefully missing the confused fluster Elissia suddenly found it necessary to contend with. He'd actually complimented her, but why would he do that when she'd already agreed to his demands? It didn't make any sense, and she was still trying to find an answer to the question when he put the skin aside.

"All right, let's start with you giving me your word about not leaving," he said, once again looking directly at her. "And this time I'll be listening carefully to what you *don't* say as well, and you won't be given another chance. Do it right the first time, or don't bother doing it at all."

"Would you like me to sign something in blood?" Elissia asked with more scorn than she actually felt. "If I swear by everything I love, will that satisfy you?"

"Everything and *everyone*," he amended with a nod. "Go ahead and do it."

Elissia sighed on the inside before finally committing herself completely. Not long ago the beast would have taken her question as the oath he wanted, but now he really was listening carefully. She swore by everything and everyone she loved that she would not try to run away again, and there was satisfaction in his dark eyes when he nodded.

"Now you've said it properly," he granted with great generosity. "For that reason I'm accepting your word without reservation, so if you try to reclaim it *this* time you'll be foresworn. Somehow I don't think you want that."

He was right, blast him, but Elissia refused to say so out loud. She also refused to think about how few men would take a woman's word under any circumstances whatsoever.

"And now it's getting close to bed time," he added, stretching casually where he sat. "Isn't there something you wanted to ask me?"

Elissia hadn't needed the reminder; she'd been trying to brace herself against the time when she would have to face incredible humiliation, but the bracing hadn't worked. She still felt the heat of intense embarrassment flushing her face, and she was no longer able to look at the beast.

"I – I'm supposed to ask to be – spanked, so I'm asking," she forced herself to say, nearly choking on the words. If she'd eaten any of that rabbit she would certainly have thrown up, so it was a lucky thing the beast hadn't insisted.

"You're supposed to ask nicely, and that isn't my idea of asking nicely," he stated to her mortified disbelief. "Do it again, and this time stand here in front of me before starting. And take off that cap."

Elissia got slowly to her feet, pulled the cap off her head to let her hair fall free, then moved two steps closer to him. She still couldn't bear to look up from the floor, but there was a question she needed to ask.

"I – don't understand what you mean by 'nicely,'" she got out, hating the man more with every passing minute. "If you don't give me some idea of what you're looking for, we could be here all night."

"That's a good point, and I appreciate having you bring it up," he allowed, a distant amusement to be heard in his voice. "What I want is for you to tell me that you've been a bad girl, so you really think I ought to give you a spanking. And don't forget to add the word 'please.'"

If someone had asked Elissia if the situation could possibly get any worse, she probably would have been certain it couldn't. Now, after hearing what the beast had to say it looked like it was a good thing she hadn't expected to live much past the time Gardal was safely back home.

"I've – I've been a – bad girl, and – and – so I'm – asking if you would – please – please spank me," Elissia finally choked out after a very long hesitation, her eyes closed against the burning in her cheeks. She couldn't have added another word if her life had depended on it, but additional words turned out to be unnecessary.

"That was fairly good for a first effort," the beast conceded, grudging the judgment only a little. "I'm sure you'll get much better as the days pass and you gain more experience. Go into the bedchamber

now and close the shutter, then get out of those clothes. I'll be there in a moment to put you over my knee."

Elissia shuddered out a breath as she turned and fled from the room, wishing she could just keep running and never stop. But maybe this was for the best after all. By the time the beast was through crushing her under his heel, she'd greet her coming death with delight rather than fear. If she ever found it possible to feel delight over anything again

Derand watched the girl hurry out of the room, and once she was gone he took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Handling her just right was going to be one hell of a balancing act, but he was determined to do it exactly right. If he used too heavy a hand with her he *would* break her spirit, but too light a hand would have little or no effect.

It was an incredible thing to admit even to himself, but the woman who was his wife was like no other woman he'd ever encountered. If he could get her to the point of understanding that she *had* to obey him for her own safety whether she liked the idea or not, she'd have a much better chance of surviving living as his wife. His realm was far from being quiet and peaceful even if most of the active fighting was over, and being his queen would not prove to be the easiest of lives.

But having the delightfully quick mind that she did, she'd be more of an asset to him than he'd ever imagined a woman could be. He'd expected his wife to warm his bed and bear his children, but this one would also look at the political situation and see it more clearly than most. She would be an incredible ally who earned the right to share the ruling of his kingdom – but only if she stopped looking down her nose at him. He had to teach her respect for her husband and something of humility, and the demands he'd made ought to do that.

Along with the rest of the plan he'd come up with. It had been disturbing to learn that she was no longer a virgin, but even that might turn out to be for the best. He'd brought along something to encourage his inexperienced bride when she shared his bed, but it could well have taken a frightened virgin a bit of time to respond to it. As things stood now that was no longer a concern, so his full enjoyment of her ought to come a good deal more quickly.

"And let's not forget that we now have her actively participating in the game," he murmured with a smile as he stood and walked to the front door of the cabin. His saddlebags had been brought along with his supper, and he'd want them in the bedchamber. "She'll probably never participate voluntarily, but this will be almost as good. Now all I have to figure out is how to extend the demand past the time we break Gardal loose"

Elissia closed the shutter she'd opened in the bedchamber, then she undressed slowly in the dark and stood with her arms wrapped around her. Full dark had brought a chill to the air, but the humiliation burned too hotly inside her for the chill to turn to cold. She hugged herself for another reason, one that added to her deep mortification and embarrassment. She *had* lain with a man once, but even he had never seen her completely unclothed.

"But how was I supposed to refuse this latest demand?" she whispered, as though arguing against someone who had accused her of acceding without a murmur. "He's already proven he's strong enough to *take* the clothes, or even to rip them from me and leave me naked to the world. At least he

didn't make me promise not to find a way to leave him bloody and dead at my feet"

This time the thought of finding a way to kill the beast did raise her spirits a bit. Or it did until the object of her murderous intentions entered the room with a lamp and a set of saddlebags, then closed the door behind him. Once again she found it impossible to meet his gaze, and knowing that he was now able to see all of her made it feel as though her entire body burned in the flames of humiliation.

"Why are you blushing?" the miserable beast asked in a casual tone as he passed her to put the lamp down on a table in front of the shuttered window. "Since you're my wife, I have a perfect right to see you like that."

Elissia was about to point out again that she was hardly going to be his wife for long, but it wasn't worth wasting the breath. He knew that as well as she did, but had decided to take as much advantage of the situation as he could. He paused as though waiting for her to say something, and when she didn't he opened one saddlebag and seemed to take something from it.

"All right, I'm ready to do as you so nicely asked me to," he announced, walking to the rough wooden chair the room held in order to sit. "Come over here and put yourself across my knees."

Elissia closed her eyes for a moment, but there was no getting out of it. She just had to remember that she was going through all that for Gardal's sake, and for that reason had to be strong. Forcing herself the few steps over to where the beast sat was hard, but not as hard as bending over his lap. He helped her with that as he positioned her to his liking, and then his big hand once again stroked her bottom.

"I'm going to take a closer, more intimate look at my wife before we begin," he said, his hand continuing the gentle stroking. "It won't be painful at all, so just let your muscles relax."

It was very difficult for Elissia to obey him, but closing her eyes again helped to a certain extent. His big hands moved over her body, stroking down her back and along her thighs, nothing overly intrusive and certainly not painful. After a pair of moments she was able to relax even more, and in a short while she even found her attention drifting. It had been a rather long and disturbing day, and she'd grown more tired than she'd felt earlier. There were unpleasant things to be faced before she'd be allowed to sleep, but –

"No, don't!" she suddenly screamed, dragged back to reality by more than mere intrusion. The beast had put something into her bottom, something that wasn't very big but still felt horribly uncomfortable. It had slid inside her as though lightly greased, moving deeper in spite of the tightening of her muscles. Even as she struggled and fought to reach it and pull it out, she could feel something like a long string against her legs that seemed to be attached to the horrible thing.

"No, you won't be taking it out, so stop trying," the beast said, speaking the outrageous words calmly again and again. He'd also captured her right wrist, and held it up behind her back. "This is a device the men in my family use to increase the pleasure their women feel while doing their wifely duty, and you'll soon see how well it works. You won't enjoy having it in you during the spanking, but afterward will be another story. Now stop struggling, or the spanking will take a lot longer than you'll want it to."

"I don't care *what* the men in your family do!" Elissia shripped, refusing to be soothed or calmed. "Take that abomination out of me this instant!"

"Girl, it's not coming out," the beast repeated, his voice hardening noticeably. "It's going to be left right where it is until I say it can come out, so you'd better get used to the idea. And I thought you said that nothing I do will be able to break you. Is this your idea of not being broken?"

Elissia choked trying to reach the proper words to answer, quickly finding it impossible to make those words come out clear and coherent. The thing inside her wasn't giving her pain, so she had no solid basis for a meaningful refusal. She *had* told the beast he'd never break her no matter what he did, but at the time she hadn't pictured anything like *this*. She'd become very aware of the leather of his pants under her bare belly and thighs, the feeling underscoring the presence of the abomination inside her. But she wasn't in pain, so what was there to say in response to his taunt?

"Hating an unnatural invasion of my body is not the same as being broken," she finally pointed out, forced to lie still due to what the abomination made her feel when she moved. "This wasn't in any way a part of our agreement, so I insist that you take that thing out of me."

"When people are first introduced to something they never heard of, they often consider it unnatural," the beast had the nerve to lecture. "Later on they discover that it's simply unusual to their experience, and after a time of indulgence it becomes ordinary and commonplace. And it wasn't necessary to make things like this part of our agreement. This is something your husband is requiring of you, and as his wife you're bound to accept it."

Which is one of the reasons I never wanted to be someone's wife, Elissia thought with a growl in her throat. It was perfectly clear that nothing she said would sway the beast, so wasting any more breath would be the act of a fool. That she'd been a fool to get involved with him in the first place couldn't be denied; adding to it would be completely pointless.

"How nice to see that you've finally decided to be reasonable," the beast commented when it became clear that she would be adding nothing more to what she'd already said. "If you'd kept up the nonsense much longer, I would have had to punish you for that as well as for your previous actions. You'll do enough on your own to justify future spankings, so there's no need to look for things to add in. And in any event, it's time to get started."

That decision brought Elissia as little pleasure as she'd expected it to, but something *unexpected* immediately arose. The beast's big hand came down on her bottom with a sharp smack, but rather than accept the beating in silence as long as possible, she couldn't hold back an "Ohhhh!" of utter mortification. Feelings she'd never experienced before flashed through her body because of the presence of the abomination, and even the rate of her breathing began to increase. She also tried to speak, but now the words insisted on coming out sideways.

"Yes, yes, I know," the beast said as he continued to spank her, obviously understanding her garbled attempts to make him stop. "You can't stand what you're feeling, but only because you've never felt it before. And also because you don't know what to do to ease yourself. You'll get the answer to that soon enough, so just try to be patient."

Patient! Elissia choked on a scream of outrage, one step away from being beside herself. That big hand of his kept smacking her bottom, this time bringing more than just an ache to her seat. Her body had begun to squirm in protest against the spanking and the feelings caused by the abomination, and

that very squirming made the whole thing even worse! Each smack caused a jolt of unbearable sensation and an involuntary movement, and the movement increased the unbearable sensation. The entire process seemed to be feeding on itself, leaving Elissia no way to stop it.

Elissia began to wail with desperation, but even that did nothing to stop the spanking. The beast continued on until her bottom throbbed with a flaming ache and she was nearly insane, and then, abruptly, the beast began on the next phase of her torture. Instead of another smack being added to the very long list of previous ones, the beast circled her with his arms and picked her up as he stood. He then carried her the few steps to the bed and put her face down on the quilts – with his knee in the middle of her back.

"No, don't move from this position unless you want to go back to the chair and the spanking," he said sharply as she tried to free herself. "I'm going to take my knee away, and if you move even an inch in any direction we'll go straight back to the chair."

Elissia closed her eyes and held to the quilt with a grip of steel, needing desperately to rub at herself and do something to ease those unbearable sensations. But if she tried to do any of that the beast would start the whole thing over again, and she couldn't face the thought of it happening. For that reason she fought silently to lie absolutely still, and did succeed in keeping the involuntary squirming to an absolute minimum.

It took a couple of minutes, but her success was confirmed when the beast lay down on the bed beside her. He'd removed all his clothes, and the first thing she knew he'd pulled her into his arms and up against his bare body. She moved in protest over that, but all he did was tighten his grip.

"Wasn't there something you wanted to ask me?" he said as he looked down at her oddly. "No, don't try to move farther away. This is the position I want you in."

Elissia now lay on her side up against him, and the sensations inside her weren't getting any easier to bear. She forced herself to remember there was only this last part of the torture left before she would be left alone in her misery, and that made speaking possible.

"I – must ask that you lie with me, and – and – allow me to do my wifely duty," she got out, again finding it impossible to meet that dark, fierce gaze. "And if the experience isn't as pleasant as you expect it to be, the fault will surely be mine."

"That's not completely true," the beast surprised her by saying, his tone suggesting he wasn't joking. "I'm sure there are times when the failure of a merging between man and woman is the woman's fault, but more often than not it happens because of the man. If he has no true idea of what a woman responds to, if his own pleasure is all that concerns him, if he expects the woman to find desire for him through nothing but her own efforts All these things will bring him disappointment, and he will, naturally, blame the woman in his arms."

One of his big hands had begun to stroke her thigh, the other moving slowly on her back. The small movements stirred Elissia in a way she'd never experienced before, in some strange way complimenting the sensations inside her while at the same time adding to them.

"But that won't happen here, because the woman in my arms is my wife and I want her to have the

same pleasure I do when performing her wifely duties." The beast's voice continued on in a murmur, and Elissia discovered she had to force herself to listen. She'd realized there was something else she wanted from this man, a something she couldn't quite define "Raise your face to me, wife, and we'll begin the mutual giving of pleasure."

Elissia did as he asked and then his lips were on hers, hot and demanding and yet gentle for all of that. In no time at all she found herself responding to his kiss, startled to find that she actually *wanted* to respond. The revelation confused her, but for some reason she wasn't up to thinking it through. The way his hands moved on her body their touch seemed to leave a trail of fire in their wake. The fire had begun to flame up through her skin, and she really needed to do something to quench it.

But the beast wasn't ready to do any quenching. He ended their kiss as he moved Elissia to her back, which made her gasp and raise her bottom out of contact with the bed. The ache of the spanking was still very much with her, but once her knees were bent and her feet were easing the problem, she quickly discovered another almost as bad. The beast had lowered his head to her breasts, and the touch of his tongue and lips was fast driving her insane. She moaned as she tried to escape the exquisite torture, but that just caused the beast to chuckle as he held her still and continued with what he was about.

An eternity of time went by, at least five or ten minutes, before the beast took pity on her. His lips slowly moved from her breasts up to her throat, and from there to her own lips. This time the kiss was very brief, and then he was crouched between her knees and touching her most intimate parts with a rod of hardwood. When it began to penetrate her she realized that that was exactly what she wanted, exactly what she most needed. Her body rose by itself to greet him while his arms circled her again and his lips came back to hers.

His kiss drowned her as his desire slowly merged with her own, but his presence inside her inflamed the sensations she'd been feeling all along. Elissia whimpered and struggled to escape being burned alive, but the beast simply held her still and entered her completely. There was the least amount of pain when he did that, due to the fact that there had been only one other man before him, not to mention the still-fresh remnants of that spanking. But then he began to stroke her slowly but with strength, and all thoughts of pain vanished entirely.

Elissia clawed at the back of the man atop her, frantic to stop his kiss long enough for her to ask what she was supposed to do. His stroking gave her the conviction that there was *something* she could do to increase the indescribable sensations, but simply squirming around wasn't it. She needed desperately to know, hating the idea of missing the unknown thing she was seemingly being promised. It was a thing of magic and marvel, a thing she wanted above all else to make her own, but she didn't know how to reach it!

And then the beast answered her question without her having to ask it, in a way that worked despite its being rather humiliating. One of his big hands came to her aching bottom, the touch making her raise her hips immediately to escape. But she raised her hips just as he was thrusting into her, and the same thing happened the next time and the next. The beast was using the spanking he'd given her to match her movements to his, and that was just the thing she'd needed to find out. She began to match his movements on her own, and after a moment his hand moved away.

After that there was nothing but frenzy and sensation, the most marvelous sensations Elissia had ever

experienced. She screamed in delight while her hands moved over the hard body above hers, even when the strength of his thrusts made her bottom feel as though she were being spanked again. But it didn't matter, since nothing mattered beyond meeting his thrusts as they rose toward the promise of perfection achieved.

It took quite a while, but at last Elissia's body exploded in that sublime, shuddering joy that nothing could match. She hadn't known that anything could be so good, so completely satisfying, and only dimly was she aware of when the beast grunted with his own release. Exhaustion now rode her as strongly as he had, and as soon as he withdrew from her she closed her eyes and tumbled into warm, overwhelming darkness.

Derand watched the girl go out like a flame blown from a candle, and he couldn't keep from smiling. She'd been as ready for him as he'd wanted her to be, and she'd given him the best experience he'd ever had. And if the scratches he could feel on his back meant anything, her own experience had been just as good.

All of which meant he now had to try doubly hard to find a way to make her accept him completely. His smile died at that thought, as lying to himself was no longer possible. The plan he'd come up with *might* work, but counting on "might" wasn't something he could continue to do. He needed a "would for sure," to replace it, and he'd have to find one quickly. He had the feeling he'd find it impossible to give his full attention to anything else until he did, and this was a time that needed his full attention.

A sigh escaped him as he reached out to stroke the girl's hair, the long, bright red hair that gave him so much pleasure to look at. And that lush body of hers, with its softly curved hips, full breasts, and enticing womanhood. He'd already known about her lovely, bouncy, round bottom, but the rest of it He'd been ready for her from the moment he'd first walked into the room and seen her standing there, trying to pretend she wasn't dying of embarrassment.

"All right, so it's time to admit I want her for reasons other than political," he whispered, finding it incredibly hard to say the words. "I never expected to feel anything other than fondness for the wife others chose for me, and maybe not even that. Now, though"

There were so many sides to this woman, he hadn't yet decided which he liked best. Her mind attracted him as much as her body, and that wasn't supposed to happen. Who ever heard of a man being attracted to a woman's mind?

Derand made a sound of annoyance, directed at himself as much as at the world at large. He'd never worried about what other people did when he decided on his own actions, and now wasn't the time to start. He'd admire whatever he wanted to about the girl, and anyone who objected could meet him face to face with swords.

But it wasn't possible any longer to think of her or call her "the girl." She was his wife and a woman he was fast becoming very involved with, so he had to call her by name. But the name Elissia was much too formal and long, so he needed something else in its place. *Let's see now*, he mused. *What about Yes, what about Seea? It's part of her actual name, but much easier to use. Yes, that's what I'll call her from now on.*

And with at least one decision made, Derand felt considerably better. The girl – Seea – had turned to

her side on the bed, so he had very little trouble gently removing the device from her bottom. She moaned a bit in her sleep as it was being done, but she didn't wake up even when he left the bed to replace the device in its special pouch. Once she began to feel desire for him without outside help, the device would not have to be used again. But until then it would help him to bind her close, a temporary aid to be used until a permanent solution was found.

And one he'd better find fast, he warned himself as he blew out the lamp and groped his way back to bed. No matter how many promises he'd gotten out of the woman, he was willing to bet that only her own desire to stay would keep her beside him. He couldn't stand the thought of losing her, but he'd better remember it could still happen.

Derand freed the quilt and put it over Seea before getting back into bed beside her, but it took a while before he joined her in sleep as well.

Princess Brat

Chapter 5

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Voices in the outer room woke Elissia, but not to the point of making her want to jump out of bed. She felt much too comfortable and satisfied – at least until the doings of last night came back. Then her eyes opened wide before they closed again in weariness, and she buried her face in the pillow.

How could you have acted like that? she scolded herself silently, a heavy warmth coming to her cheeks as she remembered more and more of what had gone on. *And with someone like that beast? How could you?*

It would have been possible to find all sorts of excuses to answer the accusation, but the truth of the matter refused to let her avoid it. She'd acted the way she had with that beast of a man because she hadn't been able to resist him. For some reason she found him incredibly attractive, and that despite the way he treated her. In fact it was probable that she found him attractive *because* of the way he treated her. No one had ever paid her enough attention to even think about changing the way she behaved, assuming they'd been strong enough to stand up to her. But most *hadn't* been strong enough, and the rest hadn't had the least interest

Not that the beast *really* had an interest in her, she also admitted as she turned her face back to a position where she could breathe. He enjoyed making her pay for disobeying him and also seemed to enjoy using her body, but that was certainly as far as it went. That he'd taken the trouble to let *her* enjoy the time as well wasn't terribly significant. She was, after all, the daughter of his father's longtime friend, and the woman he'd been made to marry. While he stayed married to her, he probably considered it only proper not to brutalize her completely.

But she couldn't ignore the fact that he'd been willing to let the marriage end before they found out about the attack on Gardal. Her father wasn't likely to have talked him into it, not considering how much her father disliked discussing things other people disagreed with. No, the man himself must have been willing, and once Gardal was free he would certainly be willing again. Not that *she* wasn't just as eager to be rid of *him*. The way he spanked her was beginning to be just the least bit intimidating, so the last thing she would have wanted was to be made to stay with him

"Ah, good, you're awake," she heard, and then the beast himself was walking into the room. "Our breakfast was just brought, so why don't you get up and come join me in eating it. We've got something of a busy day ahead."

"What's going to be making it so busy?" she couldn't help asking as she looked over to where he stood. "All we have to do is get back on the road to Ramsond."

"We'll be riding toward Ramsond, but not on the road," he corrected with a smile. "This hunting trail continues on to another cabin, so we'll stick with it and use that other cabin tonight. That should let the men I sent ahead have the time to get back with their report about what's happening in Waysten's city. Going in blind doesn't make much sense."

"No, it doesn't," she agreed in a murmur as he turned to leave the room. It would have been interesting to know *when* he'd thought of sending scouts into the city before he got there, but asking the question would have been impolitic. If the time had come only after she'd pointed out that Waysten was after the beast's head, he might not enjoy the reminder.

And right now she wasn't terribly eager to do anything the beast might take offense at. Sitting up in bed was distinctly uncomfortable after his efforts of last night, which meant she'd need that cushion again when it was time to climb back into a saddle. If he decided to add to those efforts before they left, she'd certainly have to continue on walking instead of riding.

It wasn't very long before she'd pulled on her trousers, tunic, and boots, so she went out into the front room. The beast had opened the shutters to let in some light and air, and now sat at the table where two metal bowls stood. But he didn't seem to have started on his own breakfast, and when he saw her he rose to his feet.

"Considering how hungry I am, I appreciate your being prompt," he said with another smile. "Come and join me at the table, and we can taste what's here together."

All that smiling the beast was doing was definitely making her nervous, but Elissia still walked over to the table as he'd asked. She wasn't much looking forward to sitting down on the hard wooden chair, but when she reached it she found that something had been added to it.

"That cushion was in one of your saddlebags," the beast explained when she stopped short. "I happened to see it, and the thought came that you might enjoy having it now as well as later. If I'm wrong, feel free to correct me."

Elissia felt embarrassed enough to do just that, but she managed to remember just in time that she'd decided to watch what she said. And if she told the beast that she didn't need the cushion at all, she wouldn't put it past him to keep it from her even when it was time to leave. Rather than let *that* happen, she simply nodded to acknowledge his "kindness," then moved the chair a bit and sat down.

"There's also tea in this skin," he said, gesturing to the single skin on the table. "Help yourself whenever you like, but first taste the porridge and let me know if you think there's enough honey in it."

"What if there's *too* much honey?" she couldn't help asking as she picked up the spoon which lay beside the bowl. "What can be done about it at this point?"

"Not much," he granted as he watched her taste the still-hot porridge. "All we can do is make sure it doesn't happen the next time. So, what's your decision?"

"It's edible," she gruded once she'd swallowed, refusing to add anything more. In point of fact it was really tasty, and warmed her insides even as it filled the small hollow her skimpy meal of last night had left. She applied herself to her bowl as he did the same with his, and they ate in what was probably supposed to be a companionable silence. Elissia wasn't feeling very companionable, but that was

something else that had no need to be said.

"That wasn't bad at all," the beast allowed when he'd cleaned his bowl, finishing only a short time before Elissia. "But I happen to be curious about something. I'm used to living a lot rougher than this from the time during the campaigns I waged, but I'm sure you never experienced the same. Why aren't you complaining nonstop about the awful conditions and food, or at least whining about what you're forced to put up with?"

"There's no sense in complaining when you chose to be where you are, or when nothing can be done to change things," Elissia pointed out as she reached for the skin of tea. "And as far as whining goes, I can't stand people who whine. I've been tempted more than once to ask my father to make whining a hanging offense, but if he ever did he'd lose at least half the members of his Court."

"So would some of the other kingdoms around here," the beast agreed with a grin as she drank a bit of the tea. "I've been tempted to pass a law like that myself, but so far I've been able to resist the urge. Once things are more settled in my kingdom I may change my mind, but for now I'll just have to put up with it."

He took the skin when she finished with it and also drank some tea, then he put it aside and sat back in his chair.

"Tell me what you know about Waysten's courtiers," he said, and there was no longer any lightness in his tone. "Does he have anyone he listens to all the time, someone whose advice he takes without question? Does he ever *take* advice, or does he rely solely on his own judgment?"

"He *pretends* to take advice, but I don't think he really does," Elissia responded, once again surprised that she would be asked for her opinion. "He considers himself the only one around who can really think, an attitude that's perfectly clear if you watch him talking to others. He's usually condescending if someone tries to give him advice, and that no matter *who* the person with the advice happens to be."

"That's good news," the beast said thoughtfully, making no attempt to ask if she was sure or if there was anyone who could corroborate her opinion. "If he's relying only on his own judgment, he'll make a mistake sooner rather than later. And when the mistake happens he'll also try to correct it himself, and won't look around for help until he's in so deep that even the gods would be powerless to help him. I've been thinking about what you said yesterday, and there's a very good chance that Gardal *is* being kept in a farmhouse somewhere outside of the city. If your friends can tell us which farms have been abandoned until now, we can check them out fairly quickly."

"But what if we have to go into the city after all?" Elissia asked before she remembered about keeping quiet. "You can't just ride or walk in without doing something to disguise yourself, or they'll have you two heartbeats after you're recognized. But as far as a disguise goes, I can't imagine what you might do. False whiskers won't quite handle it."

"They will if they're applied properly," he responded enigmatically with a grin. "But before we start to apply them, let's wait to see if we do need to go into the city. If we have any luck at all, we'll find Gardal on a farm."

"I've found that relying on luck is too chancy for my nature," Elissia muttered, wondering if she'd ever

learn when to keep quiet. "I prefer to use plans with lots of thought behind them, but if you've done well with luck I hope the trend continues."

"Actually, I agree with *your* way of looking at things," he said with amusement, again surprising her. "If I don't have solid planning behind what I'm about to do, I'm usually not very happy. But sometimes luck shows up even if I'm not counting on it, and when it does I thank the gods and then take advantage of it. If it happens this time, I'll do the same."

There wasn't much to say to that, and for some reason Elissia felt very uncomfortable. She had nothing to do with her hands and nothing to look at, so she reached again for the tea. Once she had her drink and had recapped the skin and put it down, she discovered she was being studied in a very odd way.

"Is something wrong?" she asked warily, having no idea why the beast would be looking at her like that with a smile on his face. If he had something else in mind to bedevil her with, she might well end up having hysterics.

"The only thing wrong is that I haven't yet thanked you for what we shared last night," he answered, immediately making her wish she'd kept her mouth shut. "It was *your* efforts which made the time so memorable, and I was very impressed. It isn't every day you find someone with so little experience doing so well."

By that time he'd taken her hand to kiss, and all Elissia wanted to do was drop through a hole in the floor. She could feel the burning red in her cheeks, making her yearn for the chance to run and hide. She didn't *want* to remember what had gone on between them last night, and the least she could do was put the time in the proper perspective.

"If you want to thank somebody, you'll have to thank yourself," she said, trying to free her hand as she looked away from the man. "What happened between us was neither my choice nor really my doing, and I would appreciate it if you would not refer to the time again. The memory isn't quite as pleasant from my own point of view."

"It isn't?" he asked, sounding disappointed as he finally released her hand. "Then what the situation calls for is an apology instead. I apologize for being so clumsy that you weren't satisfied, and give you my word that I'll try not to do as badly again tonight. And now, I think, it's time we were on our way."

"What about putting the cabin back the way it was?" she asked before she could stop herself. "Aren't we supposed to do things?"

"Some of my men will take care of it," he answered, rising and offering her his hand. "If you'd been the kind of female who whined and complained I would have had *you* see to it, but as it is there's no reason to put my queen through something like that. And you *are* my queen, you know."

For the moment, Elissia qualified to herself as she stood without accepting his help. *For as long as you still want something from me*. She half expected the beast to make a fuss over the way she'd refused to take his hand, but all he did was turn and walk to the two sets of saddlebags standing ready near the door.

"Some time today I promise to see about getting you a bath," he said instead as he picked up both sets

of saddlebags. "Since you've brought two changes of clothes, you deserve to be given the chance to use at least one of them. Don't forget to bring the cushion."

Elissia almost *had* forgotten, and the fluster she felt nearly covered the quick annoyance touching her. The beast had gone pawing through *her* things without the least hesitation, considering it his right because they happened to be married. To her way of thinking it was pure intrusion, and the sooner that marriage was over the better she'd like it. She picked up the cushion and followed the beast out of the cabin, wondering if it would be possible to get even with him without his noticing

Her horse and another stood saddled and bridled just outside the cabin, their reins looped around a short hitching post. Elissia looked around to see where the beast's men were, but apparently she was to be spared the embarrassment of carrying a cushion past them. As far as she could see, she and the beast were alone.

"My men are under orders to stay far enough away that we can't tell they're around," the beast supplied, obviously knowing what she'd been thinking. "This is a time for us to get to know one another, and we can't do that if we're constantly tripping over my bodyguards. They've been trained to be invisible, so I'm just putting their training to use."

So the men *were* there, it just wasn't possible to see them. Elissia found that comforting only to a very small degree. She didn't know whether or not *they* could see *her*, but chances were excellent that they could. What was the sense in having bodyguards, if they weren't allowed to watch the body they were guarding? And they probably knew exactly what the beast had done to her, and were snickering somewhere behind her back. She should have expected nothing else from this man, so why in the world did she feel disappointed?

Elissia couldn't answer that question, not even after the beast helped her mount and they went on their way. The cushion did its job of protecting her tender bottom from the hardness of the saddle, so she was able to let her mind wander. She didn't even have to watch where they were going, not when she no longer rode alone. A beast who pretended to care about her rode next to her, and his large flock of bodyguards was around somewhere to keep them safe. Elissia's thoughts drifted to what she would do once Gardal was free and safely home, general plans sketching themselves in as she pictured one possibility after another. It wouldn't be hard to –

Elissia's mount reared as it screamed, a reaction shared by the beast's mount an instant later. The beast's mount was a stallion, but even so its scream sounded more like fear than challenge. Elissia would have been unseated if she hadn't had her feet firmly in the stirrups, but the possibility of falling off was only a small problem. The much larger difficulty was a huge hunting cat, which stood not far away frightening the horses half to death. Its tail flicked back and forth as it showed its fangs in a grin of delight. It had clearly been looking for a meal, and now it thought it had found four of them.

"Stay back with the horses!" the beast ordered as he quickly dismounted before drawing his sword. "If that thing gets past me, just pick a direction and ride away as fast as you can. If you stay in the forest, my men will find you after a while."

And then he moved toward the big cat carefully, obviously intent on facing it all alone with nothing but his sword! For an instant Elissia couldn't believe that, not when his men ought to be there at any moment, but there was clearly no confusion about his actions. Facing a hunting cat that size with

nothing but a sword

The beast's stallion stood trembling, but with his reins hanging loose to the ground he had no choice but to stay where he was. Elissia's horse was trained in the same way, but when she dismounted she wasn't certain *her* horse wouldn't end up bolting. Whether it did or not was beside the point, however, as she'd already taken the bow and quiver of arrows that she needed with her. A sword wasn't at all the right weapon to use in the present situation, and she felt really put out that the beast would think she didn't know that.

It took only a moment to string the bow, but by then the beast and the cat he faced had already had one clash. The cat had roared out its intent to destroy the puny man daring to stand before it and then had charged, but the puny man wasn't a fool. He stood his ground only until the cat was *almost* on top of him, and then he'd jumped aside and slashed with his sword as the cat went by. The cat had also twisted aside at the last instant, so the sword only grazed it in passing. Even so, the cat screamed in fury and hatred, and whirled about before setting itself to launch another attack.

No more than heartbeats went by before the cat leaped again, but that was just long enough. Elissia had an arrow in her string and the nock drawn back to her ear, and as the cat went up into the air she loosed the arrow. She'd been taught to wait the extra seconds to be certain her target was committed to its line of attack, and the lesson proved its worth. The arrow caught the big cat right in the heart, and when it hit the ground it was already dead despite the thrashing of its body.

Elissia had put a second arrow in her string, but it was a lucky thing there was no need for it. Her hands had suddenly begun to tremble as her knees grew weak, reactions she'd been refusing to feel until now. As soon as it was absolutely certain that the big cat was dead, she began to look around for a place to sit down.

"Here, let me help you," the beast said, suddenly right beside her. He took the bow and the still-nocked arrow, then helped her to one side of the small clearing they stood in. He then eased her to sitting in front of a tree, and as soon as he'd replaced the arrow in its quiver he folded to the ground beside her.

"I didn't think there was time to string the bow, but I'm glad I was wrong," he said after a moment of just holding her to him. His arms were tight around her, but she still felt like shivering violently. "You're as pale as milk, Seea. Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'd be quite a bit better if all those men of your bodyguard had come out of hiding to help us," Elissia finally managed to say in an embarrassingly weak voice. "If I were the one paying them, I'd definitely be rather annoyed."

"But I told you that they have orders to keep out of sight," the beast protested, faint confusion in his voice. "That means out of hearing as well, so they have no idea what almost happened to us. We're 'protectively surrounded' in this forest, but that only goes for any human forces that may attack. For things like that cat, we're on our own."

Elissia was tempted to voice a small "Oh," but kept it instead on the inside. So all those men she'd pictured watching her and snickering weren't there after all, and she owed the beast an apology. But he didn't *know* she owed it to him, so she wasn't about to jump right in and offer it. Possibly later, at a more convenient time, she might change her mind about that, but for the moment

"Let me know as soon as you feel you can ride again," the beast said after a brief period of silence. "There might be more hunting cats around, and I think I've met all of them I care to today."

"And I think I've just become able to ride again," Elissia said at once, leaning away from the beast to sit alone. "I've never actually killed something like that before, and I'd really like to wait a while before I try to do it again."

"Are you saying that that incredible shot was nothing but luck?" the beast asked as he got to his feet and reached down to help her. "If so, you now know why I greet the appearance of luck with lots of welcome."

"Oh, no, it wasn't luck," Elissia said as she let him help her to stand. "I've been using a bow for many years and have even hunted regularly with it. I've just never killed anything like *that* before. It isn't quite the same as taking down a deer or an elk."

"No, taking down a predator like yourself is never the same as taking prey," the beast agreed. "I'll keep the bow and quiver until we get to the cabin, when I'll be able to get my own bow from among the things my men are in charge of. After that you can have them back."

Elissia decided it was a good thing she was still in no condition to make serious comments on things. Part of her wanted to protest his taking over the bow even if she was still shaky, but the rest wanted to ask why he wasn't in the midst of lecturing her about doing things that weren't considered womanly. And not only not lecturing her, but also clearly prepared to let her go on doing those things. It wasn't the first time she found herself not understanding the man who walked beside her, and it wasn't a comfortable feeling.

The cushion had fallen from her saddle, of course, but instead of replacing it she stuffed it into one of her saddlebags before remounting. Just like yesterday she no longer needed it, and it was a relief to get it out of the way. While waiting for the beast to remount she gave her horse a pat to thank it for not running off, and then they continued along the trail.

A little while later they heard a rider coming through the trees, and it turned out to be one of the beast's men. The beast rode over to meet the man, spoke to him briefly, then accepted a package from him. After that the rider turned and rode off again, and the beast returned to where Elissia waited.

"Our lunch," he announced, holding up the package. "I'm sure you know there are inns and roadhouses along the main road, and it would have been foolish not to take advantage of their presence even if we don't want to stop at any of them. Are you hungry enough to eat now, or would you rather wait a short while?"

"It seems to be past noon, so we might as well eat now," Elissia replied, hating the confusion that touched her again. Why had it suddenly become *her* decision when they ate? Why wasn't he still ordering her around and telling her when she was allowed to breathe?

"I'm really glad you said that," the beast told her with a grin as he dismounted. "My mother has always been firmly in charge of when mealtimes happen, and sometimes my father and brothers and I felt like skeletons before we got to table. But we were never allowed to argue her decisions, because we were taught that a wise man never takes over something that's a woman's to do."

He then started over to help Elissia dismount, but stopped when he saw that she'd already done it on her own. Instead he turned back to his horse, and led it over to where it could graze. Elissia moved her own horse over to the patch of sweet grass, and then it was time to join the beast at their own meal.

Elissia accepted the bread, meat, and cheese without comment after sitting down, then ate it in the same way. The beast chattered on around mouthfuls about the way his parents had always divided up the chores in their palace, stressing the things his mother had been in charge of. The list was the usual one, of course, with the woman in charge of all the menial things any idiot could see to. If the beast had been trying to ruin her appetite, he came close to doing it. She didn't need to have the uselessness of women underlined, not when she knew the fact so very well.

But why he was doing it was another question. It wasn't as if she'd been insisting that women were capable of doing much more than they were allowed to. They hadn't been arguing about anything at all, so why was he rubbing her nose in the pointlessness of her existence? Because she'd dared to save his life with a man's weapon? Could he really be that small?

After finishing the food and washing it down with drinks of the tea the beast still had, they continued on. He'd kept the bow close to hand while they ate and looked around constantly as they rode, but they reached the cabin in the late afternoon without coming across anything more dangerous than rabbits and birds. This second cabin looked just like the first, with a stable-shed standing to the left, but the shutters on the cabin had been opened.

"Don't worry, my men opened those shutters," the beast told her as they stopped near the shed. "I thought we'd enjoy having the place aired out a little before we got here, even though it's too late in the day to take advantage of the stream that's just a short way into the woods. But you can have that bath I promised you in the morning, once the sun is up and warm."

"The sun doesn't get warm enough for bathing until much too late in the morning," Elissia pointed out as she dismounted. "We can't be very far from Ramsond now, so a delay of any sort doesn't make much sense. I can stand washing in a basin until I get to my friend's house."

"Whether or not you use the stream is your decision," the beast said with a shrug as he got ready to lead his horse into the shed. "What time we leave tomorrow happens to be mine. The two men I sent to Ramsond haven't gotten back yet, otherwise I would have been told. What doesn't make sense is leaving here before we hear their report."

"But we don't have to wait *here*," Elissia protested, then realized that the beast hadn't heard her. He was already inside the shed, so she led her own mount inside then repeated what she'd said before adding, "If we wait at my friend's farmhouse, we'll be right there to do whatever has to be done."

"What if Waysten somehow found out about your friend?" the beast countered without looking away from unsaddling and unbridling his horse. "Then going straight there would be riding into a trap, something I thought we wanted to avoid. My men will also look around at some of the farms in the area, to see if anything unusual is going on in their vicinity."

"How can they tell if anything unusual is going on at my friend's place when they don't know who my friend is?" Elissia pointed out, fighting not to lose her temper. "I think you're delaying our departure for

another reason, one you don't care to share with me."

"If I am, then there's no sense in you asking me what my reason is," the beast countered, faint amusement in his tone. "If I don't want you to know, asking me won't cause me to tell you."

"How about putting a knife to your throat?" Elissia suggested sourly. "Even if that *doesn't* make you tell me, at least it would be more satisfying than just asking."

"But it would also be too tempting for someone like you, so we won't be trying it," the beast came back with a small laugh. Then he seemed to finish up with his horse, and walked to the stall Elissia still stood in. "You didn't have to do all that yourself. I would have done it for you."

"I can manage on my own, thanks," Elissia muttered, slipping the halter on her horse. "Some useless females can be trained to do things no one expects them to, as long as you work at teaching them long enough. And I just hope my brother agrees that your reason for leaving late tomorrow is a good one."

"When I tell him about it, I know he'll agree," the beast said softly, putting his big hands on Elissia's arms from behind. "And I *will* get to tell him about it, when we find and free him. You have to believe that."

"I believe that nothing will stop *me* from finding him," Elissia said, shaking off the beast's hands as she turned to leave the stall. With oats already having been put in the stall's bin, there was nothing left for her to do. "Having the same belief in others is something I'm not quite up to."

"Then we'll have to work on it together," the beast said as she passed him, his expression telling her he wasn't very pleased. "Doubting someone after he's given you his word isn't very nice."

"Being nice is one thing no one has ever accused me of," Elissia said, taking her saddlebags and heading for the cabin. There had been other accusations, of course, many of them, but there was no need to go into details.

The beast followed her into the cabin without saying anything else, his own saddlebags draped over one shoulder. He seemed to be thinking about something, but when he put the saddlebags down and went to a basin to wash his hands, his thinking appeared to be over.

"Go and close the shutters on the window in the bedchamber and then wait in there," he directed over his shoulder. "I'll be with you in a minute."

Elissia had no idea what she was supposed to wait *for*, but she no longer had the option of refusing to obey him. She was certain she would dislike his intentions no matter *what* he had in mind, and when he followed her into the room in little more than the minute he'd mentioned, her silent suspicions were confirmed.

"There's nothing wrong with being nice every once in a while," he said as he came in carrying a lamp and his saddlebags. "It especially doesn't hurt when you're trusting someone the way they asked you to. It's a lesson I expect you to learn during this trip, but it's obvious you need some help with that learning. Come over here."

He'd put the lamp down on a small table before closing the door, and then he'd walked over to the

room's one chair. It seemed he wasn't going to wait for her to "ask" to be spanked, but that was hardly surprising. He apparently enjoyed beating her, and couldn't put off the pleasure any longer. Elissia hesitated no more than an instant before going to him, not in the least anxious to make the time any worse for herself. At least it would soon be over for another day

"Let's take these trousers down first," he said when she stood in front of him. "Afterward you'll put them on again, since supper will be brought to us later."

He did the taking down of her trousers and drawers himself, and then he put her face down across his lap. Elissia closed her eyes in anticipation of the first smack, but it didn't come. Instead he stroked her bottom gently, and then suddenly that horrible device was being thrust into her again. She cried out in protest, but even tightening her muscles had been useless.

"No, you can't take it out again," he reminded her as she reached back in an effort to find the thing and remove it. "This will help you to learn how to be nice, and will also help you out in other areas as well. Now let's get these trousers and drawers pulled back up."

She didn't *want* her clothes pulled back up again, not with that horrible thing still in her, but once again she was given no choice. The items came up before she was put back on her feet, and then the trousers were fastened.

"There, now you're all proper again," the beast said as she stood there with her eyes closed and fought not to shiver. The simple movement of being stood up had caused the device to make her feel *that way* again, and she didn't know how long she'd be able to bear it.

"I – think I would like to be allowed to do my wifely duty now," Elissia said as she heard the beast stand up. The words nearly choked her, but she knew well enough that she would have to say them at *some* time. Better now than after an unnecessary wait.

"Oh, it's much too early for duty of that sort," the beast disagreed, a disgusting amount of amusement in his voice. "Besides, there's something you have to ask for *before* we get to the duty, and it's a bit too early for that as well. I need to sit down and relax for a time first, and you need to practice being nice."

And then he took Elissia by the wrist and pulled her into the front room. She gurgled and choked with the movement, but there was nothing she could do to stop those sensations from flashing through her. She stood motionless where the beast left her while he went back for the lamp, and when he returned with it he blew out the flame. The shutters on the front room were still open, and since daylight continued to come in, there was no need for the lamp.

"We have to talk about something, so come with me," the beast said, taking her by the wrist again. He pulled her after him to another chair, and once he sat he tugged her into his lap. The device made her gasp and turn sideways, which angled her toward the man who had done that to her. She wanted to hate him for that, more than for the spankings he'd given her, but at the moment she couldn't quite bring herself to do it.

"What we have to talk about is important, so pay attention," he said, his arms wrapped around her to keep her from standing up again. "I'm well aware of the fact that I owe you my life, but if you ever disobey me in a situation like that again you'd better hope that I don't survive. If I do and you do as

well, you won't sit down for a week. Don't you know you could have been killed?"

"I wasn't the one in immediate danger," Elissia gasped out, self control of all sort now completely beyond her. "If you'd rather think that I was simply saving my own life please do, but take this thing out of me!"

"I'm sure you'd rather be spanked in punishment than have *this* done, so that's why I chose this," the beast returned, cradling her as if she were a child. "What I'm trying to discourage you from is risking your life when it isn't entirely necessary. It so happens I killed a big cat like that one with a sword once, so you might say I learned the technique. But if it had gotten past me and attacked *you* instead, I would have been helpless to keep it from killing you. I want to hear that you'll never do something like that again."

"All right, I promise," Elissia said with all the desperation she felt. "Now will you take it out?"

"You know I won't," he returned, holding her even more tightly. "If a punishment is to be remembered, it can't be over and done with in only a minute or two. Let's see if we can't take your mind off it."

And with that his hand came to her face, raising it for his kiss. His lips were very soft and gentle on hers, but softness wasn't what she needed. He knew what she needed, but wasn't yet prepared to give it to her.

The kissing went on for quite some time, and during that time Elissia fought for some kind of control over her reactions. The device continued to drive her crazy, but after a short while she found she was able to pretend to a certain extent that it wasn't in complete charge. The beast's lips had heated her blood to a very high degree as well, but if she gritted her mental teeth she could – just – stand it.

But what she couldn't stand was the way the beast had no trouble making her obey him. No matter what he wanted he seemed to get it with ease, and what he wanted now was her. That would change, of course, once Gardal was free again, but despite the almost-constant anger she felt toward him, she half-wished it wouldn't. He was the first person in her life other than Gardal to pay actual attention to her, to go so far as to care about what she did. It would have been nice to have *someone* care, even if she did get spanked for what she did.

But the beast's caring was only temporary, so she had to continue hating him and everything he did. She'd never be able to survive the time needed to find Gardal with her sanity intact if she didn't hold firmly to that memory. It didn't help at all to want to get to know more about the man, to ask why he said and did certain things. He seemed to have been worried about her during the attack by the big hunting cat, but that was undoubtedly because he would have to face her father if anything happened to her. It *had* to be for that reason, but she'd almost asked why her survival mattered. She'd stopped herself just in time, to avoid hearing what she knew perfectly well was the truth

A knock at the door ended the time of teasing kisses, also causing Elissia to get too hastily to her feet. She stood fighting for control while the beast went to the door after lighting the lamp again, and by the time he returned with two platters and a drinking skin her blush had lessened a bit. Since darkness had fallen she hadn't been able to see the man at the door very well at all, but *he* certainly hadn't had any trouble seeing *her*. That there was actually nothing for him to see apparently made no difference to her inner self. *She* knew what had been done to her, and couldn't get over the feeling that everyone else

knew as well.

"Tonight we have venison and baked potatoes for our meal, Seea," the beast said as he set everything down on the table. "We'll have to eat it all with our hands, of course, but that usually makes food taste even better. Why don't you go and use the wash basin first."

Walking wasn't something Elissia wanted to do, but moving at her own pace was preferable to being pulled along at his. For that reason she went slowly to the basin, poured water into it and washed her hands, then dried them again on the length of thick cotton cloth the beast must have put near the basin. When she finished she stepped out of his way, and he took his own turn at washing. When her slow movement finally brought her to the table he was only a step or two behind, something she found out when his voice stopped her as she reached for a small slice of venison.

"No, now, you know better than that," he scolded lightly, coming up beside her. "Civilized people sit down to a meal, they don't help themselves on the run. There's a perfectly good chair to your right, and I expect you to use it."

"Don't you care anything at all about me?" Elissia blurted, all but wailing at this new demand of his. "I can't sit in that chair, and you know it as well as I do!"

"It won't be comfortable for you, but you certainly can sit in the chair," the beast disagreed at once, those dark eyes looking down at her. "Of course, you can always ask for your spanking first and *then* sit in the chair, but that decision is up to you. I want you to remember the lesson I'm teaching, but there's no need to overdo it."

No need to overdo it. Elissia closed her eyes for a moment, knowing perfectly well that he wasn't joking. If she didn't obey him he would make her ask to be spanked, which would turn the process of sitting down into something ten times worse. And there was nothing she might do to make him change his mind

"Can – can I give you a more detailed promise not to disobey you like that again?" she nearly begged, the only thing she could think of to say. "I'll put it however you like, say it in any words you choose, but please – "

"Seea, no," he interrupted, turning her gently around and putting his arms about her. "Saying things like that won't do any good, so there's no need for you to put yourself through it. I can't let you talk yourself out of the full punishment, or you'll immediately decide you'll be able to talk yourself out of it the next time as well. I'm doing this for your own good, so I can't afford to be less than firm about it. Some day you'll understand."

He held her to him for a moment and stroked her hair, almost making Elissia believe that he really did commiserate with her suffering. But whether or not that was true, he'd certainly convinced her of one thing: he wasn't going to change his mind under any circumstance. When Elissia found herself clinging to him in response to what really seemed like comfort, she forced herself to stop being foolish. Clinging was one of those things useless women did, and she wanted no part of it.

"Go ahead now and sit down," he urged when she moved back from him. "It will only be for a short time while we eat, and then you'll be able to stand up again. And please don't forget that I expect this

to be a *nice* meal that we share."

Rather than uselessly muttering under her breath, Elissia moved over to the chair and carefully lowered herself into it. She gasped as her bottom made full contact with the chair, finding the sensation almost as bad as she'd imagined it would be. The worst part of those sensations was the way they made her feel about the beast, of course, wanting him with every fiber of her being. She didn't *want* to want him, but even the feel of the leather strings against her skin under the trousers added to the rest. It was a waste of time wanting the man, but her body refused to understand that.

The time of the meal was far from pleasant, but Elissia still had to provide "nice" responses to the beast's table conversation. She'd been really hungry to start with, but the plain, unseasoned food combined with the rest to drive away all thoughts of hunger. She wasn't even sure of what she said to the man she shared the cabin with, but it must have been acceptable. After what seemed like hours he sat back in his chair with a sigh of satisfaction.

"That was really good, the meal and the company both," he said with a smile. "Are you sure you don't want to finish the last of the venison or have a little more wine? No? All right, then you can stand up again."

Elissia wasn't foolish enough to jump to her feet, not when she knew what that would feel like. She raised herself slowly and carefully, but being fully erect turned out to be less of a relief than she'd been expecting.

"You go on into the bedchamber now, and I'll be there in a moment," the beast directed as he also stood. "I'm more tired than I thought I'd be and may go straight to sleep, but I could be open to persuasion if you have something else in mind. It all depends on how strong that persuasion is."

He smiled again and moved away from her, leaving Elissia to briefly close her eyes before heading toward the bedchamber. She'd been told what she had to do if she wanted relief from what she'd been made to feel, and it took no talent at all to know in advance that persuading him would be less than easy. But she still had to try, or end up dying of need.

Again the beast was good to his word, and it wasn't long before he followed her into the bedchamber with the lamp from the front room and her saddlebags. He put the saddlebags down and closed the door, then put the lamp on the same small table he'd used earlier.

"Yes, getting straight into bed sounds really good right about now," he said as he turned from the lamp to stretch. "You don't have any objections to my doing that, do you?"

"Do you mean you intend going to bed without seeing to something important first?" Elissia asked, having thought frantically while she stood alone in the room. It hadn't been hard to see that the bed was already made up, so even having to wait until it was useable would not have delayed him. "I thought you were more conscientious than that."

"What thing of importance are you talking about?" he asked as he watched her make her slow way over to him. "I don't remember anything left undone."

"Then let me remind you," Elissia replied, lowering her head as she stood before him – and refraining from calling him a liar. "I've been a very bad girl today, and because of that I really should be properly

spanked. Are you going to let me get away with being bad?"

"Letting a woman get away with being bad isn't the best thing for her," the beast allowed, making Elissia know he watched her closely. "But I really am awfully tired, so maybe we can take care of the matter tomorrow."

"But by tomorrow I'll have learned all the wrong lessons," Elissia protested, suddenly not quite sure he *meant* to let himself be coaxed. "You know you don't want me to learn the wrong lessons, so *please* spank me tonight!"

By then she'd put her arms around him and rested her head against his chest. She couldn't believe she'd actually said what she had, and even more, meant every word. She was frantic at the thought of his simply going to sleep, and as shocking as the revelation was, she found herself willing to do *anything* to keep it from happening.

"I admire you for wanting to be properly corrected at the proper time," the beast said after a pause that had scraped against her nerves. "I can't in all good conscience let such admirable behavior go unrewarded, so let's take care of the matter right now. Come with me."

He'd put his arms around her almost at once, and now he released her to lead her to the chair. He sat down and raised her tunic before beginning to open her trousers, and Elissia couldn't believe the relief she felt. She was about to be given a hard spanking, and what she felt was *relief!* What had the miserable beast done to her?

Whatever it was, there was more to come before it ended. The beast lowered her trousers and drawers and then put her across his knees, finally running his hand over her bare bottom. Every movement and touch made her want to gasp, but it was always possible that the wrong sound at the wrong time might cause him to change his mind. For that reason she swallowed a moan as he continued to caress her, and then that part of it was over.

"Brace yourself now," he warned as his hand left her bottom. "You *were* a bad girl today, a very bad girl, and this will be part of your punishment. It will probably be the hardest part, but you really do have to learn that lesson."

Before Elissia could offer to swear a blood oath that she *had* learned the lesson, his hand came down with the first smack. For some reason she seemed to have been expecting the spanking to be no more than a token effort, but the "Oh!" forced out of her at once made it clear that she'd been wrong. His hand had touched her far from gently, and the following smacks proved that the first hadn't been a mistake. She writhed at the urging of the device even as she began to cry from the hard, punishing spanking, and the tears would have been wasted if they'd been a ploy. The beast had no trouble ignoring them as his hand continued to come down on her bottom in an even, rapid rhythm, making her regret everything she'd done and even thought about.

The spanking lasted much too long, and by the time it was over Elissia was nearly sobbing. The beast had made her bottom ache more than any of the other times, and she really did feel punished. When he finally let her up it was to help her out of her clothing, and then he led her to the bed.

"You can lie belly down until I'm ready for you," he said as she crawled onto the bed and put her cheek

to the quilt. "You more than earned the punishment you were given, but now it's time for soothing. And since you've already asked to do your duty as my wife, you won't need to ask again."

Elissia was still desperate to be soothed, but she'd now reached the point of half wishing he would insist on going straight to sleep. Her bottom throbbed and ached with the results of his anger-induced punishment, and when he put her to his use it would feel as if she were being spanked all over again. But as thoroughly intimidated as she now felt, she knew that refusing him anything would be impossible. And she did still want him, even more than before

This time he blew out the lamp before joining her in bed, and when he took her in his arms she was very grateful for that. His kiss was gentle but coaxingly passionate, and she couldn't keep herself from responding. When he began to caress her she put her hands to his bare back, shuddering as she felt the hard muscle under his skin. She *couldn't* admit how much she wanted this man, she just couldn't, not when he would never be hers. His lips on her breasts, his hand on her thigh she would never be able to live once the reality turned into nothing but memory, so it was a good thing she'd already made her plans. Once Gardal was safe she could end the pain

but when he entered her she was very glad to have a reason to cry out. If he knew what she meant to do he just might keep her out of pity, and that would be a thousand times worse than death. No, she had to make sure he never found out, but meanwhile his heavy stroking made her forget about everything but him. And especially about the woman he would next do this to, once she was no longer in the way

Princess Brat

Chapter 6

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Derand awoke first again the next morning, and thoughts of how nicely the night had gone led him to a repeat performance that he hadn't planned. He was getting to the point where it was hard to keep his hands off Seea, but he couldn't just pick her up and carry her off to bed even when there was a bed available. If he wanted her to be as eager as he was he would have to have patience, but hanging back wasn't easy. So he took advantage of the fact that she was still asleep and made love to her again, then held her until sleep had reclaimed her. They'd had a long, intense bout of lovemaking the night before, and he would have enjoyed joining her in falling asleep again.

But if his men got back early enough today, they'd be able to move on toward Ramsond. Along with the information he needed, those men would also be bringing the items he needed for his disguise. Since he wasn't about to discuss the disguise he'd thought of – especially with Seea - before he absolutely had to, he'd refused to tell her *why* they weren't going directly on to the city. Her continuing lack of trust in him had hurt enough that he'd made an issue of it, but the whole thing had ended really well. He'd given her a spanking she'd remember for quite a while, but that hadn't stopped her from nearly devouring him when he got into bed.

And to think I almost missed out on that, he thought with a grin as he dressed and went silently out to the front room. *Her appetites are already enormous, much sooner than I expected. Once they're firmly established and we don't need to use the device any longer, she'll probably respond as though we were still using it. Spankings will also help to remind her, and we won't soon run out of reasons for those. As soon as she no longer has her brother to worry about, I'm sure to have my hands full.*

Derand chuckled at the thought of the trouble Seea was likely to make for him, especially when it came to seeing to those chores the wife of a king *had* to take care of. He certainly couldn't do everything himself even if he were any good at things like that, but to say that Seea was less than enthusiastic about running a palace's household was to understate the matter severely. He'd tried to use his own mother as an example of how good a woman had to be to run such a household smoothly, but Seea had seemed to be dismissing every word he said. Once they found Gardal and freed him, he'd have to ask Seea just what it was that she had against being in complete charge of a palace. It wasn't as if he expected her to do all the work herself

But there was something even more important that he needed her for, the job of being an advisor he could rely on. She had the knack of keeping her eyes open and actually *seeing* what people were like, which let her make shrewd and accurate guesses about what they were apt to do. And she also seemed able to spot a trap from a league away, then find a way around that trap. Abilities like hers were rare and precious, certainly not to be wasted.

She'd be kept busy as his wife and queen, but first he had to get her to relax and accept the position

along with what went with it. She hadn't mentioned their marriage being over anytime soon for a while, so maybe she was finally getting past the idea of being free of him. Being around her was like having your rope on a wild stallion; if you didn't pay really close attention, the stallion would slip free and be gone. Right now the only thing holding her was the danger to Gardal's life. He'd have to keep his eyes wide open once they had Gardal back and safe

After throwing water in his face to wake himself up, Derand opened the shutters on the windows to let his men know he was up and about. Even the assigned liaison wasn't close enough to disturb his and Seea's privacy, but seeing the shutters open would let the man know he wanted something. What Derand wanted at the moment was some bread to quiet his appetite until breakfast was ready, preferably with a generous coating of lightly salted butter. If his men had already gone to the nearest inn or roadhouse it might prove possible to get the bread. If they hadn't, he'd just have to wait until they did or the porridge was ready

When his man came to the cabin door, there was a package in his hand that encouraged Derand to hope for the best. It did turn out to be bread, so Derand gave his man a few orders about what he wanted, and then returned inside to eat. The porridge would soon be ready, he'd been told, and as soon as it was, two bowls of it would be brought.

The pledge of a few minutes wasn't a lie, and shortly the bowls and a skin of fresh tea was brought to the door. It also finally came through to Derand how nice and warm the new day already was, so he added to the orders he'd given earlier before letting his man leave again. He'd given his wife a promise about something, and now meant to make good on that promise.

Derand knocked softly before reentering the bedchamber, which helped to bring Seea awake. She looked over at him blurrily, so he smiled.

"Breakfast is ready, Seea, so it's time to get up and dressed," he said, walking over to her saddlebags. "I'll wait for you in the front room."

He took her vague nod as agreement, and so left her to wake up the rest of the way. He also took her saddlebags with him, to be sure that she didn't put on either of the two changes of clothing she had with her. That would come later, after she'd had the bath she'd been promised.

It was no more than a few minutes before Seea appeared from the bedchamber, completely dressed and now looking more fully awake. She came to the table and paused to glance down at her chair, but that had already been taken care of. Derand, knowing what she'd been given last night, had already put the cushion on it.

"It's a beautiful day, so after breakfast we'll both go for a bath," Derand told her as she took her seat rather gingerly. "Bathing in a stream is fun, and I'm looking forward to it."

"I've never bathed in a stream," she said after a short hesitation, looking at her porridge rather than at him where he sat to her left. "I think I'd prefer to bathe as best I can from the basin."

"And miss the fun?" Derand said, suddenly very eager to rid her of that quietness. He hated to see her like that, a suggestion of what she'd become for far too long in her father's palace. "You *need* some fun in your life, to make you smile if for no other reason. I can't remember the last time I saw you smile."

Rather than answer, she began to eat. Derand had the feeling she was deliberately keeping silent rather than not having anything to say, a decision he would consider wise at another time and place. Right now, though Hopefully she would come out of it once the remnants of last night's spanking were not so much with her.

Derand applied himself to his own breakfast, and again finished before she did. This time, though, she seemed to be forcing herself to eat, another sign Derand didn't care for. He had to pull her out of the black mood as fast as possible, using the only tool he had against it.

"My men haven't come back from Ramsond yet, but they should be here any time," he said, quickly drawing her attention. "If for some reason they aren't here by nightfall, we'll plan on leaving early tomorrow anyway. I can see waiting one day, but not any longer."

"Don't forget it's always possible they were captured," she pointed out, finally pushing away her bowl. "If they were then Waysten knows you're coming for certain, and he'll have more than casual traps set. I may have to go into the city alone."

"If it comes down to that, we'll figure out a way to make sure you're protected even if you *seem* to be alone," Derand said, hating the idea but forced to acknowledge the possibility. "But first we'll have to make sure that Gardal isn't being kept on an abandoned farm. If he is, no one will have to go into the city."

"I've been thinking about that, and I don't believe it's very likely any longer," she replied, reaching distractedly for the tea. "People in a farm district *do* know everything that goes on in it, so even using a farm that isn't abandoned would be a risk on Waysten's part. He'd also have to limit the number of men he has around Gardal, which would make freeing him much too easy. No, I think Gardal is being kept somewhere in the city, but I don't yet know exactly where."

"Wouldn't it be even harder to disguise the presence of guards in a city?" Derand put, all but thinking out loud. "I mean, if a house in *your* neighborhood suddenly had all sorts of men guarding it all the time, wouldn't you notice and mention it to your friends?"

"Yes, I would, so that leaves two possibilities," Seea answered after taking a swallow of tea. "Either he's being kept in a place where guardsmen are *supposed* to be at all times, or he's in some location that's run – and guarded by – the criminal element every city has. If the criminals are being led to believe that my brother is being held for ransom rather than for political reasons, they'd help out and keep quiet for the promise of a portion of the ransom."

"And that would be the most likely place to find him, since the other possibility would have to be official and therefore easily traceable to Waysten," Derand concluded for her. "There's always the chance that they have him drugged and so don't need too many guards on him, but that can be checked on both inside and out of the city. I, personally, tend to agree that the criminal element is involved, so we'll have to make the strongest efforts in that direction."

"Buying the information will be easiest if it's done discreetly enough," she responded after taking a second drink. "Do you have enough gold with you?"

"More than enough," he assured her, then stood up. "So let's go see to getting those baths. If we don't,

they'll know we're coming as soon as they're downwind of us."

"I learned to do without bathing on hunting trips," she said, ignoring the hand he held out to her. "If you use basin-washing it isn't too bad, and I'd rather – "

"Seea, we're going to take a bath," he interrupted firmly, reaching to her hand and taking it just as firmly. "And we're going to have fun, just the way I said we would."

Her expression briefly looked as though she were flinching on the inside, and then she stood up with a sigh. She seemed to be expecting his idea of fun to be painful, which meant he *had* to show her she was wrong. Or maybe fun always *had* been painful for her, and she'd gotten to the point of expecting nothing else. He hoped he was wrong about that, but was afraid he wasn't. So how did you make something fun for someone who didn't know how to *have* fun?

Derand used the hand he held to lead her over to her saddlebags, then told her to take out a clean outfit. He went into the bedchamber to do the same with his own saddlebags, then came back out and went toward the bow standing in the corner of the room. The bow and a quiver of clothyard shafts had been waiting when they reached the cabin, but happily Derand hadn't needed the weapon then. Now he might, so he wasn't about to leave it behind.

When they were both ready he led the way out of the cabin, moving through the woods in the direction the stream was supposed to lie. Seea followed him silently for a time, but then she moved up to walk beside him.

"Why do you keep calling me that strange name?" she asked, her attitude telling him that curiosity had driven her to put the question. "My name is Elissia, not something you might call a pet."

"'Elissia' is a pretty name, but it's too long and formal," he responded, deciding to try again to lighten the mood between them. "Besides, you *are* my pet, at least for the time being. Why don't you relax and enjoy the time? It won't be for too much longer, remember, and then we'll have to go back to the everyday demands of the world. Haven't you ever learned to take enjoyment when you can get it?"

Her only answer was a lowering of her head, which made Derand sigh on the inside. Hadn't she had *any* enjoyment out of life until now? She'd seemed to enjoy making her father do things her way, but had she really? If she'd considered it a duty rather than enjoyment, he'd misjudged her badly. That was something else they'd have to talk about, but not at the moment. He could see the stream through the trees ahead, and was really looking forward to that bath. He'd been raised to the idea of regular bathing, and tended to miss that the most during the time of campaigns.

"Will you look at that," he said when they came out of the woods and were able to see the stream clearly. "Isn't it the most beautiful and inviting sight you've seen in a very long while? And it even comes equipped with large towels we can use to dry ourselves with."

She looked at the towels with a frown, apparently taking him at his word at first. Then reason prevailed and she transferred a dark look to him, which made him grin.

"All right, so it was my men who provided the towels," he allowed with a chuckle. "But it's more fun to think that all streams come complete with the essentials, including the soap you can't see but which

also ought to be there. You do know how to pretend, don't you?"

"Yes, I know how to pretend," she answered with a sigh, but that wasn't all she had to say. She hesitated a long moment, then added, "But it isn't possible to pretend about *everything*. I'm now forced to admit that I can't swim. That's why I wanted to wash in the basin back at the cabin rather than come out here."

"Why are you making it sound like such a tragedy?" he asked, seriously curious. "No one can do *everything* in this life, and not knowing how to swim is something that can be easily taken care of. The area near the bank ought to be shallow enough to stand, and afterward I'll give you your first swimming lesson."

"You expect me to put my life in *your* hands?" she blurted, now looking positively pale. "Considering how much trouble you seem to find me, I'd probably be safer with that cat I killed yesterday."

"I don't find you to be any trouble at all," he corrected her, speaking the absolute truth. "Another day will be another matter, but right now you're anything but trouble. And what did we discuss about not trusting people who *ought* to be trusted?"

He'd used the word "discuss" in case there was anyone close enough to hear their conversation, but Seea's blush told him she knew what he really meant. Part of the reason she'd had the device put in her early last night was because of a lack of trust, and she obviously needed the reminder. But *why* did she need it? Was she deliberately letting herself forget everything he said and did because she expected to be rid of him soon? If so, that was something they needed to discuss right now.

"Seea, are you thinking that our marriage will be annulled once we find your brother?" he asked, knowing he had her attention even though she didn't look up at him. "I believe I've already said that that isn't going to happen, so you'd better get used to the idea. And I'd like to know what you find so terrible about running a palace as its queen and mistress. It isn't everyone who can do it right."

"Of course not," she muttered with a snort of disbelief and scorn, still keeping her gaze away from him. "It takes the incredible talent of finding people to give orders to the servants, and then sitting back and letting them give those orders. My mother happens to have that talent, and she must work at it oh, a good five or ten minutes a day – if that long. I don't think I could stand the pressure and strain."

Derand knew that Seea's mother was a really sweet woman, but so passive that it was hard to tell just how intelligent she was. She never pushed herself forward or voiced an opinion that wasn't asked for, and since people rarely remembered she was around she was never asked for an opinion. But quiet and unobtrusive didn't necessarily mean stupid

"You sound as if you followed your mother around for a few days, seeing for yourself that she did little or nothing," Derand commented, certain that Seea was voicing a prejudice rather than discussing anything she'd actually witnessed. "How long ago did you do that?"

"Have you forgotten that I'm a princess and was raised the proper way?" she countered, now kicking at the grass under her boots. "I was taught everything I need to know about running a household of any size, up to and including a palace. As I said, the pressure and strain are more than I could handle."

"I *had* forgotten girls are taught that," Derand muttered, now at a loss as to what to say. Seea wasn't

just sounding off about something she didn't have firsthand knowledge of, she'd been put through whatever the training was like. The problem was obviously going to be more involved than he'd thought, but it didn't have to be solved right this minute – thank the gods.

"Let's stop talking and get to bathing," he said, more than happy to drop the subject. "I'd like to be ready to go when my men get back, not caught in the middle of scrubbing my hide."

Seea seemed just as willing to let the matter go, but happiness was conspicuous by its absence. Derand stopped a short distance from the towels and soap and began to get out of his clothes, his weapons first placed in a way that they could be gotten to quickly. Seea moved over to a bush before beginning to undress, her clean clothes put down carefully on the grass, her well-worn ones simply dropped. Although she wore less Derand was ready first, a fact which wasn't terribly surprising. People who couldn't swim were usually afraid of the water, so he had to show her there was nothing to fear.

Moving to the bank and slipping into the water took only a moment, and then Derand was enjoying the feel of wetness all around him. The water was warmer than he'd expected it to be, which meant it was refreshing rather than chilling. He bent to wet his shoulders and chest, and then he turned to Seea.

"You won't have any trouble standing up right here," he said, gesturing around him. "Even the bank comes right down to the water, so you can simply slide in. I'm also right here to catch you, so stop hanging back and join me. As they say, the water's fine."

"At least there's one bright spot in all of this," Seea muttered as she made her reluctant way to where he stood. "If something hungry comes swimming up out of all that water, it will probably eat you first."

"It will definitely eat me first, because I probably taste better than you do," he agreed with a grin, putting his hands up. "Come on, now, just slide in."

She gave up hanging back with a sigh and sat down at the edge of the bank, then slid into the water. He caught her just as he'd promised he would, and held her until she stood as firmly as it's possible to stand in water. He really had no interest in letting her go even then, but she did need to find a measure of confidence before the fear eased its hold on her.

"Now we can get to washing," he said as he reached for the large pouch lying next to the towels. "The soap is in here, so help yourself as you need to."

She turned carefully to look at the pouch, then used the bank to pull herself closer to it. The soap had been broken up into slivers that would foam up in a bather's hand once water was added, making it much easier to use. If it had been left in large lumps the way it usually was, the person bathing would have to keep track of the lump he or she was using – and hope that they didn't drop it.

Derand had already helped himself to a handful of slivers, so he used them to wash his chest and arms. He'd shaved before breakfast came and Seea woke up, and once Seea began her own washing he took more slivers to use on his hair. He even did his best to wash the parts of him that were underwater, and once he'd rinsed all the soap away he stood and waited for Seea to be finished. She hadn't moved at all from her place right beside the bank, but that would change.

"Now, doesn't that make you feel at least a little better?" he finally asked once she'd seen to the final

rinsing. "I usually enjoy taking my time in a bath, but today we have too much to do. Are you ready to get started?"

"Started with what?" she asked warily as he began to move closer to her, and then she remembered. "No, really, I don't *want* to learn how to swim right now. We can do it some other time, after – Don't!"

By then he had his arms around her and had lifted her from her feet, an action requiring no effort at all, thanks to the water. She gasped and threw her own arms around his neck in fright, a reflex that made him want to hum with pleasure. Her bare breasts were thrust into his equally bare chest, and if she hadn't been so frightened

But she *was* that frightened, so Derand pushed his fantasies aside with a sigh and got on with his reason for picking her up in the first place.

"Try to relax and pay attention to the water around you," he said, bending his knees in order to lower her. "Can you feel the way it wants to make you float in spite of your not wanting to? Are you on the verge of sinking like a rock, or floating like a fish?"

"I'm on the verge of having hysterics," she muttered in answer, but not seriously. Her death grip on his neck had eased fractionally, and she did seem to be paying attention to the way the water treated her. She was too full-figured to be anything but buoyant, something Derand had been sure of but she would never have believed.

"I'm going to take your hands in mine and hold them," Derand warned her next. "I won't let you go under, so don't be afraid. The stream current here next to the bank is very gentle, and you'll be perfectly all right. No, don't tighten your grip on me, there's nothing to be afraid of."

It was clear from Seea's reaction that she didn't agree with the statement, but again Derand wasn't surprised. It took a while to get her to relax again and a bit longer to talk her into taking his hands, but when she finally did she floated out away from him like a banner in a wind. The expression on her face said she didn't expect the condition to last, but after a minute or two she gained enough confidence to kick her feet a bit.

"Well, I'm impressed," Derand said then, smiling down at her. "Adults don't usually learn this much this quickly, so you ought to be proud of yourself. Maybe we'll be able to come back later for a second lesson."

She parted her lips as if to protest leaving, but at the last moment decided against speaking the words. She still wasn't truly confident in the water, and Derand wanted to get her out of it before some accident happened to ruin the small amount of confidence she did have. The next time she would approach the idea of learning to swim with the memory of a pleasant time to color her outlook, and that would make all the difference.

Derand helped her up on the bank, then waited until she had a towel and had moved out of the way before following. He felt refreshed and relaxed as he picked up his own towel, watching Seea take herself behind her bush. He would have enjoyed following her and giving them a reason to return to the stream to rinse off, but making love to Seea there in the open would have upset her. He knew she still pictured his men watching them from hiding, and since it might even have been true at the moment

he would simply have to wait. Maybe once they got back to the cabin

It was a foregone conclusion that Seea would be dressed before him, and that turned out to be true. When Derand pulled his boots on and stood, he saw the girl staring out across the stream to the other side. She held her worn clothing in the crook of one arm, and seemed to be viewing the stream with newfound appreciation. Derand chuckled to himself at that and turned toward his swordbelt – only to go motionless with a strangled exclamation.

"What is it?" he heard Seea ask quickly, and then she added, "Oh, no."

By that Derand knew she'd seen what he already had: the skunk which had come out of the woods to stand right behind his weapons. The thing looked up at him with a calm that was downright disconcerting, and then it began to move toward him with its tail high. Derand lost no time in backing away, half a step for every full step the skunk took. He wasn't very far from the edge of the stream, he knew, and he didn't want to –

Derand discovered the hard way just how close the stream was when his latest step proved not to be there. His arms windmilled as he went over backwards into the water with a giant splash, and once he surfaced again it took a moment before he had his eyes wiped. When he did, though, he saw something he hadn't expected: the skunk had disappeared, and Seea stood convulsed with laughter.

"Where did it go?" he tried to ask the girl, but she was too busy enjoying herself to respond. He finally made his way to the bank and up onto it to stand dripping, and that seemed to add to her amusement. She laughed with very clear delight for almost another minute, and then she shook her head.

"The skunk seemed to like water even less than I do," she finally managed in a breathless way. "When you splashed it like that, it got insulted and ran away. I think it might have had a crush on you, and now you've ruined its day."

"Well, as long as *you* were amused, it wasn't a total waste of time," Derand growled, looking down at himself. He did have another set of leathers to change into, but not here at the stream. What he had was the choice of squishing back to the cabin as he was, or getting back into clothes he'd worn for too many days. He didn't like either option, but finally settled for the squishing. That, at least, would save him from needing another bath right away.

"You were right about it being fun to visit a stream," Seea commented in a very bland way, her expression finally back under her control. "When do you think we can do it again?"

Rather than answer, Derand simply growled wordlessly and went to gather what had to be taken back with them. He held his swordbelt instead of putting it on and stalked into the woods, and Seea trailed after him with her clothes and the towel she'd used. There wasn't another sound out of her, but Derand could *feel* the smirk she wore.

When he reached the cabin, Derand left a wet trail across the front room as he stomped into the bedchamber. He also swung the door closed with moderate strength, intent on showing that he hadn't appreciated Seea's attitude. He'd wanted to see her smile not make her laugh, and especially not at *him*. After all he'd tried to do, even after he'd started to teach her how to swim, she still hadn't hesitated to *laugh* at him. That hurt, but as Derand stripped off his wet clothes before using the towel again, he

told himself with grim satisfaction that he didn't have to hurt alone. It was obvious that she didn't care anything about *him*. The least he could do was show that he felt the same even if he didn't

Elissia winced as the bedchamber door slammed shut, telling her more clearly than words that her company wasn't wanted any longer. All during the walk through the woods back to the cabin she'd been trying to think of a way to apologize for having laughed at the beast, but the proper words had refused to come. She knew well enough from having grown up with her brother that men did tend to have very little of a sense of humor when it came to something that made them look foolish. If she'd remembered that soon enough to keep from teasing the beast over what had happened

But she hadn't remembered soon enough and hadn't been able to find the words to apologize, and now he was really angry with her. She would have enjoyed believing that he had no cause to be angry, but she knew well enough how *she* would feel if someone laughed at an accident *she* had. She would hate that person, even if the only thing she felt for them before that was pity

Elissia sighed as she walked to a chair and sat, then reached for the skin of tea which had been left on the table. She'd been startled when the beast had tried to insist that their marriage wasn't going to be annulled, but then she'd understood what he was doing. He must have thought that she felt shamed at sharing a bed with a man who would soon no longer be her husband, so he'd taken pity on her and lied. But he hadn't been able to keep up the lying for long, which showed that basically he must be a fairly honest person. And he hadn't taken advantage of the lie to put her beneath him yet again, which someone else in his place might well have done.

And to thank him for that, as well as for trying to teach her how to swim, she'd laughed at him. At first she'd thought he would share the amusement, but when he didn't why hadn't she had the sense to understand what was happening? Did a tree have to fall on her before she saw the obvious?

"You're not quite as good a person as you like to believe, are you?" she muttered to herself after putting the skin of tea back on the table. "And you still can't think of what you might say to him "

And that, she knew, was partly due to what she'd felt this morning, when he'd awakened her in an unexpected way. He'd taken the device out of her again after she'd fallen asleep last night, but when he came to her this morning it was almost as though the horrible thing was still inside her. She'd *wanted* him to touch her, and to kiss her, and to put himself inside her, just as though she really did expect to be the wife he cared for from now on. And when she'd fallen asleep again afterward, she'd dreamed about being gently held by him, just the way she wanted to be.

But that was never going to happen, and she knew she'd better get used to the idea. He was being kind by lying to her, but hadn't even been able to deny the fact that she wasn't needed to run his household. She would be completely useless as his wife, and probably worse than useless. He'd denied that she caused him trouble, but if that was so why did he keep spanking her? No, she was nothing but trouble to him, and he would separate himself from her as quickly as he could once Gardal was safe.

Elissia looked down at her hands where they twisted together in her lap, struggling not to break down and cry. She made trouble for the man just by being there with him, she made him feel so guilty that he was forced to lie, and then she repaid his unnecessary kindness by laughing at him. Not only did he have no reason to want to keep her as his wife, he had every reason not to. She was such a flaming

success at everything she tried, it was a wonder she hadn't yet managed to destroy the world. But by accident, of course, only by accident –

"Are you resting comfortably?" the man's voice came suddenly, startling her. She hadn't heard the bedchamber door opening, but obviously it had. "You exerted yourself quite a lot back at the stream, so you probably *need* the rest. A pity you won't be getting it quite the way you had in mind."

Elissia didn't know what he was talking about, but she had no time to question him. He strode over to her without another word, pulled her out of the chair, then moved the two steps necessary to reach his own chair. Once there she was quickly put across his knees, her trousers and drawers were taken down, and then he began to spank her.

If she'd thought he was angry yesterday, she now learned the real meaning of anger. His hand felt as hard as a wooden paddle, and the strength he put into every slap and smack hurt more than ever before. And since she hadn't quite gotten over the last spanking, he quickly had her howling and kicking and struggling to escape. But there *was* no escape from the punishment, and even her sobs were drowned out by the sound of his hand striking her bottom.

The spanking lasted for quite a while, and when it was finally over he picked her up and carried her into the bedchamber. She was crying wildly by then, and didn't even stop when he dropped her on the bed. She just turned to her belly as fast as possible, then buried her face in the quilt.

"You'll stay there, just as you are now, until I tell you that you have my permission to get up," he said in a voice as cold as a winter's night. "And while you're lying there resting, you'd better keep in mind that you still have to *ask* for a spanking sometime today. The one you just got was a bonus, so it doesn't count on *your* side of the slate."

And with that he walked out and closed the door, leaving her all alone in her misery. Her bottom really hurt, she felt horribly embarrassed needing to lie there with her trousers and drawers still down around her ankles, and there was no doubt that he'd decided not to waste any more kindness on her. All she wanted to do was get up and run into the woods so that she would never have to see and hear him like that again, but she'd given her word not to. She'd have to continue on with him, knowing how much he now hated her, also knowing that it was entirely her own fault. It looked like she *had* managed to destroy the world, only she hadn't noticed right away. She'd notice from now on, though, without the least doubt

Just like her inner pain, the tears and crying refused to stop. They went on, and on, and on

Derand sat slumped in his chair for a timeless time, his thoughts too black for him to want to examine them carefully. He was brought out of it by a knock at the door, which turned out to be one of his men with their lunch. He accepted the package without comment, handed over the used bowls from breakfast, then went back to his chair again but didn't sit. He had very little appetite himself, but maybe the girl did.

The girl. Derand laughed bleakly at himself for no longer calling the girl by the name he'd given her, but he couldn't help it. Seea was someone who was supposed to grow into the woman he really wanted, a woman who would want *him* in return. But "the girl" was just a passing stranger, someone who would be out of his life as soon as her brother was rescued. It had become very clear which one *she* wanted

to be, and all he could do was accommodate her.

He walked over to the bedchamber door and paused to knock, but knocking would have been stupid. The way he'd left things she had no say about his coming and going, so he simply opened the door and went in. She'd know better by now than to say the wrong thing to him, but most probably she'd be thinking all sorts of indignant and outraged curses

Derand stopped short when he saw that she wasn't doing any kind of thinking. The girl had fallen asleep, but even in her sleep she still seemed to be crying. Her slight body shuddered with muted sobbing, and that made Derand retreat in confusion. She'd certainly cried hard enough during the spanking, but that could be considered an attempt to make the time easier on herself. He'd naturally ignored her tears, but now How could he ignore the fact that hours had passed but she was *still* crying, even in her sleep.

Shaking his head didn't help to make matters easier to understand, and when he reached his chair and sat again he leaned forward to clasp his hands as his forearms rested on his thighs. He'd let all his hurt and anger come out when he'd spanked the girl, but was it possible he'd also really hurt her? That hadn't been his intention, but what if he'd done it anyway? To be brutally honest about it all, it wasn't *her* fault if she didn't feel for him what he felt for her. It also wasn't fair to punish her for that lack, as if she were deliberately luring him on and then pushing him away. She'd never given any indication that she wanted him when she wasn't forced to it by the device, so what right did he have to feel disappointed?

The answer to that last question was too obvious to state, but he did it anyway. He had *no* right to be disappointed at her lack of interest, and he'd been the one who'd said he wanted to make their outing fun. He'd been so deeply concerned over the possibility that she'd never *had* any fun, and then when she'd finally found some he'd punished her for it. Looked at objectively he'd been a ridiculous sight, but he hadn't been *able* to look at it objectively. He still couldn't, but that didn't keep him from the disturbing suspicion that he'd been much too harsh with the girl.

"So what am I supposed to do about it *now*?" he whispered, wishing he could ask that of his father. That and a lot of other questions besides, just as he'd done when he was still a boy. But he was a man now and a successful conqueror, and as such was supposed to have all the answers he needed without asking anyone else. It would be nice if things really worked that way

Derand sat deep in thought for quite some time, but nothing in the way of enlightenment came. At this point apologizing would be useless, so there was no sense in trying it. What he *could* try was still beyond him, but maybe he'd think of something when the girl woke up. They still had to spend quite a lot of time together, not to mention cooperate to find Gardal. That meant there was still a chance things could change between them, so there was no sense in giving up hope just yet.

That made Derand feel the least bit better, and so did the fact that the next time he checked on the girl, she was awake. She'd also stopped crying, which was positively encouraging.

"You can get up and dress whenever you like," he said to her, knowing she heard him even though she made no effort to look at him where he stood. "And our lunch was brought some time ago, so you can come out and eat it."

"Thank you, but I'm not very hungry," she answered, unmoving where she lay with her head on a pillow. "If you don't mind, I'll save eating for later."

"No I don't mind " he responded lamely, hating the "dead" sound to her voice but helpless to change it. "Come out whenever you like."

Derand retreated for the second time, even more disturbed than he'd been. If she'd been angry or offended he could have dealt with it, but what was he supposed to do against that total lack of what could only be called hope? Surrender was something he'd gotten well used to seeing, but total surrender was more horrible than he'd ever imagined. The one thing he could do to bring her out of it was talk about her brother's rescue, but that would have to wait until later. And, if by some chance even that didn't work, he'd have to promise her freedom from the marriage.

He'd be the one without hope then, but better that than sitting back and watching her waste away to nothing

Elissia rearranged her clothes once the man was gone, but then she lay down again to return to the silent battle she'd been waging. Her dreams had been filled with tearful scenes of begging and pleading with him not to let her go, but he hadn't even heard her. He'd stood watching something she couldn't see, a faint amusement curling his lips, both her presence and existence erased from his awareness. She'd been desolate then, but there hadn't been anything she could do to change his mind.

And there still wasn't. When he'd come into the room he'd sounded as if he'd returned to being "kind," but that was part of his nature and meant nothing. Having her around had already proven painful for him, and if she didn't take herself firmly in hand it would do so again. Her only hope of not trampling all over his feelings a second time was to get her own feelings under control, and that was the battle she'd been fighting. That dream had been a sign from the gods telling her not to waste her time wishing for the impossible. All she could do to thank the man for his kindness was let him do as he pleased with her now, and then get quickly out of his way once Gardal was safe.

It took until suppertime before she felt she could look at the man without breaking down into tears, but she'd found a new determination to repay him for the attention he'd given her. She'd been afraid for years that he would turn out to be someone she could really like, most especially since he was such good friends with Gardal. That was why she'd avoided him so completely the various times he'd come to the palace, using the claim that he was too much of a "savage" to hide behind.

But avoiding him entirely had proven impossible, and now she was faced with what she'd feared all along: loving a man who wanted little or nothing to do with her. The fact that her loving him wasn't *his* fault had let her find the strength to do what was necessary, along with the equally obvious fact that it would hardly be for long. Another few days and then she could find a way to end all pain forever.

His knock on the door before he entered was not surprising in the least, but the gentleness of his tone became more painful than the punishments he gave.

"Our meal has been delivered, and it's a pleasant surprise," he said, coming no more than a single step into the room. "Instead of catching and cooking it, my men bought it from the inn nearby. Come and try it and see for yourself."

Elissia still had nothing of an appetite, but she couldn't afford to forget why they were there in the first place. She'd certainly need her strength in the coming days, and eating properly was the only way to keep it up. So she left the bed and followed him back to the front room, joining him where he stood at the table.

"We've got a feast," the man said, gesturing toward the many dishes standing on the table. "There are salads, and fried chicken, and mashed potatoes, and corn, and cherry cobbler for dessert. You also have your choice of tea or a fairly decent wine, so let's dig in."

"Of course," Elissia said, finding it much easier to do what she had to if she didn't look directly at the man. Sitting down, even on the cushion, was still painful, but she did it without hesitation and without showing what she felt. Then she began to help herself to the food, but not to the wine. If she started to drink anything alcoholic, she had the feeling she'd never stop.

The meal was very tasty, but there was still a limit to what she could stuff down her throat. When she finally reached it she sat back from her plate to find that the man had finished before her. He now studied her in silence, but she already knew what had to be done.

"I've been a very bad girl," she said without hesitation, but also without looking at him. "For that reason I'd like to ask you to spank me."

What she'd said wasn't really a lie, but the man reacted in a way she hadn't expected.

"I've changed my mind about that," he said, the kindness in his tone cutting her to pieces. "You didn't really ask for the spanking you got, but you've asked now so we can let the last one take the place of –"

"No," she interrupted harshly, beginning to hate even the word "kindness." "We made a deal, and if I expect *you* to stick to it, I have to do the same. I asked for a spanking, and I expect to get it."

"All right, then come over here," he said after a very long hesitation. But the words themselves hadn't been hesitant, so she rose and walked over to him. It was ridiculous to think that she'd reached the point of preferring his punishments to his kindnesses, but that was exactly the way she felt. His punishments weren't nearly as painful as the other

He raised her tunic and took her trousers and drawers down slowly, then put her across his knees. She closed her eyes against what was coming, hoping to keep silent no matter how much it hurt. The first swat did more than sting, and the second and third were worse. She whimpered deep in her throat with the next three strokes, and bit her lip with the following three. He wasn't just pretending to spank her, he was actually doing it, just as she'd demanded. Once again he was treating her fairly rather than patronizing her, and that thought rather than the punishment brought hot tears to her eyes.

She didn't know that the final three swats really were the final ones until it happened. Another minute and she would have been howling, but suddenly she was being lifted to her feet and helped to replace her clothing. But once again he was silent, so once again it was up to her.

"Now now I ask to do my wifely duty," she whispered, wiping furtively at the tears to get rid of them

before he really noticed. "As soon as you're ready, of course."

"Of course," he echoed, his voice oddly empty. "Why don't you wait for me in bed."

She nodded to acknowledge his instructions, then went back to the bedchamber. Her seat was hot and throbbing with the short but effective punishment he'd given, and she had to fight hard not to limp. But the thought of waiting for him in bed inflamed her more, since she wasn't likely to have him many times again. She meant to remember and treasure his touch for as long as life remained to her, and even looked forward to his presence on the other side of the bed.

She lay waiting for him for a very long time before she finally had to admit that he wasn't coming. He was being as kind as possible to her, but kindness, it seemed, also had its limits. He obviously no longer wanted to touch her even as a passing amusement, which was perfectly understandable. But only to her conscious mind, which her following dreams more than proved. He wanted nothing more to do with her, and she was helpless to change that

Derand waited until the bedchamber door closed behind the girl, and then he leaned forward and buried his face in his hands. Women were more than fortunate in that they were allowed to cry, while men had to be strong and forego the sometimes necessary release. It had killed him to see the girl stick so scrupulously and honorably to the deal they'd made, refusing to back down even when it had been more than clear that she still ached from the last spanking. He hadn't been able to insult her by refusing to do his own part, but as for the rest of it

"I want to make love to her so badly I may break," he whispered to the empty silence all around. "But how can I touch her when I know she's only keeping up her end of the bargain? I want her to *want* my lovemaking, not simply accept it because she's given her word. But she *doesn't* want it, and I've lost the stomach for taking what isn't freely given. I'd rather do without."

Which was easy enough to say, but not quite as easily accomplished. He sat wishing things were otherwise for a very long time, so long that when he went into the bedchamber he found the girl asleep. Nothing else had changed, of course, not even his raging desire, but at least he'd have one thing: the girl who used to be Seea sleeping on the other side of the bed. It was little enough to ask of her, since he'd never again be asking anything else.

Princess Brat

Chapter 7

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Elissia awoke early the next morning, so early that it wasn't quite light out yet. At first she thought that the man hadn't come to bed at all, but the other side of the bed was more rumpled than it had been. So he'd been to bed and was now up again, hopefully for a good reason. If his men had finally gotten back, they'd have some idea of what lay ahead of them. If they hadn't gotten back, she and the man could very well find themselves riding into the waiting arms of Waysten's men. But they still had to go, and hopefully prove themselves to be more capable than anything Waysten decided to put in their way.

Sitting up showed Elissia that her bottom was still tender, but it was nothing she couldn't deal with. So she sat for a moment with her face in her hands, trying to decide if the idea that had come to her when she woke had any merit to it. That man and his kindness He hadn't been happy last night, and for a change the fault was all hers. He so obviously pitied her that she almost couldn't stand it, and apparently he was in the same position. She had to do something to get rid of that pity, if for no other reason than to take the load off *his* back.

So the idea had come that she could go back to treating him the way she had when this whole mess had first started. That would certainly get rid of the pity, and might even make him add to the memories she already had of him. Something like that would be worth any price to her, but she knew she'd be wise not counting on it happening. That way if it didn't, the disappointment would be less than crippling.

"But not much less," she muttered as she got out of bed and went over to her clothes. The more time that passed, the more she wanted that man. She had no idea what he'd done to her to make her feel that way, but as long as she did she might as well see what could be done to take care of it. After all, he was the one who had started the whole thing

After dressing she lit a lamp, then washed as best she could in the room's basin. It almost felt as though it were winter, when people bathed as infrequently as they could get away with. It was odd to do the same during nice weather, especially with that pretty stream so close. It would have been nice to go back to it one more time, but not seeing it again would be a small loss compared to the rest.

Elissia quickly pushed those thoughts away as she dried herself, then she went toward the front room. Her hair needed brushing really badly, something she could see to once she found out who the man was talking to. She'd noticed the sound of soft voices, so there was every hope that his men really had come back.

And it proved to be so. She opened the door to find two strangers sitting at the table, and when they saw her they got to their feet.

"Good, you're already awake," the man said as he also stood. "We now have everything we need to

continue on, including a description of what's going on in the city. If you'll join us, I'll tell you what I've learned so far."

"I'll be there as soon as I get my hairbrush," Elissia said with a nod, walking toward her saddlebags. "To save time, why don't you start telling me about it right now."

"All right," he said agreeably as she bent to the saddlebags. "Here's the situation: Gardal is definitely *not* being kept on a farm. A group of my people called on the farmers one at a time, and didn't leave again until they were convinced they'd learned everything the people on the farm knew. One or two of the farmers were frightened into claiming they knew something they really didn't, but my people checked carefully and discovered the lies for what they were. We now know for certain that we have to go into the city."

"Well, we assumed that that would be the case," Elissia said as she brought the hairbrush to the table with her. "What about the city itself? Are there extra patrols, official or unofficial? Are there too many loungers on main street corners? Are the gate guards checking everyone and everything coming in very carefully, or have they gone back to being their usual sloppy selves?"

"The gate guards are *pretending* to be sloppy, but they aren't really," one of the two men said as they all sat down again. Elissia had claimed the fourth chair at the table, but unfortunately it wasn't the one with the cushion. "They pass the people they recognize without too much fuss, but strangers are looked at long and hard behind lazy excuses of checking for contraband. They don't say what sort of contraband they're looking for even if someone asks, but I'm willing to bet it's black leather and armor they most want to find."

That comment made Elissia realize that the two men were dressed in ordinary clothing, nothing like what the High King's bodyguard usually wore. It was comforting to realize that the people around her weren't complete children when it came to playing a role, and then the second man took his turn reporting.

"There *are* extra guard patrols out, supposedly looking for information about whoever kidnapped an important visitor to the city," he said as he scratched at his cheek. "As strangers we were stopped and questioned, but since we hadn't heard about any kidnapping and immediately asked for details we were sent on our way. Asking around let us find out that no one who lives and works in the city is being bothered, but the search patrols are still acting as if they're doing a thorough job."

"'Acting' is the right word," Elissia said with a sound of scorn, struggling to get the knots out of her hair with the least amount of pain. "So did you notice anything suspicious that no one in the area would talk about?"

"Actually, we did," the second man admitted after exchanging a glance with the first. "It was in a fairly busy part of the city, with a lot of people moving around the streets. Some of those people were supposed to look like lazy louts just standing around, but I've never seen louts who were so careful to examine anyone who came by. If we weren't given strict orders not to try anything on our own under any circumstances, we would have had a look inside the building the louts were lounging in front of."

"And then you would have been in Waysten's hands," the man said to him after exchanging his own glance with Elissia. And that was when the confusion in her thoughts told her that she had to think of

something else to call "the man." He wasn't the only man around any longer, so she'd have to think of something fast. Then it came to her that the best thing she could do was think of him as "the savage" again. It would match the way she planned to act with him

"We're not that clumsy at getting into places unseen," the first man protested uncomfortably. "If we'd had a look in that building, we could either have eliminated it or known for certain where Prince Gardal is being held."

"No, you would have been captured," Elissia assured him before the savage could add to what he'd said earlier. "It was certainly one of Waysten's traps, trying to lure in anyone who happened to be looking for my brother. You would have found it easy to get in, but they would have taken you before you were able to get out again. And then they would have questioned you about why you were there, and the pain they gave would have eventually made you talk – or die."

"And if you did talk, they would have known what my plans were," the savage added with a solemn nod. "You don't know them in detail yourselves, but you know what you were sent to get and that would have given them the necessary clues as to what to look for. Are you absolutely certain that no one knows about what you bought?"

"We *made* certain," the second man agreed with a nod. "Listore here did some very obvious sneaking around to draw off anyone who might be watching us, and that's when I bought the items. When I had it all we both did some sneaking around, and then tried to sell the jewels we had with us. Once they knew our intentions were dishonest, they stopped watching us."

"And we even got a decent price for the jewels," the man Listore said with a grin. "Amis was sure they would try to skin us because we were strangers to the city, but they seem to believe in encouraging new business. They told us to come back again the next time we 'found' something worth selling."

"That's an in we'll be able to use later, once I'm established in the city," the savage said with an approving nod. "We're fairly certain that the criminal element in the city is involved in the kidnapping, and they're also probably holding the prince somewhere. We'll pull all the strings together at the right time, but at the moment we have to get started with the first part of the plan. If you'll bring in your purchases, you can go back to camp for breakfast before we leave this area."

The two men rose to their feet at once, bowed to their king, then went out to comply with his orders. Ten heartbeats later they were back with a number of paper-wrapped bundles, which they put on the floor next to Elissia's saddlebags. After another bow they left again, this time closing the door behind themselves.

"Our breakfast should be brought in just a few minutes," the savage said as he rose and walked to the bundles. "After that I'll get into my disguise, and we can go to inspect our new house. One of the things those two bought was a house in the city."

"You've decided to settle down in Ramsond?" Elissia asked with brows high. "And where did you get the gold to do all that buying?"

"I borrowed it from your father before I left," he answered, standing over the bundles without making any effort to look inside them. "The same goes for the jewels those two sold in the city, and happily we

have more for them to do the same again. As for the house, it took no effort to realize that every inn and hostel in the city would be carefully watched by Waysten's people. My buying a house ought to catch them off guard, which in turn ought to let us do what we have to before they find out we're anywhere around."

"Aren't you going to open those things up to see if everything's there?" Elissia asked when he simply turned back to the table. "And what about my own disguise? Did you have them get anything for me as well?"

"Your disguise as a boy will do really well along with what my own will be," he answered, making no effort to go back to the bundles or even to look at them again. "As for checking to see that everything's there, I don't have to. If they hadn't been able to get one or more of the things I needed, they would have said so."

Elissia tried to think of a reason other than her burning curiosity as to why the bundles should be opened right now, but before any ideas came there was a knock at the door.

"That should be our breakfast along with fresh tea," the savage said after calling out permission to come in. An instant later his guess proved true, and two bowls of porridge along with a skin of tea were brought in by two men who *were* dressed in black leather and armor. They glanced at Elissia as they delivered their burdens to the table, bowed to the savage and herself, then left as silently as they'd arrived.

"You can finish brushing your hair while the porridge cools off a bit," the savage said once they were alone again. "And I'm glad to see you had the sense to bring a plain hairbrush. If it had been covered with jewels or precious metal, it would have had to go in with the 'loot' my men will bring into the city."

"If I left the palace as a 'boy,' why would I bring things with me that told anyone looking that I was a girl?" Elissia asked with a sound of scorn after glancing at the plain wooden hairbrush. "At least I know how to think, unlike those two you sent to the city. You do know how close they came to being taken, don't you?"

"But they *weren't* taken, because they obeyed orders," the savage pointed out as he watched her finally finish up with her hair. "If they'd decided they knew better than the man giving them their orders, they would have regretted the decision for as long as they lived – which probably wouldn't have been very long at all. There's a lesson in that that everyone can benefit from."

"Only if you happen to be male," Elissia disagreed as she put the hairbrush aside and reached for the skin of tea. "Most men aren't capable of thinking for themselves, but that doesn't apply to certain women. Since I'll be seeing your disguise for myself in a just a little while, why don't you take a chance and tell me about it now? I'll even promise not to pass the information on to Waysten if you like."

If Elissia hadn't been watching the savage even as she lifted the skin to drink, she probably would have missed the flush of embarrassment briefly coloring his skin. He also stayed silent for a time, then he shook his head with a sigh.

"Yes, telling you about it now is probably the best thing I can do," he granted her, still looking extremely unhappy. "That way you might survive actually seeing me in the disguise, which isn't guaranteed to

happen if you let your sense of humor run away with you. If Gardal's life weren't at stake I'd never do anything like this, but as it is "

Elissia put the skin of tea aside and pulled her bowl of porridge closer, making no effort to prod the savage into adding to what he'd already said. He really did seem to hate what he was about to do, which made Elissia burn to know what it was. But she'd learned better than to push at someone who was reluctant to speak of a certain something. Listening quietly instead usually brought positive results more quickly.

"All right, as I said I might as well tell you," the savage finally continued, obviously forcing himself to speak. "You'll be going into the city as a boy, and I'll be going in as your mother."

"As my what?" Elissia couldn't help demanding, having almost choked on the taste of porridge she'd taken. "You didn't really say as my mother?"

"There's nothing else I can do to disguise myself," the savage said, the flush on his tanned cheeks now more obvious. "The gate guards will be watching for a big man with or without leather and armor, but not for a big woman who's no longer young. My men also found an old buggy at one of the farms and bought it, and that's what we'll enter the city in. You, of course, will be driving."

"Because I'll be your son," Elissia said with a nod before stuffing her mouth with porridge. It was the only way to keep herself from laughing out loud, a reaction which would certainly get her killed. The savage, dressed like a woman

Elissia shook her head as she concentrated on her food. She'd wanted something to stop the savage from pitying her, and now he was the one who had provided that something. Talking about what he'd be wearing would *not* be the same as seeing it, and there were any number of ways to let someone know what you happen to be thinking besides laughing out loud

Breakfast seemed to take a very long time to be over, and Elissia couldn't help but notice that for once she finished first. But when she sat back with the tea the savage noticed the same, and quickly finished what was in his bowl.

"I never thought that getting dressed would ever take more courage than riding into battle," the man muttered as he got to his feet. "But putting it off any longer is stupid, so I'm getting to it right now. Don't forget to put on your cap when we're ready to leave."

Elissia raised her brows at the reminder, and once the savage had taken the bundles into the bedchamber and closed the door, she went searching for the cap. She hadn't seen it since she'd been made to take it off, but it turned up tucked into one of her saddlebags beneath the cushion. She pulled it out and then put the hairbrush away in the other bag where it belonged, along with the rest of her clean clothing. The worn outfit had also been put in the other bag, so she had nothing else to do but wait. The savage had done her packing for her, and now she was ready to leave.

Despite the brave words he'd spoken, it took a very long time before the savage opened the door to the bedchamber and came out. Elissia had thought she was braced against anything she might see, but one look made her turn away to keep from choking out where it would be noticed. The man now wore a dress in godawful green, one that clearly had had padding added underneath. The "woman" in

the dress was fat as well as tall, and her "bosom" matched the rest of her. Beneath the hem of the long dress it was possible to see a pair of brown work boots, old and scuffed but extremely stylish when considered along with the dress.

And one of the things adding to the length of time dressing had taken was that the savage had shaved. He'd had a night's worth of stubble on his cheeks and chin when he'd walked out of the room, but now he had heavy face makeup and eye coloring and lining instead. Above what made the man look like an aged lady of the night was a graying wig, one that had probably been bought from some troupe of traveling actors. The total result really was a remarkable change, and as soon as Elissia had control of herself she turned back to him to say so.

"As long as Waysten's people think the same, the effort will have been worth it," he growled when he heard her out. "Let's get going before I lose my nerve and tear all this stuff off."

He bent then to pick up a hand grip she hadn't noticed sooner, a beat-up old thing that matched the "woman" who carried it. He then walked over to her saddlebags, and picked them up as well.

"There's another grip already on the buggy for *your* things," the savage said as he led the way to the door. "You'll transfer them over and leave the saddlebags here, and my people will take them along with our horses. *Your* horse might pass muster assuming it was willing to be put in traces, but mine never would."

When Elissia followed him outside, she understood what he meant. The two horses hitched to the small buggy were plain brown and tired-looking, considerably less than even *her* horse. Next to them her mount looked to be top quality, and the savage's stallion would have been the equivalent of carrying a sign with them announcing who they really were.

It didn't take Elissia long to transfer her belongings to the grip on the luggage rail of the buggy, and the thing was big enough to take everything she had with her. The only part she disliked was that her worn clothing now lay much too close to the fresh, but there was nothing to be done about that. Saddlebags would suggest saddle mounts to anyone with enough intelligence to notice, so the saddlebags had to go.

The dusty seat of the buggy was actually padded with faded and torn red velvet, and could have been a good deal worse. She settled herself comfortably on the left-hand side while the savage made a production of climbing in on the right, and once he got himself and his skirts arranged properly Elissia got them going on their way. Her hair was once again hidden by her cap, and the savage had looked her over carefully to make sure that none of it showed in a way it shouldn't.

The savage directed her back toward the main road, and it didn't take them long to reach it despite the almost-plodding gait of the horses. Elissia had no trouble holding them, so she glanced over at the savage.

"You'd better bring your knees a bit closer together, Mother dear," she said in a low voice even though no one else shared the road with them. "Women don't sit the way men do, even a woman like you."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" he demanded, even though he immediately did as she'd suggested. "I'm supposed to be a perfectly respectable woman despite being a bit long in the tooth."

"Lower-class women don't wear so much makeup unless they're street-strollers," Elissia told him, making no effort to break the news gently. "If you like you can pretend to be an ex-street-stroller, but no one will believe you never had a career."

"You're not suggesting I might actually get hit on?" he asked, now sounding downright nervous. "Something like that just isn't possible."

"Don't worry, sweetie, it won't hurt much after the first time," Elissia commented, paying a lot of attention to the road ahead of them. "Of course, the man involved will be disappointed that you don't have all sorts of experience, but I'm sure you'll find a way to help him get over it."

"How would *you* like help in getting over my knee again?" the savage asked with a growl. "I warned you about having fun at my expense."

"I think we're a little too close to the city for that to be a very good idea," Elissia took a lot of pleasure in telling him. Then she gestured with her chin toward the group of people coming from the opposite direction. "There are too many potential witnesses around for it to go unnoticed, and the closer we get the more witnesses we'll have. Do you really want one of them to earn silver or gold talking about the odd woman and boy they saw?"

His only answer was a wordless growl, the exact answer Elissia had been expecting. But that brought up another matter that needed to be discussed.

"And you'd better do something about your voice," she said, still not looking at him. "A woman's voice can be deep, especially if she's built big, but not *that* deep. Or hadn't you considered that part of the problem?"

"I considered *every* part of the problem," he countered – surprisingly in a still-deep but much mellower tone. "This should take care of the current aspect of the problem, and I'll take care of the rest of it later."

"What are you considering the rest of it?" Elissia asked, sincerely curious, but he didn't answer. There were even more people on the road now, thanks to a fork they'd passed, so idle conversation wasn't the wisest thing to indulge in. They were getting enough startled glances as it was; adding to that would have been foolish.

It took almost another hour of traveling, but then the woods gave way to open farm country. Beyond the fields of wheat and corn to either side of the road, Elissia was able to see the walls of Ramsond. They still had a good distance to go, but at least their destination was in sight. And Gardal was that much closer to being set free. Elissia believed that with every fiber of her being, as any other possibility was completely unacceptable.

"We seem to be almost there, Lodris, and about time too, / say," the savage commented pettishly in that mellow tone of his. "I'm looking forward to seeing the house your father bought for us, and to lying down for a while. I'm not as young as I used to be, you know."

"You're still a flower among women, Mother," Elissia said in her version of a boy's attempt to sound older, her lips curling just a little in a swallowed smile. "I'm sure Father hasn't even glanced at another woman since we've been away from him. But something seems to be wrong with my memory. I can't

remember your name or his, or even our family name."

"Your father and I are Dosson and Inesta om Faril," the answer came in a softer voice. "You, of course, are Lodris om Faril, and we've come from Hergesond to live here in Ramsond. Your father is an experienced farm agent, so we're certain he'll find a position really soon."

"And he brought the rest of our things ahead with him, rather than leaving it for *us* to bring when we came after him?" Elissia put, her tone telling the savage what she thought of that part of the story. "What were we using until he sent for us?"

"We took shelter with family until he sent for us," the savage provided after a moment's thought. "We lost almost everything to a terrible fire, so your father didn't *have* anything to bring ahead with him. That's also why we don't have anything with *us*."

"Except for the few odds and ends we managed to save," Elissia agreed with a nod. "Yes, now I remember. I just wonder what people will say when Father doesn't join us as soon as we get there."

"But he *will* join us as soon as we get there," Elissia was corrected gently. "He and your sister Omira will be seen at least as often as you and I are."

"I see," Elissia acknowledged. "And Omira traveled with him just as I'm traveling with you. That way neither of the women in our family had to be without male protection, and only two of us had to be sheltered with our family. It makes sense, I suppose."

"More sense than expecting a young boy to be able to protect his sister as well as his mother," the savage pointed out. "Anyone who asks will understand perfectly, because anyone who asks will probably be male."

"Oh, yes, I almost forgot that men can usually be told any old story and they'll believe it," Elissia murmured. "I withdraw my objections."

Once again Elissia wasn't answered in words, but there was no doubt about the way the savage had taken her comments. He wasn't happy with her at all, but playtime was over and they had serious things ahead of them to do. And there would certainly be little or nothing of pity dragging everyone down.

The closer they got to the city gates the more their progress slowed, until the buggy was in the midst of a crowd of other vehicles and horses and was barely moving at all. The air around them was dusty and hot, and sweat covered Elissia's face. The same sweat turned the savage's face makeup into a caked and matted mess, but that was all to the good. He looked more than ever like an old woman trying to maintain a death grip on her lost youth, and hopefully the gate guards would spare him no more than a glance.

By the time they actually reached the gates and the guards were up to them, Elissia found that they didn't even rate a glance. The guards gestured them through the gate with heavy impatience, all their attention on the riders who were in line behind the buggy. She used the reins to urge the horses ahead and away from the crowded gate area, at the same time glancing at the savage. He sat with a crumpled lace handkerchief in his hand which he tried to fan himself with, looking as though he were about to faint. It wasn't likely that he was going to faint, but Elissia decided to make sure.

"Are you all right?" she asked in the lowest tone possible in the midst of all the noise of the city. "Do you want me to pull over somewhere where the air might be easier to breathe?"

"I'm not having trouble breathing, I'm signaling," was the equally low answer. "Do you see that rider up ahead, the one on the pinto? Since he looks like he's about to start choking, he must have finally recognized me. He'll lead us to where our new house is."

"Oh, yes, I see him," Elissia said, feeling foolish for having been concerned. "I'm supposed to follow him without making it *look* as if I'm following him, I take it?"

The savage's nod was clear, so Elissia flicked the reins to make the horses move a bit faster. The man on the pinto had moved to the side street on the right between him and them and had turned into it, so Elissia did the same while looking around as though trying to follow memorized directions. She'd visited Ramsond a number of times, but never alone and only knew the area around the palace.

Just inside the gate had been an area of warehouses, and now they followed their guide past more of the same until houses began to replace storage structures. People in the streets either glanced at them and their buggy or ignored them entirely, except for the beggars. That group tried to come up with hands outstretched, so Elissia just pretended they weren't there. People like the ones she and the savage were pretending to be wouldn't have had the extra copper to give handouts, and that seemed finally to become clear. The beggars stopped pushing forward, and soon there were fewer of them to be seen.

The neighborhood they were led to at last was far from being upscale, but at least it wasn't filthy or falling down. The man on the pinto, who had been looking straight ahead the entire time, now stared at a blue house on the left as he passed it slowly. Once it was past easy seeing he turned his head away from it, and then he was moving a good deal faster than he'd been doing.

"Pull up to that blue house on the left," the savage directed her suddenly in a murmur. "That has to be the one that's ours, and you'll need to carry our luggage up the steps and inside. Then you'll come back out and stable our horses and buggy half a block back, in that public stable we passed."

Elissia nodded and directed the horses over to the curb, then she sat for a moment to study "their" house. It was a narrow two-story structure whose blue paint was rather faded and beginning to peel, and it stood awfully close to the houses on either side. A small stretch of dying grass in front of it was probably supposed to be a lawn, and the wooden steps leading up to the tiny porch and front door looked splintery rather than smooth.

"Home at last," the savage said in his "woman's" voice, adding a very obvious sigh. "Lodris, dear, get our luggage from the back while I see about unlocking the door. Your father sent me this key, and if it's the right house it should work."

The savage had produced a key from the green cloth "handbag" he'd taken from his grip before getting into the buggy, and then he began the process of getting out. Elissia wondered if she was supposed to help him, then dismissed the idea as she tied off the reins and also got out. If a "woman" the savage's size needed a "boy" of her size to do any catching in case of an accidental fall, she'd end up squashed flat. Better to just see to the luggage and forget about being a gentleman.

Her grip felt heavier than her saddlebags had been, and the savage's grip was even worse. Elissia tried not to show her struggle to carry them both as she followed the savage up the steps, but the savage moved slowly with his skirts held up and away from the splinters. For that reason she had to rest the grips on a step before moving them higher to the next one, but eventually they were on the tiny porch and the savage was fitting the key into the door. A moment later the door swung wide, and she was able to drag the grips the final few steps into what seemed to be a miniature sitting room.

"Thank you, dear," the savage said in that mellow voice, making no effort to keep it down. "Now take the buggy and get the horses stabled."

Elissia wiped the sweat from her face before accepting the silver coin the savage held out, and then she went back to the buggy. Being a "boy" was proving to be something of a revelation, and one she didn't much care for. She liked it better when it was someone else doing the carrying and caring for the horses, preferably someone male. For people who were useless, women seemed to have the better position in life

The man in the stable accepted her silver and then led the horses away to where the buggy would be put, so Elissia was able to walk back to the blue house. The front door was closed but not locked, and after letting herself in she stopped to take a better look around. The tiny sitting room had frayed and dusty furniture standing in it, and not even much of that. Faded drapes that had been cheap when new still hung closed over the windows, and that was something of a surprise. The air in the house was musty and stale, and could have used freshening.

"I'm back here, dear," the savage's voice called from the rear of the house. "If you'll come through the hall, I'll show you where your room is."

Her "room." Elissia sighed as she walked through the arched opening into the narrow corridor that had to be the hall. Having a single room to live in was acceptable in a cabin in the woods, but a house in the city shouldn't have provided almost as little. It was difficult to understand how people lived like that all the time, rather than only for a short while during an emergency. Elissia wouldn't have been able to stand it, not for any real length of time

The savage made the narrow corridor even smaller by standing at the end of it. When Elissia got close enough, he held up a cautioning hand.

"I had to open the windows in the kitchen, so watch what you say," he told her in a very soft voice. "Sound carries easily from one of these houses to the next, and we don't need to have everyone knowing what we're in the middle of. Lunch has been left for us, so let's go eat it."

"Lunch that doesn't have to be cooked," Elissia said just as softly with a nod. "Yes, that *would* make people suspicious. If anyone had come in with us and seen it, we would have had something of a hard time explaining it away. Are your people afraid you'll starve if they don't constantly provide your meals?"

"It's one of those things a king's followers feel they have to do for him," the savage answered, now looking somewhat annoyed. "And if anyone else had come in here with us, the game would have probably been lost even before that."

"If you say so," Elissia conceded, actually conceding nothing – which the savage noticed at once. His

jaw tightened as he turned away, but he made no effort to speak as he led the way into the "kitchen."

The room Elissia found herself in was only a bit larger than the front room of the cabins in the woods. On the right it had an unlit hearth, dirty pots and pans hanging on the wall near the hearth, and a number of low, closed cabinets lined up along the floor. To the left was a table and chairs almost as crude as the ones in the cabin had been, and they, too, had seen better days. A closed door stood in the wall straight ahead, and behind the table and chairs to the left were two dirty but opened windows. The air coming in through them wasn't particularly fresh, but it was better than what the front room – and probably the kitchen itself - had offered.

The savage smoothed his skirts before sitting in one of the chairs, but Elissia just sat down and reached for the skin standing next to the wrapped package of whatever they'd been given for lunch. The skin contained the tea she'd been hoping for, so she took a good long drink before replacing it in the center of the table. Carrying luggage and taking care of horses was thirsty work.

"So what are we going to be doing next?" Elissia asked in a murmur as the savage opened the package of bread and cheese and meat and began to give her some. "And what's become of the father and sister you told me I had?"

"Your father and sister are currently hanging upstairs in two of the bedchambers," the savage replied in the same murmur. "Your father consists of a set of cheap, badly cut clothes for a rather heavy man, along with graying hair and a thick, graying beard. Your sister is a worn dress and shawl and crudely cobbled shoes, and since she's your twin the items ought to fit you perfectly. The two will be going out tomorrow, just to show the neighbors that they really do exist."

"And between then and now?" Elissia persisted after taking a bite of the cheese. "What will the two current members of the family be doing?"

"After lunch your mother will be going to the neighborhood temple of Kalifar to give her thanks for a safe arrival," was the answer, muffled by a large bite of meat and cheese together. "While she's there she may very well learn if anything of interest has come to various peoples' attention. If not, it will be time to think of one or two ways to *make* something of interest happen."

"What will my mother's son be doing while she's so well engaged?" Elissia put next, well on the way to being really annoyed. "Sit here and twiddle her thumbs? There's no reason why my mother has to go to the temple alone, so she *won't* be going alone."

"There's one reason for her to go alone," the savage corrected, the words still a murmur but the look in his dark eyes suddenly hard. "Her son hasn't been showing her anything like the proper respect, a topic which the two of them will discuss once lunch is over."

"I'm sorry you think I haven't been giving you the respect you deserve, but we're beyond that kind of foolishness now," Elissia pointed out, finding it hard to keep her voice down. "We've come here together for only one reason, and it's more than time we concentrated on that and left the nonsense for another time and place. I'll be coming with you to the temple, so there's nothing for us to discuss."

And with that she gave all her attention to eating, making no effort to look at the savage again. While she ate she thought about the meals served in her father's palace, but only briefly. The comparison to

what she'd been given lately was much too painful to dwell on for long.

Once she'd stuffed down as much as she could, Elissia drank more tea to rid her mouth of the taste of the "meal." She seemed to be rapidly reaching a point where hunger would be a better choice than eating what was given her. Throwing up could *not* be considered fun, but that was what might happen if she had to put up with much more of the "delicacies" the savage's men kept providing. She'd never considered herself picky when it came to food, but that trip was providing insights into more than one area.

"Your possessions are upstairs, so come and see where I've put them," the savage murmured, then rose from the table. As usual he'd finished a number of minutes before she had, so Elissia simply got up and followed him. If she was very lucky, the rest of her "meal" would be gone when she came back down again

The stairs leading to the second story were narrow and creaky, and the savage moved up them carefully, his skirts held high to make certain he didn't trip on them. When he reached the top he turned left, back toward the rear of the house, and then to the door at the very end of the hall. It opened with a groan of complaint from its hinges, and when Elissia took her turn at entering she found herself surprised.

The two windows in the far wall of the fairly large room stood open, and the musty smell was almost gone. The room contained a decently large bed to the right, a hearth to the left, two plain chairs standing in front of the hearth, and a large wardrobe in the corner to the right of the windows. There was also a small table with a pitcher and basin not far from the door on the left, but Elissia ignored it to walk to the windows. The room might be large when compared to the rest of the house, but Elissia still felt a need for the sight of more open space than the chamber provided.

But looking out the window didn't do the good she'd hoped it would. The back of the house looked like a copy of the front, with a small amount of dying grass surrounded by a head-high, rickety wooden fence. The same amount of space seemed to be on the far side of the fence, with another house standing beyond it. That house was just as close to the ones to either side of it as the one she stood in was to *its* neighbors, and four of the six fenced-in areas she could see had small children playing in them. There were also adults talking through openings in some of the fencing, and a muted din drifted up to where she stood. How *did* they all stand living in each other's laps?

A big arm suddenly circled her waist and pulled her away from the window, but when she parted her lips to complain about being treated like that the words were interrupted in a shocking way. Cloth wadding of some kind was thrust into her mouth, and her cap was pulled off and tossed away. The next thing she knew she was face down on the bed with the savage straddling her and holding her in place.

"In another minute we'll be able to have our discussion," the savage murmured as he unbelievably began to tie her wrists together behind her. "I think you'll need help in keeping our discussion private, so I've given it to you."

Elissia tried to demand to know what he thought he was doing, but the wadding muffled her words down to nothing but tiny noises. The savage ignored the noises as he finished with tying her wrists, and then she was picked up and carried with him to one of the chairs.

"I noticed that you thought our arrangement was just for when we were in the woods," he said softly as he draped her over his skirted lap. "It wasn't, and now you'll be taught that the hard way. After this, I think you'll be anxious not to make the same mistake again."

But we don't have the time for this! Elissia tried to shout as he began to undo her trousers in order to take them down. *And that arrangement was just for the woods!*

"It isn't possible for me to know what you're trying to say, and in point of fact I'm not *interested* in knowing," the savage pointed out as he next reached for her drawers. "There's no excuse for the way you've been behaving, there's only the punishment you've earned. I hope you enjoyed yourself during the time, because now I intend to enjoy *myself*."

His hand caressed her now-bare bottom the way it usually did, but the spanking didn't start right after that as Elissia expected. There was something of a pause, and then she choked as she tried to scream and fight. That device was being put in her again, the device she'd thought she was rid of for good! Struggling proved just as useless as it had in the past, and when the thing was fully inserted the savage chuckled.

"Yes, I do know how much you dislike having that in you," he murmured, stroking her bottom again. "At least as much as I disliked the way you spoke to me. And please remind me to thank you for bringing along a plain wooden hairbrush. A decorated one just wouldn't have been the same."

Elissia was startled by that comment, and tried to turn her head to see what he was talking about. When she did she noticed a movement across the room, which turned out to be her reflection and the savage's in a long mirror in its stand beside the wardrobe. She could see the two of them clearly, and what she saw in the savage's hand made her heart pound harder. He held her hairbrush, just as though he really meant to use it on her –

Elissia tried to howl at the first stroke of that brush on her bottom, but the wadding muffled the sound to a tiny grunt. The wood of the brush was *hard*, and what it made the device do to her was worse than anything the savage's hand had ever achieved. The second smack was just as bad, but the third, unbelievably, was worse. And she could see herself being spanked in the mirror as well as feel the strokes as they landed, which made the entire episode completely unbearable!

But bear it she did, because she was given no other choice. The savage kept spanking her with that hairbrush, and in no time at all the tears flowed freely out of her eyes. She would have begged him to stop if she could have, and that was probably one of the reasons she was gagged. The savage didn't want his enjoyment interrupted, not until he was completely satisfied.

The mirror showed Elissia a flaming red bottom before that satisfaction came to him, and she couldn't control the writhing of her body. He'd kept spanking, spanking, spanking, until she knew it would be forever before she was able to sit down again, and on top of that she also wanted the savage desperately. It would be really painful when he finally got around to using her, but Elissia couldn't make herself care. Even that hairbrushing was a small price to pay for having him again, or at least not too large a price.

"I think that will do it for the moment," the savage finally said, his voice now sounding lighthearted.

"Later will be another matter, of course, when the time comes for you to ask to be spanked. And I have to be going anyway. I have an appointment with the god Kalifar at his temple, not to mention a few people as well. You *will* be good while I'm gone, won't you?"

Elissia couldn't believe he'd said what he had even when he stood and carried her to the bed. He put her face down, checked the leather he'd tied her wrists with, then patted her aching bottom before leaving the room. When she heard the door being closed, it was no longer possible to think he was only teasing her. He really was leaving without making any attempt to use her.

Sometimes tears came from pain, but much more often they came from the realization that the person you most wanted to care about you really didn't. Elissia's face was almost as well marked by the tracks of her tears as her bottom was marked by the hairbrush; that, however, didn't stop the newest tears from making brand new tracks of their own. He *had* to know how she felt, but he'd still done *this* to her and then had left. She'd wanted to help rid him of the pity he'd been burdened with, and she certainly had. He just hadn't replaced the pity with any more desirable emotion.

It took quite a while for the tears to stop, and by then Elissia had given herself a good talking to. She'd known right from the beginning that nothing could come of her association with the savage, so why was she wasting time and effort feeling so upset? It made no sense, and since Elissia wasn't in the habit of doing things that made no sense, she would stop feeling deathly disappointed and think about what was really important: freeing her brother.

The savage was out busily gathering information, but to judge by what he'd done so far, that information would be put aside and never used. If Gardal was to be found and freed, the matter was again up to her. And it had been part of their deal that she would *not* be excluded from helping to free Gardal. If the savage had changed his mind about that, which he apparently had, they certainly had no deal any longer.

Moving was painful as well as horribly and deeply disturbing, but for the second time in as many hours Elissia had been given no other choice. She first fought to kick her boots off, then struggled to free her legs of her trousers and drawers. The process took much too long, but finally she'd rid herself of everything holding her where the savage had put her. The next step was to bring her arms down past her seat and then pull her legs through them, and it turned out to be a good thing she was still gagged. Rather than rousing the neighborhood with the noise she made, she finally had her bound wrists in front of her so that the wadding could be pulled out of her mouth.

Elissia breathed deeply for a moment or two, and then she went at the leather with her teeth. Getting free would have been harder if the leather had been plainly knotted, but the savage obviously wanted no trouble getting it off when *he* decided to free her. He'd used a slipknot with a tail that merely had to be pulled, and once Elissia's teeth had pulled that tail the leather all but fell from her wrists.

The first thing to be done after that was ridding herself of the device. She pulled it out as quickly as possible, then threw it as hard as she could into the corner of the room. The man didn't want *her*, he just wanted her to want *him*. Well, that was too bad about him. She was all finished with doing what *he* wanted, and would be happiest if she never saw him again. And if luck was with her at all, she never would see him again.

Getting back into her clothes was difficult and painful, but Elissia would have gone through a lot more

pain than that in order to be out of that house. She used the mirror to make sure that her hair was completely pushed up under the cap again, then looked at the grip holding her possessions. She hated the thought of abandoning the little she had with her, but dragging a grip around would slow her down as well as make her someone people remembered seeing. Instead of taking the whole thing, she went and got out the silver she'd brought but hadn't used. Once it was safely put away in her clothes, she headed for the door.

Princess Brat

Chapter 8

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Derand's good mood lasted until he'd fixed the mess his makeup had become and he'd left the house. The way the girl had treated him had really gotten him furious, and he'd enjoyed giving her that spanking more than ever. But the rest of it Tying and gagging her had been necessary to make sure their disguises weren't compromised, but using the device in her hadn't been. The device had only one true purpose, and Derand had known he wouldn't be using it for that.

People glanced at him as he walked along the street and a few of those people snickered, but no one actually offered him any overt insult. That turned out to be a very lucky thing, as Derand was busy being disgusted with himself. He'd used the device in the girl to get even with her for not wanting him freely, and he couldn't deny that now. He silently called himself a whole list of dirty names, but that didn't help even a little. If anyone on the street had given him the smallest reason he probably would have torn them apart, taking out on them the anger he felt toward himself.

The temple of Kalifar he'd been told about was only three streets away, so he contented himself with the promise that he would conclude his business as quickly as possible and then get back to the girl. She would have to suffer for that length of time, but despite his self-disgust he couldn't help feeling that that was only fair. If *he* had to suffer, why shouldn't the person making him feel that way do the same?

He knew well enough that that was a really low thought, and by the time he reached the temple he was truly ashamed of himself. As he stepped inside the cool dimness of the temple entrance, he thought it would have been more fitting to meet in a temple of Donnias. Kalifar was the god who looked after travelers, but Donnias was the patron god of fools. If *he* didn't deserve to be there, no one did

"Majesty, over here," a soft voice called, bringing Derand's attention to the shadowy side wall of the entrance where someone stood. Derand joined the shadowy figure, who grinned at him as soon as he was close enough. "But please don't bat your lashes at me," Listan added with a come-on smile. "I'm a pushover for big women."

"How would you like to be executed slowly, Listan?" Derand asked sourly as he glared at his good friend and advisor. The man was dressed in ordinary clothing, which made him almost a stranger. "One more remark like that, and I'll make sure it happens."

"But then who would you have handy to flirt with?" Listan asked innocently, then he held up his hands in surrender. "All right, I know you're not enjoying any of this, so I'll stop the teasing. Now *you* can stop trying to kill me with a stare."

"All right, tell me what, if anything, the men have learned," Derand said with a sigh. "Tomorrow I'll be dressed as my 'husband,' so I'll be easier to live with."

"Finding anything out at all hasn't been easy," Listan said, his amusement now completely gone. "Everyone knows about the kidnapping, but no one who has any details is willing to talk about them. And those 'search parties' the prince has out They really are searching, but not for a kidnap victim. They're searching for anyone asking questions about the victim, and they arrest anyone they feel the least bit suspicious of."

"Have any of the men been taken?" Derand asked at once, a new worry crowding into his mind. "If they have we'll have to free them before the pigs in this city start to use torture to make them talk."

"So far we've been incredibly lucky," Listan said with a headshake. "None of them has been taken, so we don't have to plan any rescues. We made sure to ask our questions at only the right time, like when the people we questioned were all but falling down drunk. When you're doing the buying, the people you buy for are relaxed and easy in your company."

"But they've also probably forgotten half of what they know," Derand said, still feeling sour. "It looks like I wasted my time sending all of you ahead of the girl and me."

"Not exactly," Listan disagreed, satisfaction now shining from his gaze. "It happens we did pick up one small bit of information, which could well be the place Prince Gardal is being kept. One of our other men got friendly with the thief who bought the jewels from Listore and Amis, and began to get drunk with him on a regular basis. Or at least the thief got drunk. Foreon is one of those lucky devils who never does get drunk."

"Even if he matches you drink for drink," Derand agreed with a grin. "The thief couldn't help but notice that Foreon wasn't nursing his drinks, so he didn't get suspicious. So where does the location turn out to be?"

"It's in a warehouse district that's also used as a minor headquarters by the city's thieves," Listan replied. "The district is on the far side of the city from the gate, and the warehouses are in use during the day. At night is when the thieves take over, and they've got to have at least a few secret places in some of the warehouses. We haven't moved in and tried to find out where because we didn't want to force them into killing the prince before we could locate him."

"I agree with that," Derand said with a thoughtful nod. "And all of you are in line for a reward once this is all over. Right now I need to know which of the warehouses has a thief or two hanging around during the day. They won't want to be *too* obvious about it, but they'll also want to be on hand in case something unexpected comes up. If we can narrow the search down to a single warehouse, we can get some men inside and spread out before letting the thieves know we're there. Then the inside men can watch to see where the thieves rush to first, naturally following right on their heels. Letting them lead us to the prince will be easier than trying to find him ourselves."

"We'll have to make sure the timing is exact, but it can be done," Listan agreed, also looking thoughtful. "We'll need some time to get things set up properly, but we ought to be ready to go by tomorrow."

"Then it's time you got started on that other matter we discussed before you left," Derand reminded him, feeling depressed despite the elation of impending victory. One more day, and then he and the

girl would have to part. His Seea, gone for good and always "Everyone should be in position by now."

"I'll take care of it first thing," Listan promised. "It wasn't practical until now, but since we'll be moving tomorrow the time is now right. How many of the men do you want sent to the house to be your 'servants'?"

"We can't afford to have any servants, not when we're living in *that* neighborhood," Derand pointed out. "Send Kravil by later with provisions for a decent meal, and have him pretend to be a friend of my 'husband's'. I'll invite him in to visit, and then he can prepare something better than what we've been eating for the last couple of days. The only break we had from trail fare was when a meal was bought from an inn, and that wasn't the best I've ever eaten."

"Buying provisions and then cooking them will take a while, so I'll send Kravil over as soon as I get back to the men," Listan said with a nod. "He'll also be able to give you directions to where the rest of us are, based on what it takes to walk to your house. I don't like having you in a position where you can't contact us."

"Until now it was necessary that I not know," Derand said, his anxiety to be on his way back to the house growing. "If something had gone wrong and I'd been taken by the gate guards, I didn't want it to be possible to betray the rest of you. And you haven't been to the house, so you don't know where it lies in relation to where you and the others are. Otherwise *you* could give me the directions."

"But we'll get that all straightened out in just a couple of hours," Listan said. "Now you'd better go into the temple and give your thanks, just to be certain no one wonders why you came here but weren't seen by the priests. I'd hate to have a slip like that betray us just when we're getting ready to move."

"Unfortunately, you're right," Derand grumbled, hating the idea of a longer delay but knowing there was no help for it. "I'll go in while you disappear, and I'll see you again tomorrow."

The two men shook hands before they parted, Derand hurrying into the temple proper. He knelt at the altar and thanked Kalifar for keeping him and his 'family' safe during their journey, then he gave one of the priests a silver coin to have a chicken sacrificed in his name. The priest smiled his agreement as he made the coin disappear, and Derand was finally free to leave.

The trip back to the house couldn't be allowed to be faster than the trip out, so Derand was nearly frothing at the mouth before he got there. He tried to unlock the door, found that he couldn't, then discovered that the door was already unlocked. Filled with a dread that nearly choked him, Derand literally raced up the stairs to the bedchamber he'd left the girl in. The door was open after he'd left it closed, and he walked in fearing the worst –

Only to find something almost as bad. The girl wasn't lying dead in her bonds, but she also wasn't there. Derand quickly searched the rest of the house to make certain of that, but there was no mistake. The girl was gone, with no clue as to *where* she'd gone or with whom.

Derand went slowly back to the room she'd been in, then sat down in a chair. His frantic worry hadn't eased much, but at least his mind had begun to function again. If agents of Waysten had found the house, it wasn't likely that they would have untied the girl before taking her with them. That went for almost anyone else as well, and the fact that the leather he'd used on her wrists lay in a pile on the

floor was very encouraging.

And that led him to stand up again and look around more carefully. The girl's grip and its contents were still there, but the cap he'd taken from her wasn't. Then he noticed something lying in a far corner of the room, and went to see what it was. It turned out to be the device he'd put in her, and a mark on the wall above where it lay said the thing had been thrown there rather than simply dropped.

"So that *has* to mean she got herself loose," Derand muttered as he went back to the chair and sat again. "But if she did, where could she have possibly gone? And how could she have gone anywhere at all? She gave me her word"

But only as long as she was allowed to help rescue her brother, a small voice in Derand's head reminded him. *You left her here rather than take her with you, so in her view that must have constituted a break in the agreement. That left her free to go her own way, and now you've lost her even sooner than you thought you would.*

But much worse than that, she was out in the city without anyone there to protect her. Derand was furious about that, but he was also worried sick. She had nowhere to go and no one to help her, but she'd still gone off on her own. If she hadn't hated him before, she certainly did now.

Derand wanted to jump to his feet and go out to look for her, but he had no idea in which direction to go. He could have used his men to search in *all* directions, but he didn't yet know how to reach his men. He'd have to wait until Kravil got to the house, and by then the girl would be swallowed up by the thousands of twists and turns of the city. He'd change disguises to the male one waiting in the wardrobe in that very room, but that would just be something to fill the time until Kravil arrived. It would do nothing to help the woman he loved, the woman he missed more than he'd ever imagined would be possible.

And if he ever found her in one piece again, he'd spank her absolutely black and blue for running away.

Elissia had to ask directions three times, but finally she found the street of the Inn of Inner Delight. Her friend and former maid Renni really had married a farmer in the area, but Renni's last letter had mentioned the trouble her husband's aunt and uncle were having with their inn. They'd lost their cook to a terrible accident, and they couldn't just hire anyone in the cook's place. The man had been a true artist when it came to cooking, and the inn had gotten a reputation for having the best food in the city.

So Renni had been asked if *she* would do the cooking until her husband's aunt and uncle were able to find someone good enough to replace the original cook. Renni was a good deal better than average in the kitchen, but she had no interest in making a career of the talent. What she wanted was a family to cook for, but she'd still agreed to help out by coming into the city every day and going home again at night. Elissia's plan had been to come into the city *with* Renni, but now she needed a haven more than anything else.

Rather than going in the front of the inn, Elissia made her way around to the back door. She knew that that was where the kitchen ought to be, and sure enough, it was. She looked in a window to see Renni and a number of others, but it took a few minutes before her friend looked up. Waving a hand got the

girl's frowning attention, but a moment later Renni realized who she was looking at. She said something to the other people in the room, then made her way to the door. Once outside she closed the door firmly behind her, then turned to Elissia.

"Elissia, what are you doing here?" Renni demanded in a whisper. "What are you dressed in, and why are you all alone?"

"I'm here to find my brother," Elissia whispered back, joining Renni in a hug. "Haven't you heard that Waysten had him kidnapped?"

"What I heard was that the High King of Arvin is responsible for the kidnapping," Renni answered, now looking even more disturbed. "What makes you think it was Prince Waysten instead?"

"Only the fact that the High King of Arvin has no reason to bother," Elissia replied. "If he wanted our kingdom, all he'd have to do is take it. Kidnapping Gardal would be completely unnecessary, even to make Waysten look guilty. Besides, the High King is also looking for Gardal, to clear his name and help my father, who's beside himself with worry. Not to mention the fact that the High King and my brother happen to be friends."

"So what are *you* doing here?" Renni asked, her large, dark eyes showing that she still missed nothing. She was a relatively small woman, but only physically. Her mind was as sharp as any Elissia had ever come across.

"I'm here trying to get the job done *right*," Elissia said, ready for the question. "The High King's intentions are good, but he has a habit of sitting around waiting for other people to find things out for him. I don't have the patience for sitting around."

"You never did," Renni said with headshake, her expression still filled with worry. "But what will happen if Prince Waysten discovers that you're here? If he's responsible for kidnapping your brother, what's to stop him from doing the same to you?"

"Nothing, so he can't *find out* that I'm here," Elissia said while glancing around to make sure they were still alone. "Do you think you can get me a room here that no one knows about? You can tell everyone that I'm the cousin of a friend of yours, and I need to keep my location quiet for a short while. I do have silver with me, so I can afford to pay."

"You can be here doing something important for your family," Renni agreed with a thoughtful nod. "It won't be a lie, and Aunt Orra and Uncle Camdin understand about family responsibility. Yes, I think we can get away with it. What name do you want me to use when I introduce you?"

"Call me Sentor," Elissia said after a moment of thought. If she'd used Lodris and one of the savage's people heard it "I'll want to rest for a while, but later I need something else. Do you know anyone who's a criminal but who can still be trusted?"

"Why would you need someone like *that*?" Renni demanded softly, but then her expression changed. "As a matter of fact I do know someone like that, but I'd still like to know why you need him."

"We – *I've* come up with the theory that Waysten is using the criminal element of this city to keep Gardal wherever they have him," Elissia explained. She'd almost mentioned the savage, but there was

no need to do that. "Even if your acquaintance isn't one of those in on the secret, he can at least help me to look around."

"And he's trustworthy enough to keep you safe," Renni said with another nod. "His name is Wyole, and he ran into trouble with one of Prince Waysten's new laws. If he hadn't left his family and hidden among the thieves and beggars of the street, he would have been arrested and condemned to a place on one of the work gangs. That's been happening to too many people in the city lately. But the kidnapping of a neighboring Prince by a man out to conquer everything in sight has taken people's attention away from how frightened and unhappy they are with Prince Waysten"

"I think you've just found one of the major reasons Waysten had Gardal kidnapped," Elissia said dryly when Renni's voice trailed off. "I'm sure there are other reasons, but that one by itself ought to be enough to wipe away doubt about Waysten's guilt."

"I'm very much afraid you're right," Renni said with a sigh, then she turned brisk. "Let's get you inside and to a room, and once you're settled I'll keep a watch out for Wyole. He usually stops in here to sell firewood at least once a day, and happily he hasn't arrived yet."

Elissia nodded and followed Renni inside, and a minute later she was being introduced to Orra and Camdin. The inn's hostess was a pretty woman of average size with brown hair and eyes, and her husband Camdin was a husky man with the same hair and eye color and a warm, welcoming manner.

When they found out that "Sentor" was a friend of Renni's and was in the city on private family business, there was no mention made of putting the name in the inn's guest register. Elissia was given a room key by Renni for a part of the inn that wasn't used unless the rest of the rooms were taken, and then she was shooed off to find the room.

Elissia had to climb two flights of stairs to the third floor, but once she did it wasn't hard to find the room. No one else had a room on that floor, and Elissia opened the door to find a small but neat and pretty room. The walls were newly whitewashed, the bed had fresh linens and quilts and fluffy pillows, and the wood floor was swept clean. There was also a table with a basin and pitcher with a towel beside them, and a straight-backed chair standing in front of the window.

Closing and locking the door took only a moment, and then Elissia opened the window before stretching out face down on the bed. She still hurt quite a lot from what the savage had done to her, but she wasn't about to let that keep her from doing what was necessary. When that man Wyole showed up she'd finally be able to get started with a serious search, and then it would only be a matter of time before Gardal was safe.

And then *she* could get on with the rest of her plans. Once Gardal was on his way back home to their father and mother, she would be free to find an end to constant pain – of all kinds.

Derand, now dressed as the husband of the family, followed his man Kravil back to where the rest of his men were. The false beard pasted to his face itched slightly, but that was a small price to pay for being able to walk right past a group of guardsmen without having them recognize him. And without having to wear a dress to do it. All men who entered the city were examined carefully, so any man already inside must have been passed by the gate guards.

Kravil led him to a much nicer neighborhood than the one the blue house was in, and to a house much larger than the one bought for him and his "family." But rather than go up to the front door they circled around to a narrow side street, one which led to the closely fenced back area of the house. A triple knock brought the sound of the fence gate being unlocked, and a moment later they were being admitted to the area. The man on gate duty seemed startled by the "stranger" Kravil had brought with him, but a wave of Kravil's hand let them continue to the house.

Another pair of guards stood just inside the back door, and one of them allowed the new arrivals to enter while the other studied them carefully from a short distance away. Derand was about to call them by name when the one closer to them laughed abruptly.

"I almost didn't recognize you, Your Majesty," he said with a bow that the other man hastily copied. "Hearing about what you would look like and actually seeing it aren't the same thing at all."

"Let's hope the city's guardsmen continue to have the same trouble," Derand said with as much of a smile as he could manage. "Is Listan here?"

"In the study at the front of the house, Your Majesty," the man supplied. "Would you like an escort?"

"Kravil's enough of an escort," Derand said with a headshake. "You two stay at your post."

The men bowed again as he followed Kravil toward the front of the really large house, and a moment later he was being led through the door Kravil had knocked on once before opening. Listan looked up from the desk he sat behind, then got to his feet showing confusion.

"My king, what's wrong?" he asked at once. "Why have you changed your plans?"

"I had the plans changed *for* me," Derand answered as he walked closer to the desk, then he turned to his escort. "Thank you for showing me in here, Kravil. You can go back to your usual duties now."

"I was supposed to cook you a really good meal, Your Majesty," Kravil replied with a bow. "I'll go and see to it right away."

Derand no longer had an appetite for that meal, but he made no effort to say so. He waited until Kravil had closed the door behind himself, and then he turned back to Listan.

"When I returned to the house, I found that Princess Elissia was gone," he told his friend as he lowered himself into one of the chairs standing in front of the desk. With the pillow stuffed into the front of his clothing it wasn't exactly easy to sit down, but Derand knew he'd better get used to it if he meant to move freely around the city.

"Are you saying she was taken by the guard?" Listen asked worriedly. "What if they make her tell them what she knows?"

"All she knows for certain is that *I'm* in the city, along with one of my men," Derand said at once to calm his friend. "There was no need to tell her about the rest of you, so I didn't. But I don't think she was taken by the guard. I think she decided I wasn't doing enough to find her brother, so she went to work on the problem herself. Do you have any men to spare for a low-key search?"

"At the moment, no," Listan admitted with clear disturbance. "The only ones left in the house are on guard duty. But some of them should be back in an hour or two, and I can send them out again then. Whatever possessed the queen – the princess – to do something like that?"

"Yes, there's something I'm not mentioning," Derand admitted, answering the question Listan had left unasked. "If you needed to know the details I'd have already given them to you, so all I'll say is that she and I had a serious disagreement. Because of that I did something to her I shouldn't have, and now she's gone. She didn't take her possessions with her, but I don't consider that a sign she means to come back. She wanted to melt into the city's population as quickly as possible, and she wouldn't have been able to do that carrying a grip."

"I know any number of *men* who wouldn't have understood that point," Listan said as he took his seat again. "Does that mean we have to worry that she really might find her brother at the worst possible time?"

"She does happen to know the proper direction in which to look," Derand told him with a sigh. "She and I worked on the question of where Gardal might be together, and that's how we came up with the idea of checking the criminal element. I know she'll do something with that bit of knowledge, I just don't know what."

"I'd love to warn the men already in the warehouse, but if we try to contact them we might ruin the whole plan," Listan fretted, pulling at his lip as his thoughts turned inward. "They must have already found a place to dig in where the thieves won't find them tonight, so finding them ourselves won't be easy. Do you want me to have some of the men try anyway?"

"No," Derand decided after a moment's thought. "Since the girl may not come anywhere near the warehouse, we can't afford to do anything that might increase the risk to Gardal. We'll just have to let the outside men know, and hope that that's enough."

"Along with a quick but systematic search of the city, it just might be," Listan said, obviously trying to cheer Derand up. "And I think the lady's resourceful enough to keep herself safe, so she ought to be all right. You'll stay and eat with us, of course, and later you can decide whether or not to go back to your own house. There's plenty of room if you do decide to stay."

"I meant to ask you about that," Derand said, also trying to distract himself from bottomless worry. "Why is it that the house the men bought for *me* is small and badly kept up, while the rest of you are in what looks to be a mansion? I'd be interested to hear the logic behind the arrangement --if there is any."

"Of course there's logic behind it," Listan replied with a wounded look that Derand doubted was sincere. "It goes this way: If Prince Waysten found out you were in the city and sent men to search for you, the last place they would look is in a poor neighborhood. That makes a poor neighborhood the safest place for you. *We*, on the other hand, are just ordinary men. If a search took place for *us*, the last place they would look is in a wealthy neighborhood. *We're* each protected by being in a place we don't normally belong."

"There's only one thing wrong with that line of thought," Derand pointed out as he studied his friend's hidden amusement. "If the city is searched for *me and* my men, being in the wrong place won't help

either of us. They'll search every neighborhood, and find us that way. That point escaped you?"

"Why, so it did," Listen said with surprise that was just as unreal as his former wounded expression. "Now, see, that's why you're High King and I'm just one of the men. It's obviously a good thing Prince Waysten isn't searching the city for us with definite knowledge that we're here."

"How can you be so sure about that?" Derand put next, a serious question in the midst of nonsense. "Waysten certainly *expects* me to come into the city, so how do you know that say, a false alarm hasn't been raised? The man thinking he saw me would be mistaken, but the alarm would still be raised."

"If it is, I'll know about it rather quickly," Listan assured him, also no longer joking. "I have someone watching the guard barracks, and if an alarm is raised I'll know about it almost as soon as the guardsmen themselves. It's *her* you're worried about, isn't it, not yourself?"

With the answer to that question so obvious, Derand didn't bother to reply. He just bent his head and rubbed his eyes with one hand, praying to all the gods there were that the woman who would never be *his* Seea would still live to be *someone's*.

A light tapping at Elissia's door woke her from the doze she'd fallen into. She rubbed her eyes before going to see who it was, and opening the door showed her a smiling Renni.

"Wyole's here," Renni said at once in a soft voice when she saw Elissia. "He agreed to help you, so he's waiting just outside the kitchen door. Do you want me to ask him to come back later?"

"No, no, now is fine," Elissia assured her, knowing that her friend had noticed the signs of sleep. "I was just resting until he got here. Give me a moment."

She left the door open while she went to replace her cap and get the room key, then she locked the door before following Renni downstairs. If anyone decided to enter the room before she got back, there was no sense in making it easy for them.

Renni led the way through the kitchen and outside, where a large bear of a man waited. He had dirty blond hair and blue eyes, and when he saw Elissia he raised his brows.

"This is the *boy* you told me about?" he asked Renni, speaking in a very soft voice when compared to his size. "I think I'll ask what's going on before I get any more deeply involved."

"Why did you stress the word 'boy' like that?" Elissia asked before Renni could say anything, making sure to use the proper voice. "Are you trying to start a fight?"

"I'm trying to say that I have kids of my own," the big man replied with amusement. "Two of them are boy and girl twins, and sometimes my daughter tries to pretend to be her brother when she wants to do something *she* isn't allowed to do. You're older than she is, but that's just about the only difference."

Elissia exchanged a quick glance with Renni, trying to decide whether or not to tell Wyole the truth. It would have been nice if she'd had a choice, but it looked like she didn't.

"All right, so I'm not a boy," she admitted after the very brief hesitation, hoping she was doing the right thing. "It was decided that a girl pretending to be a boy would have a better chance to look around the

city to find out what really happened to Prince Gardal. A boy is usually overlooked and ignored, while a troop of big manly men isn't."

"That's true enough, but I don't understand what you're saying," Wyole returned with a frown. "Everyone knows that the High King of Arvin is responsible for Prince Gardal's kidnapping, so what do you mean by 'what really happened to him.'"

"It's Prince Waysten who's responsible for the kidnapping, not the High King of Arvin," Elissia stated, watching the man closely. It was clear that Renni had only told him that someone wanted his help, and had left the details to be filled in by her. "Prince Waysten has set a trap for the High King using Prince Gardal, probably because he knows that they're friends. Waysten wants to be High King himself, but not just of Arvin. We think he has his eye on becoming High King of everywhere, and we've decided not to let that happen."

"You keep saying 'we,'" the big man remarked, studying her carefully. "Tell me who that includes."

"That includes people from Sollera, which is Prince Gardal's kingdom, and people from the Federated Kingdoms of Arvin," Elissia supplied, stretching the truth only a little. "Is that enough of a 'we' for you?"

"I'm tempted to believe that this is a trick to get me to commit against Prince Waysten," Wyole muttered, rubbing his face with one hand. "The only problem is that I'm not important enough for something like that, I'm already committed to being against Prince Waysten, and you're not just *any* 'boy.' Your bearing tells me you're not a commoner, and I think this is probably my only chance to get my life and family back. With that in mind, what do we do first?"

"Why don't you two sit down in the garden and talk about it?" Renni suggested when Elissia hesitated. "If you like, I'll even bring you something to drink."

"I'd appreciate a cup of tea," Elissia said at once, giving her friend a warm smile. "And we *will* be in the garden, but not where we can be easily seen."

Wyole followed Elissia to the small but pretty garden to one side of the inn while Renni went back inside. The big man was looking puzzled, but there was no need for Elissia to tell him that she wasn't ready to sit on a stone bench just yet. She had the excuse of wanting to keep out of sight, so she meant to use it. A thick privacy hedge surrounded the garden on two sides to protect those in it from the stares of passersby, and Elissia lowered herself to her side in the grass not far from it.

"This way we'll seem to be lounging instead of talking," Elissia told Wyole when he folded into a sitting position not far from her. Then she explained the conclusions she and the savage had come to about where Gardal was being held, making no mention about who had done the theorizing. When she'd finished, she looked up at her companion.

"So what I need most is to find out where Prince Gardal is being held," she concluded. "Do you have any idea where that might be?"

"As a matter of fact, I think I do," Wyole replied, rubbing his face again. "I don't go out of the city to chop the wood I sell, not when I'd be arrested if I tried to leave or come back in. My partner does the chopping and I do the selling, and we keep our supply in the corner of a warehouse a friend lets us use. I think Prince Gardal is being kept in a warehouse across the street from there."

"Why?" Elissia asked, accepting the cup of tea Renni brought, along with a flagon of ale for Wyole. Renni then left again hurriedly, probably because she was needed. "Why do you think Prince Gardal is being held in a warehouse?"

"The warehouse is a gathering place for many of the city's thieves," Wyole replied after taking a swallow of ale. "They show up after dark, once all the workers have gone home for the day, and they hold meetings as if they were members of a guild. They made a practice of never showing up until dark, but lately there have been at least one or two of them around all the time. The one or two don't actually do anything beyond standing around, but the fact that they're there during the day now has to mean something."

"I agree," Elissia said with a thoughtful nod. "It would be too much of a coincidence otherwise. Can you show me where this warehouse is? And do you know anyone else who could be of help in freeing Prince Gardal if he *is* there?"

"There are a lot more men in this city in my position than there used to be," Wyole said with a sigh. "Every time Prince Waysten passes another law, whole groups of innocent men suddenly become lawbreakers. And those lawbreakers aren't sent to work gangs anymore. They're sent as levies to the prince's army, where they're stuffed into uniforms and taught to march. I managed to avoid that with the help of friends, and now I also help others to avoid it. Yes, I think I can find men who are willing to help."

"Good," Elissia said with a smile. "And hopefully they'll be helping themselves at the same time. Let's finish our drinks and get going."

It didn't take long to finish those drinks, so Elissia and her new companion left the cup and flagon in the kitchen and then set out. Wyole seemed to know every back street and alleyway in the city, and once they threaded through most of them he finally stopped to point.

"That's the warehouse I meant," he said in a very soft voice. "Do you see that man in the torn coat, the one standing not quite casually in front of the building? He's a thief, and he looks that uncomfortable because he isn't used to being out in broad daylight without also being in the middle of a crowd that he can steal from."

"So they must have Gardal hidden somewhere in that building," Elissia agreed, trying to consider the entire situation. "If we try to break in and free him, they could well kill him before we find the place he's hidden. We need someone to find that place before anyone knows we're around."

"Which means we have to get people into the warehouse without the thieves finding out about it," Wyole said with a nod. "I think one or two of my people might be able to manage that, but I'll have to talk to them first. I'll take you back to the inn, and then I'll call a meeting. I should have definite word of progress for you by tomorrow morning at the latest."

Elissia would have preferred to be able to do something to free Gardal immediately, but even *her* impatience understood that doing the job hastily would be worse than not doing it at all. For that reason she simply nodded, then let Wyole lead her back to where she was staying.

By the time they got back it was beginning to get dark, and Elissia was definitely hungry. Renni was busy cooking for the supper crowd the inn attracted, but not too busy to sit Elissia down in a corner of the kitchen with a meal of her own. The food was just as good as Elissia remembered it to be, and by the time she'd finished it all she felt happily stuffed. When she'd swallowed the last of her tea, she interrupted Renni briefly to give her a hug goodnight, and then Elissia went back up to her room.

That part of the inn was really very quiet, and even the sounds coming in through the open window were no more than muted night noises. Elissia carefully locked her door before getting out of her clothes, and once she was in bed it didn't take long before she fell asleep. It had been such a long day that she felt worn out despite the short nap she'd had in the afternoon.

The sound of a door slamming somewhere brought Elissia awake with a jerk, but her heartbeat slowed to normal when the sound wasn't repeated. She had just begun to drift off again when she heard footsteps out in the hall, but the steps didn't come to *her* door. They went to the next room instead, and then Elissia heard the door being opened.

"I'm assuming from that slam that Rossor tried to resist being thrown out again," a soft female voice said in the next room. "If he ever stops getting drunk here before going home at night, it will probably mean the world is about to end."

"Or that his wife has finally found a way to keep the coin out of his hands," a male voice replied with a chuckle. "We'll have a bit of a smaller income, but she and her kids will be able to eat on a more regular basis."

By then Elissia had tiptoed out of bed and over to a slit in the wall through which lamplight gleamed. She hadn't lit the lamp in her own room even when she'd first come back, and certainly didn't do so now. Peeking through the slit showed her Orra and Camdin, the two owners of the inn, but the room didn't look like one the owners would use for themselves. It was just as small and undecorated as her own room, so Elissia had no idea what they were doing there. No idea to begin with, that is

"Now, then," Camdin said to his wife in a stern tone, no longer looking friendly and welcoming. "Isn't there something you have to tell me?"

"Yes, I'm afraid there is," Orra replied in a very meek voice, looking down at her hands rather than up at her husband. "I was very bad today, but I didn't do it on purpose, and I promise it will never happen again."

"A likely story," Camdin returned with a snort as he looked down at her. "Bad girls don't just stop being bad on their own. They need a reason to stop, and I'm more than prepared to give you one. Come over here."

He turned to walk to the room's chair, then sat in it as he looked at Orra again. She'd followed him slowly and reluctantly, and when she reached him he took her by the waist and positioned her across his knees. She'd been making small sounds of dread, and when he raised her skirts the sounds turned into words.

"You don't have to spank me to make me remember not to be bad again," she begged softly as he ran his hand over her now bare bottom. "I'll remember without it, really I will!"

"You'll remember even more thoroughly with it," he countered, still caressing her. "Are you ready?"

"No!" Orra answered in a low wail, but the denial did her no more good than Elissia's had ever done with the savage. Camdin raised his hand and struck her hard on her seat, and she jumped and began to struggle against being held like that. By the third stroke her breath drew in and she struggled even harder, but it just wasn't possible for her to escape the punishment. Camdin's hand kept striking her bottom, sometimes landing on one cheek or the other, but for the most part warming her entire seat to a flaring red.

Elissia felt a good deal of empathy for the woman being punished, but there was something she didn't entirely understand. Orra hadn't been forced to come to that room, she'd been there waiting when Camdin arrived. And the words they'd exchanged, about the man Camdin had had to throw out they hadn't sounded like the prelude to something like this. Orra was crying softly now as her seat was warmed more and more by the stern spanking, but Camdin just kept on with it. And the expression on his face showed such *satisfaction*

The punishment continued until Orra was twisting with the ache in her bottom and begging softly to be allowed to show how sorry she was. At last Camdin relented and gave her seat a final three smacks, then she was allowed to stand again. As Orra rubbed at her bottom through the skirt and cried quietly, Camdin also stood and took her in his arms.

"Are you going to be a good girl from now on?" he asked as he held her close to comfort her. She nodded against his chest, and he patted her shoulder. "Good, I'm glad to hear it. You go down to our rooms now, and I'll be along in a minute to comfort you a bit more thoroughly. Go on, now."

Orra nodded meekly before raising her face to his for a brief kiss, and then she left the room. She continued to rub her bottom with one hand until she was out of sight, and Camdin watched her gone before going to the lamp by the door and blowing it out. Then Elissia heard the sound of a key in a lock, followed by unhurried footsteps going by in the hall. Once the footsteps had faded to nothing, Elissia went back to bed, but not to try falling asleep again.

It was fairly clear they hadn't realized that Renni had put Elissia in the room she had. They'd obviously come up to the third floor for some privacy, and probably would have chosen a different place if they'd known they were being watched. Elissia's first urge had been to turn away from what she wasn't meant to have seen, but then the questions had started which kept her from moving away.

Elissia had known more than one woman who was beaten by her husband, but Orra had nothing of the same telltale marks. She wasn't overly silent or withdrawn, she didn't cringe in the presence of her husband, and she certainly didn't seem to fear him. But she *had* said something about being bad, and then she'd let herself be spanked without more than a token protest. Camdin hadn't just been pretending to spank her, he'd really done it, and then he'd sent her to get ready for him in bed.

So what in the name of all the gods was going on? Orra couldn't have enjoyed that spanking any more than Elissia had enjoyed having a hairbrush used on her earlier in the day, but she still must have gone to that room willingly. Was it possible that Orra *had* enjoyed the spanking, and she and her husband were playing some kind of game? But what kind of game was that, and why would people play it? It simply didn't make any sense

Elissia lay awake for some time trying to find an answer to calm her confusion, but there didn't seem to *be* an answer. And thoughts of Orra and Camdin in bed together were even more upsetting, but Elissia flatly refused to think about why that was. Instead she forced herself to thoughts of sleep, and finally managed to find it.

Princess Brat

Chapter 9

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When Elissia went down to breakfast the next morning, everything seemed returned to normal. Orra and Camdin were busy being warm and gracious to their guests, just as if nothing at all had happened the night before. Elissia slid past them and into the kitchen, where she had her food at the small table to the side. By the time she was through eating she'd almost decided to discuss what she'd seen with Renni, but that was when Wyole appeared at the kitchen door. When he saw her he came over and sat opposite Elissia at the table.

"We're all set," he murmured just before Renni came with a cup of tea for him. He smiled and nodded his thanks and waited until she was gone again, then added, "We'll be going into the warehouse in a couple of hours, and everyone agreed that you ought to be with those who go in first. If for some reason there's confusion about who to rescue, we need someone on the spot who knows Prince Gardal by sight. You do know him by sight, don't you?"

"Yes, I certainly do," Elissia agreed, feeling rather wonderful. They actually wanted her there in the thick of things, needing her there for a reason. For the moment she wasn't useless at all, and there was no feeling in the world like it.

"Good," Wyole said with another nod and smile after sipping at his tea. "I thought you might, and that's what I told the others. As soon as we finish our tea we can get going."

Elissia nodded her agreement, and it wasn't long before they were leaving the inn by the kitchen door. Renni had hugged Elissia and whispered a wish for good luck, just as if she knew what was about to be done. It was likely Renni did know in general, just as she'd always seemed to know what went on around her. But she also seemed to find it unnecessary to mention aloud what she knew, not unless someone else mentioned it first. Renni was sure enough of herself as a person that she had no need of something to increase her stature in the eyes of others.

As Elissia followed Wyole through the back streets and alleys, she wished *she* could have the same kind of confidence. She knew well enough how capable she was, but the fact that no one seemed to want her ability tended to make her less than sure of herself. She not only wanted to do something productive she *needed* to, but those around her never seemed to understand that. Except for her present companions

They reached the warehouse district a bit faster than the day before, but didn't stop in the same alleyway. Wyole led the way to a place behind the warehouse they wanted, then into a nearby building. There were quite a few men in that building, and one of them stepped away from the others to greet the newcomers. He was a man of middle years with a dignified bearing, which helped him to rise above the ordinary brown hair and eyes of his appearance.

"I'm glad you've returned so quickly, Wyole, my friend," he said as he shook hands with Elissia's guide. "And this must be the boy you mentioned. Does he know what his role in this is to be?"

"He does, and he's more than able to play it," Wyole answered with a smile. "This is Torban, Sentor, the man who has made himself guide and mentor for every 'outlaw' in the city. Sentor knows what the prince looks like, Torban, so we have no worries on that score."

"That's a great relief," Torban said pleasantly to Elissia, offering his hand to shake. "And I'm in no way as important as Wyole implied. I'm simply a teacher who taught the wrong thing - in Prince Waysten's opinion - so my career was abruptly shortened. Welcome to the ranks of the unwanted and unappreciated."

"Thank you, but I've been in those ranks for most of my life," Elissia answered in her boy voice as she took Torban's hand in a firm grip. "This undertaking, though, will change things at least temporarily for most of us. If we manage to free the prince, the king of Sollera will be very grateful. I'm sure he'll be willing to welcome anyone from your group who wants to relocate."

"More than one of our people will be delighted to hear that," Torban said with deep satisfaction. "They yearn for the ordinary life they were forced to abandon, and those with families miss them sorely. They'll gladly relocate to a place they're no longer hunted."

"Then we'll make sure it happens," Elissia said with a reassuring smile. "Right now I'd like to hear the plans you've made."

"Of course," Torban agreed at once. "The plans are relatively simple, in that we'd like to have the prince before anyone knows he's gone. There are a limited number of places he can be hidden in the warehouse, and we have two men who are very familiar with the place from having worked there. You and they will look in each of those places in turn while making very sure that the current workers don't become aware of your presence. When you locate the prince you'll bring him out the same way you and the others went in, and no one will be the wiser. If they do catch you in the act, so to speak, the rest of us will be poised to come to your defense. Do those plans suit you?"

"Very much so," Elissia said as she thought the thing through. "If the prince is able to move on his own, he'll simply leave with us. If he's drugged or otherwise incapacitated, the men with me will carry him while I act as scout and open doors as necessary. We'll get a lot farther if we get him out before they know he's gone."

"I'm delighted to hear you say so," Torban said with what looked like real relief. "So many young men today want nothing more than to charge into a situation with sword swinging, declaring strategy and tactics to be useless. It's a true delight to meet one who knows the advantages of discretion. And if we're all agreed, there's no reason not to get to it."

The other men in the building had been standing around listening, and now they came closer. Two of them stepped out in front, and Torban gestured to them.

"Istlan and Morgis are the ones who will be going in with you," he said, then turned to the two. "Men, this is Sentor, who knows what the prince looks like. Your team should be very effective, but if something goes wrong the rest of us will be there to help. Wait five minutes before you begin, to give

us time to get into position. All right, everyone, we all know where we're supposed to be, so let's get there."

Everyone including Torban and Wyole left then, all of them silent and moving as quietly as possible. When they were gone Elissia looked at the two men waiting with her, and they both gave her smiles of encouragement. She tried to send the same back, but nervousness had begun to turn her insides. This was so very important, but what if something went wrong? Or what if Gardal wasn't being held in that warehouse after all?

It took some effort, but Elissia pushed away as much of the doubt and fear as possible. Worrying about something going wrong was the most likely thing to turn that awful end into reality, and bad situations needed no extra help in happening. She would anticipate success instead, and worry about failure only if it happened.

The five minutes took a very long time to pass, but finally it was Elissia's group's turn to leave the building. The man Istlan went first, gesturing Elissia after him, and Morgis brought up the rear. They moved silently to an almost-hidden door in the warehouse, a small door that had crates stacked up very close to it. It seemed to be a way into the warehouse that was rarely used, which made it perfect for their purposes.

Once the door was closed again behind them, the gloom in the large building thickened. They'd come in behind tall stacks of bales and crates and sacks, and the lantern light in other parts of the warehouse was completely absent. Istlan paused for a moment, but whether it was to let his eyes get used to the gloom or to make sure no one was very close, Elissia wasn't sure. Whatever the reason, after the moment they moved on again.

What they moved through was an outer aisle of sorts, Elissia finally realized, an aisle that wasn't visible to the inner part of the warehouse where people walked around and worked. Once they passed a gap in the stacks, a crooked path that seemed to lead with twists and turns to the warehouse proper. If the path continued completely through it could be used to reach the aisle from the main part of the warehouse, but Istlan ignored it and just kept going as he had been.

It took them a number of long, anxious minutes to work their way around to another part of the warehouse, but finally they did it. It looked no different from the rest of what they'd passed, but Istlan stopped and gestured Elissia closer.

"This's th' first place, and that big crate there ain't really a crate," Istlan whispered once Elissia had reached him. "That there section as looks like a door *is* a door, but there ain't much room inside f'r more'n one. You wanna take a look inside, or you want me t'?"

"I'll do it," Elissia whispered back, her insides now twisting into knots. If Gardal wasn't there, or if they'd done something really horrible to him "But you and Morgis stay close just in case."

Istlan nodded his agreement, so Elissia moved over to the small section of crate front that looked like a door had been cut in it. It had a strip of leather that looked like a latchstring, and that was usually a sign that visitors were welcome. With that in mind Elissia pulled on the string and then pushed the section of "door," and –

"What do you want now?" the figure on the cot demanded in an irritable whisper without looking up. "Can't you people leave me alone even for a *few* minutes?"

"I'm Sentor, and I'd rather leave you alone some place other than here," Elissia returned softly with the joy she felt. Gardal looked filthy and sported a scraggly beard, but he seemed to be perfectly all right! "Unless you'd *prefer* to be left here?"

"Ei – uh, Sentor!" Gardal exclaimed, having finally looked up to see her. "What are you doing here? If they find you they'll have two prisoners instead of one!"

"I'm here to get you out, fool," Elissia countered with sudden impatience. "Don't just sit there asking silly questions, get up and come with us."

"But I can't," Gardal protested, now looking horribly disturbed. "They have the members of my escort as prisoners somewhere else, and if I try to escape they'll torture my people to death. I can't be responsible for something like that, even to get out of *here*."

"Gardal, the only members of your escort still left alive are at home," Elissia told him gently, now understanding why he hadn't tried to escape by himself. "The rest were killed when you were taken. They knocked you out before they did the killing, just so they could use a lie to hold you."

Her brother muttered something that must have been vile under his breath, and then he rose to his feet.

"I know *you'd* never lie to me, so what you just said has to be the truth," he growled softly. "With that in mind, what are we waiting for?"

Elissia stepped back to let him out, and then she closed the door again behind him. The thieves obviously checked on him rather often, but the longer it took them to discover he was gone, the better off they would be.

This time it was Morgis who led the way, with Istlan bringing up the rear. Gardal walked ahead of Elissia just behind Morgis, and it was a good thing he did. Morgis had just gone past the gap leading to the twisting path to the rest of the warehouse, when someone stepped out of it right in front of Gardal. The two men who had guided Elissia were frozen in place as thoroughly as she was, but Gardal was a different story. As soon as he saw the man he threw a heavy, furious fist, and the intruder went down without a sound. But he did hit his head on a crate on the way down, and when Morgis straightened up from the unmoving form, he shook his head.

"He's dead, then," Gardal whispered in a voice that still showed his satisfaction. "I would have enjoyed seeing this man die more slowly, but at least he'll never torment another helpless captive. Let's get out of here."

Rather than leaving the poorly dressed body where it lay, Morgis picked it up and carried it until they reached the small door they'd come in by. He then moved half a dozen steps past the door to deeper dimness, and that was where he put the body down. He'd returned to them in another moment, and then he opened the door and carefully looked out.

Morgis held up a hand to tell them to wait, but the wait wasn't long. Someone must have been out there, but as soon as the someone disappeared they slipped out of the warehouse and across to the

building they'd started from. Istlan went to tell the others that they were back and successful, and Elissia used the time to explain to Gardal that some of his rescuers wanted to move to Sollera as a reward for their help.

"They'll be more than welcome," Gardal assured Elissia and Morgis both, and then he drew Elissia a bit to the side. "But I still haven't heard how *you* happen to be here. I can't see Father giving you permission to do something this insane, not when Waysten probably wants *you* more than he did me. They tried to pretend that it was Derand who was responsible for capturing me, but I knew better. Waysten is the only one it *can* be, and I still don't understand what he hoped to gain."

"He wants to take your friend's place as High King, but of everywhere rather than just of Arvin," Elissia explained briefly. "Kidnapping you was supposed to look like the first step in taking over every kingdom that wasn't already his. Waysten would have used the excuse to get the other kingdoms to give him armies to fight against Arvin, and once Arvin was no longer a threat he would have used those armies to take over everywhere else."

"That makes an unfortunate amount of sense, but still doesn't answer my first question," Gardal pointed out. "What made it *your* job to come after me?"

"The fact that you're my brother made it my job," Elissia said, then gestured to Gardal for silence. "The others are coming back, so let's save the rest of this for later."

Gardal wasn't pleased with that, but with the others coming in he forbore to say so. Torban and Wyole led the group, and both men were grinning.

"Excellently done, my friends, excellently done," Torban said as he came toward them. "No one outside noticed a thing, so your mission has to be considered a success. Are you in need of anything, Your Highness? If so, you have only to ask."

The offer was followed by a bow, which the other men copied as soon as they realized they were supposed to. The way Gardal looked had made them forget he was a prince.

"The only thing I need right now is a room larger than two feet by four feet, and a decent meal," Gardal replied with something of a smile. "Those people fed me, but you could call what they gave me food only by the loosest of definitions. After that, of course, I'll need a way out of this city and back to Sollera."

"I can take care of the room and food," Elissia said at once. "If our new friends will work on the rest, you'll be ready to go when they find the way."

"There *are* unofficial ways out of the city, but we'll have to locate the people who know about them," Torban said with another bow. "As soon as we have the information, I'll send someone to the inn where Sentor is staying. I assume that *is* where you'll be taking the prince, Sentor. Am I correct?"

"Yes, that's where we'll be," Elissia agreed, then she looked at Torban with curiosity. "If there are secret ways out of the city, why haven't your unhappiest people already used them?"

"To go where?" Torban asked reasonably. "Other cities always register new residents according to where they came from, and we couldn't very well admit that we were escaped 'criminals' from

Ramsond. No matter what was said, the people looking for sanctuary would have been arrested and sent back, so what was the sense in even trying?"

Elissia nodded her understanding, while at the same time deciding that something needed to be done to change the current system. Right now it caught actual criminals if they tried to register for work, but not many criminals *wanted* to work. It was only those unfortunates like Torban's people who were caught, and that simply wasn't fair

"If I'm taking you back to the inn, we'd better get going," Wyole put in, drawing Elissia's attention away from her thoughts. "A number of strangers are wandering around the area here, but we can get past them if we leave right now. Their numbers are slowly growing, but they haven't reached the point where the entire neighborhood is cut off."

"Do you have any idea who they are?" Gardal asked at once, looking seriously concerned. "Can they be Prince Waysten's men?"

"They look like fighters, so it's possible they *are* the prince's men," Wyole agreed, upsetting Elissia without knowing it. "He may have decided that it's time he found the kidnap victim."

"More likely the kidnap victim's *body*," Gardal corrected angrily. "If he found me alive and well, I'd be able to tell people that it couldn't possibly have been the High King's men who took me in the first place. But finding my dead body would have given him an excellent excuse to start his war."

"So let's not waste any more time in getting you to someplace safe," Torban put in briskly. "Wyole, we won't be here long after you leave, so meet us in our usual location once you see Sentor and the prince to where they're going. We'll be in touch soon, Your Highness, so please be patient."

"I'm always patient with people I owe my life to," Gardal said with a much better smile. "Which way do we go?"

Wyole showed him, and Gardal insisted that Elissia precede him before he followed. Elissia made no effort to argue, most especially since she suspected she knew whose men were now in the midst of surrounding the warehouse area. But even if she'd been absolutely certain it was the savage's men who were out there, she still would have kept silent. She never wanted to see that miserable man again, and if Gardal found out that his friend was in the city No, Elissia would keep silent as long as there was another way to get Gardal away and back to Sollera. If it became absolutely necessary she would tell her brother the truth, but until then

Derand was awake and ready to go early, but he couldn't insist that everyone cater to his impatience. His men had to be given time to get into position without alerting either the thieves or the city guard, and there was no way to rush that. As he paced back and forth in Listan's study he wished there *were*, but his wishing for things had stopped making them come true.

"Where can she *be*?" he muttered as he paced, his thoughts dragging him back to the question of the girl. His men had been able to find not a single trace of her, and there may have been only three of them searching but they were the ones who knew the city best. She'd disappeared completely, and Derand could only pray that she hadn't been captured by Waysten. If she had been, he'd certainly have to go after her no matter *what* the political repercussions were

"Okay, we're ready to move," Listan announced as he entered the study. "The men should be completely in position by the time we get there."

"Then let's go," Derand said, immediately striding toward the door. "Did you tell everyone to keep their eyes open for the girl? She's dressed like a boy, but most of them should be able to tell the difference."

"They'll be watching for her," Listan promised as he followed. "Although how she's supposed to find *that* place I have no idea. It was hard enough for *us* to find."

"If anyone can do it, she can," Derand muttered, almost wishing that weren't so. "She's not your average, ordinary girl "

No, not average or ordinary by any means, nor would her punishment be when he caught up to her, Derand told himself grimly as Listan took over the lead. He would take her trousers and drawers down and put her over his knee, and then he would spank that round and squirming bottom until it was bright red. At that point he would announce he was ready to stop, but *she* would be required to beg him to continue. She would have to ask very nicely indeed, and he would finally agree to her request and start to spank her again.

Derand could almost feel her nicely padded seat under his hand, could almost hear her well-earned wailing as that hand came down again and again, giving her a spanking the equivalent of the worry she now gave *him*. He'd teach her to run away, and by the time he was through she would never even *think* about doing the same again.

Assuming she was still alive and unhurt; assuming he was *able* to find her; assuming he didn't discover that she really did hate him and wanted nothing of being married to him. That last part was the most painful to consider, so Derand put it aside for the moment. He *would* find her, and when he did they would have it out once and for all.

Listan led him by a roundabout way to another part of the city, and when they got there one of the men came over to say that everyone was in place and ready. With that in mind Derand gave the signal to begin, which meant that he and Listan and three others began to walk toward the man they'd decided was a guard for the thieves. The man was small, thin, and badly dressed, and had been standing around doing nothing. When he saw Derand and the others with him, he turned and ran into the warehouse.

That was exactly what they wanted the man to do, and Derand could see a faint smile curve Listan's lips. The men he'd hidden inside the warehouse would be alert for just that kind of panicked move, and would follow the thief wherever he went. He would lead them to Gardal, and the ones who followed close behind him would make sure that nothing happened to the helpless prisoner. Gardal would be free in a matter of minutes, and then Derand would be free to look for Gardal's sister.

When Derand and the others reached the inside of the warehouse, the small thief was nowhere in sight. It was a big place and the man could be hiding anywhere, but it turned out that he wasn't hiding at all. One of Derand's men stepped out to gesture to the newcomers, and when they reached him they found that their plans were working perfectly.

"There's a narrow path between these bales and crates, Your Majesty," the man said with a bow. "We

don't know where it leads, but the others are following right behind the quarry. He won't have a chance to do anything but lead us right to the prisoner."

Derand nodded and gestured the man into leading off, and he and the others followed. Once into the narrow opening they found that the path between stacked items twisted and turned a bit before leading to a narrow aisle between the stacked items and the warehouse wall. A second man was there to direct them to the right, and they all hurried along in the dim dustiness until they heard something of a scuffle. That made them pick up their pace a bit, and a moment later they came on the thief being held by three of Derand's men. The thief looked frantic and terrified, but Derand's men didn't appear much happier.

"What's wrong, Histan?" Listan asked one of the three, his frown deep enough for Derand to hear. "Where's Prince Gardal?"

"He doesn't seem to be here, my lord," the man Histan replied hesitantly. "We were right behind this thief here when he opened that big crate by a door in its side, but there's no one inside."

"All right, speak up, you," Listan said to the quivering thief, a definite growl in his voice. "You can tell us now where Prince Gardal is, or you can tell us later after you've been taught what real pain is. The choice is yours."

"No, don' hurt me!" the small man begged as he twisted in the hands of those holding him. "I don't know nothin' 'bout where th' fool's got t'. He wus here jest a bit ago, an' now he's gone! When th' others find out they'll skin me sure!"

Derand let Listan browbeat the thief a bit more, but he had the feeling they would get no other answer from the frightened man. If he hadn't expected to find the prisoner in that crate, there would have been no reason for him to have made straight for it. Gardal *had* been there, but now he was gone.

"So now what do we do?" Listan asked in a very soft voice once he'd drawn Derand aside. The thief stood crying in true terror, a reaction it was clear even Listan found hard to doubt.

"I wish I knew," Derand muttered back, fingering the false beard he wore again. "If the thieves moved him elsewhere, they would hardly have left one of their own in the dark about it. Waysten isn't likely to have taken him, not when he still seems to want to keep his hands clean of accusation. So who does that leave?"

Only seconds could have passed before Derand looked at Listan, to find his friend looking at *him* in the same way. They'd apparently had the same thought, but then Listan shook his head dismissively.

"No, that can't possibly be the answer," Listan said, sounding as though he were trying to convince *himself*. "It isn't possible for the girl to have gotten here ahead of us, so there has to be another answer. Doesn't there?"

"If you can think of one, be sure to let me know," Derand told him, almost as disbelieving as his friend. It didn't seem likely that Seea had managed to find that place and get there ahead of him and his men, but what other possibility *was* there? Her plans must have been more involved than she'd told him about, and the fact that they'd succeeded proved they were good plans. As he should have known they

would be. Hadn't he realized immediately that she would make a topnotch advisor?

"All right, let's get out of here," Derand finally said with a sigh. "If the prize was plucked out of our hands, it still has to be out there somewhere. Or he has to be, along with his sister. I doubt if they've been able to leave the city, so they're still going to need protection. But we have to find them if we're going to provide that protection, so let's get to it."

Listan nodded then began to gather the men, but he also took the precaution of arranging to keep the thief with them. The man knew a little too much for all their sakes, so they had to decide what to do with him. If he made himself useful in some way – like helping them to find Seea and her brother – Listan would let him live. If not, the small man would disappear without anyone knowing what had become of him.

And Derand would make no effort to keep that from happening. Seea and Gardal's safety was the most important thing in that whole mess, and Derand meant to let *nothing* get in the way of it

"This is where we'll be staying until we can find a way out of the city," Elissia told Gardal in a soft voice when they reached the back of the inn. "Wait here with Wyole for a minute while I make sure it's all right to go in."

"Just be careful," Gardal said equally as softly after his nod of agreement. "I couldn't stand it if I were retaken because we were careless."

Elissia gave him her own nod of agreement, then made a cautious way into the kitchen. Everything seemed to be normal, and Renni came over to her at once.

"How did it go?" Renni asked anxiously in a low voice. "Why have you come back alone?"

"But I'm not alone," Elissia answered with a grin of enjoyment. "I have a friend with me who's a bit worse for wear, and he could really use some of your wonderful cooking. After that he'll probably want to use the bed in my room. If you have to use a name for him, call him Demmin."

"He probably won't like that, but I'll do it anyway," Renni said with a matching grin. She knew well enough that Demmin was one of Elissia's servants, but it wasn't a thing to mention aloud. "And if he needs feeding, bring him on in here. I'll stuff him so full he'll have trouble climbing the stairs to your room."

"I'll be right back," Elissia agreed, and then went out to where Gardal waited with Wyole. "Everything's all right," she told Gardal at once. "We can go in now, but please remember that your name is Demmin. Don't answer to anything else no matter *what* happens."

"Demmin it is," Gardal agreed without the least amount of fuss, then he turned to Wyole. "Thank you for your help, my friend, and please pass the thanks on to the others as well. I won't forget what you've done for me, and there's a new home waiting for any of your group who want one."

"I think there will be a large number of men who take you up on that," Wyole answered as he took the hand Gardal had offered. "Most of us consider Ramsond home and would rather stay here, but not as criminals and outlaws. We were all decent family men, and we'd like to be the same again."

"One way or another we'll make that happen," Gardal promised, then turned to Elissia. "Okay, 'boy,' lead the way inside. And if that's the kitchen, we'll be making a stop before going anywhere else."

"That *is* the kitchen, and the stop has already been arranged," Elissia told him with a smile that she then transferred to Wyole. "Just saying 'thank you for your help' doesn't seem to be enough, but I'll say it anyway. I'll be grateful to you and the others for as long as I live."

"It really was my pleasure," Wyole assured her, now looking a bit uncomfortable. "I'll leave you two alone now, but I'll be back as soon as we have the information you need. I wish you two a lot of luck, and hope you'll be happy together."

And with that he disappeared back the way they'd come, noticing nothing of the odd look Gardal sent after him.

"What was *that* supposed to mean?" Gardal asked Elissia softly. "Talk about your strange things to say"

"I have the feeling he thinks we're sweethearts rather than brother and sister," Elissia answered with amusement. "He's known I'm a girl all along, so it's a natural conclusion for him to come to."

"I suppose," Gardal allowed as he turned to follow Elissia to the kitchen. "And it's a more pleasant outlook than if he decided *he* wanted to court you. It would be awkward trying to explain that you're already a married woman."

Elissia almost stumbled when she heard that, not having been certain that Gardal knew about her marriage to the savage. But he did know, and the way he'd spoken of it said he also approved. That meant she really did have to keep him from knowing that the savage was also in the city. If Gardal ever made contact with him, she would be handed back before she had the chance to put the rest of her plans into effect. No, Gardal couldn't find out, and if he did she would have to be ready to leave at a moment's notice

Renni greeted the "stranger" warmly before leading him to the table Elissia used in the corner of the kitchen, and then she began to feed him. Gardal ate as though he were starving, and Elissia sipped tea as she watched him. Half of her task had already been accomplished, and hopefully it would not be long before they were out of the city. Once they were safely away from Ramsond she would separate herself from Gardal, making him believe there was an important stop she had to make before she could follow him home. After that

When Gardal had eaten all he could hold, Elissia got a second room key from Renni, then led him upstairs to her room. The bed was large enough for two, and as long as both of them slept in their clothes there was no reason they couldn't share it. Gardal looked around after stepping inside, and then gave a short laugh.

"At one time I would have considered a room this size to be nothing but a bread box," he said. "After the days I spent in that crate, though, this place looks enormous. And if you don't mind, I'd like to stretch out on that bed for a while. It has an actual mattress, which my cot in the crate didn't."

"That's what you're here for, so help yourself," Elissia said with a sweep of her hand. "You can rest up

here without anyone bothering you, and I'll make sure of that by locking the door when I leave. Have I said how glad I am to see you again, brother?"

"No, you haven't, and I'll probably never forgive you for forgetting," Gardal said with a grin as he came over to hug her. "I have to be the luckiest brother in the world, to have a sister like you. When I see Derand again, I plan to tell him exactly how lucky a man *he* is as well Hey, what's wrong? You went stiff there for a minute."

"Gardal, why didn't you ever tell me about that marriage?" Elissia couldn't keep herself from asking as she stared at his worn and rumpled shirt. "Didn't it occur to you that I had a right to know?"

"I – ah – see I put my foot in it, but not as badly as I might have," Gardal answered after something of a pause. "I forgot for the minute that you didn't know, but obviously you now do know. I assume Father told you, and that's why I didn't. He asked to be the one to break it to you, and I knew he would be really gentle about it. Besides, I wanted you to get to know Derand before you decided you had to hate him. He's the best friend I have, and I hoped you would like him as much as I do. Even if you *are* totally against marriage for some reason."

"You should now find it easier to understand that reason," Elissia said after moving away from her brother's arms. "If a woman's husband decides he likes the idea, he can put her in a box just like the one *you* were put in, and no one has the right to tell him he can't. Consider how you would have felt if no one came to your rescue, and then think about your feelings if no one had the *right* to rescue you."

"But Derand would never do something like that to you," Gardal protested, clearly almost as upset as Elissia was. "He's really a decent man, El, and once you get to know him you'll find that out."

"I don't *want* to get to know him, not now and not ever," Elissia stated, determined to make her brother see exactly where she was coming from. "He's nothing but an unfeeling savage, and I'd rather be dead than stay married to him. But look You said you wanted to rest, so why don't you do that. I'll find something to occupy me downstairs."

Gardal tried to keep the discussion going, but Elissia had had more of it than she cared for. She walked out of the room, closed and locked the door behind her, then was able to continue on downstairs without being pursued. If she knew Gardal they'd probably argue again later, but later could be taken care of when the time came.

Elissia found a quiet, private corner of the garden, and spent the rest of the day there. She had no appetite for lunch so she didn't bother looking for any, but Renni didn't let her ignore dinnertime as well. The small woman came out to the garden and all but dragged Elissia inside to eat, letting her escape again only when most of the food was gone.

Darkness had already fallen when Renni appeared again, the lantern beside the kitchen door letting her see where Elissia sat. She walked over to Elissia slowly, then sat in the grass beside her.

"Will you please tell me what's wrong?" she asked in a voice soft with aching as she put an arm around Elissia's shoulders. "I thought everything would be fine once your brother was rescued, but you look more unhappy now that you did before he was free."

"My brother thinks I ought to be a wife to a man who doesn't care a thing about me," Elissia whispered

in answer, willing to speak if that was the only way to get Renni to go home. "Do *you* think it's all right to be chained to a man who uses your own feelings against you?"

"No, of course not," Renni said at once, her tone faintly outraged. "Do you mean your father and brother have someone they want you to marry? If so, just tell them you refuse to do it. You've never had trouble standing up for yourself before, so why is it such a problem this time?"

"I can't go into details, but it's more than just a problem," Elissia said, staring down at her hands rather than looking up at Renni. "It's a horrible trap, and I seem to be caught right in the middle of it. He doesn't want the marriage any more than I do, but he happens to like my father so he's hesitating over disappointing him. What he does to *me* doesn't carry the same concern."

"Elissia, I don't know what to say," Renni groped, trying to be supportive. "We've become good friends in spite of the difference in our stations in life, and I hate to see you so unhappy. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"I wish there was," Elissia said with a sigh, finally reaching over to pat Renni's hand. "If I think of anything I'll be sure to tell you. The only thing I know without the least doubt is that I'd rather be beaten than not cared about. The pain is less and doesn't last nearly as long."

"And there can even be benefits if the beating isn't *too* bad," Renni said, obviously trying to lighten the tone of the conversation. "I know some people – friends of friends – who make a practice of having the man spank the woman almost every night. I didn't understand why they did that, so I asked to have it explained."

"And what was the answer?" Elissia asked, giving no indication that she knew it was Orra and Camdin that Renni was talking about. "Getting spanked doesn't strike me as much of a fun way to spend the evening – if you'll excuse the expression."

"As I said, I didn't understand it either," Renni went on with a small chuckle. "What I found out, though, was that the arrangement had benefits for both parties involved. A woman likes to believe that her man is strong enough to keep her from doing things that could be harmful to her. We all have things we do that we really shouldn't, things that could end up really harming us, but we can't seem to break the habit of doing them. If the man we're bound to takes the trouble to punish us for doing those things in an effort to help us get to the point of stopping, it's only because he cares about us. If he didn't care, it would never matter to him *what* we did."

Elissia had never looked at the matter in exactly that way, but it did make a bit of sense. You don't get angry at someone for risking themselves, for instance, if you don't care what happens to them.

"Now, the man's point of view is something I still don't understand quite as well," Renni continued. "Most men seem to have a yearning to be in charge of everything around them, but sometimes that's not possible. If they're in business they have to cater to their customers' whims and desires, and when it comes to the government there's no one in charge but the people appointed by the prince. The men can sometimes get frustrated to the point of insanity – but not if they have an outlet. Being completely in charge of their family is one way, but too often a man like that is a tyrant. If he doesn't want to be a tyrant, he finds a different outlet."

"Like spanking his wife?" Elissia asked, still not really convinced. "That's your idea of not being a tyrant?"

"If the rest of the time he's considerate and loving toward her, what's so wrong with the idea?" Renni countered. "He takes out his frustration with life by warming her bottom, and then he's ready to face those frustrations again – for her and for the rest of their family. It keeps him from becoming someone everyone hates and fears, it keeps *her* from doing too many things that might harm her, and no one is really hurt. And on top of that, a lot of men consider it fun to spank a woman. He ends up aroused, and she eventually ends up satisfied. Do you also want to argue with *that* outcome?"

"Are you saying that some women deliberately provoke their husbands into spanking them in order to have a better time in bed?" Elissia demanded, for some reason finding the idea uncomfortable. "I didn't know something like that could make such a difference."

"It can if the man is one who enjoys the game," Renni assured her. "Sometimes that kind of man even likes to have his wife *ask* to be spanked, a sign to him that she's joined him in the game and also enjoys it. If he's in the game alone it isn't nearly as much fun, but a woman doesn't necessarily have to ask in words. She can use her behavior to provoke him, and do the asking that way. But it still comes down to sharing, which is just another way to show you care."

There was that word again, Elissia thought, wincing on the inside. The word "caring" brought a lot of pain with the memories it evoked, and Renni seemed to know how she felt. The smaller woman hugged Elissia gently, and then she sighed.

"I have to leave now so that my husband doesn't begin to believe I've run off with another man," she said, again trying to lighten things up. "But don't forget I'll be back tomorrow, and if you need to talk you just have to say so. Your brother didn't come down for supper, so I put something away for him in case he gets hungry later. It's wrapped in some paper with the name 'Demmin' on it, so he'll know for certain it's his. Will you be all right?"

Elissia nodded with the best smile she could manage, and apparently the dark helped her out. Renni accepted the smile and gave her another hug, and then got up and left.

The dark was peaceful and quiet, but after another short while Elissia realized that she might need to be up early tomorrow. If Torban's people found a way out of the city for them, she and Gardal would have some hard riding to do. For that reason she left the peaceful night, went inside, then climbed the stairs to her room.

Gardal didn't stir at all, not when she came in then relocked the door, and not even when she took off her cap and lay down beside him. His slow, even breathing showed how deeply asleep he was, probably the first good sleep he'd had in days. It suddenly came to her how hard it must be to sleep in captivity, what with worry over the condition and more worry about when it would end – and what would happen in between. No wonder he hadn't even gotten up for supper

Elissia moved around in an effort to get more comfortable, but something seemed to be keeping it from happening. It was true she wasn't terribly happy about sleeping in her clothes, but that wasn't the point of greatest disturbance. It was something else, something she couldn't quite –

When sudden understanding came, she voiced a low groan and closed her eyes. The thing disturbing her was the fact that a man lay on the other side of the bed, reminding her about a different man who had shared a bed with her. That other was a man who had seemed at first to care about her, a man who had even gone so far as to spank her hard when she did something he disapproved of. She could almost feel his hand coming down, each swat bringing an ache to her bottom and then adding to it. He'd held her across his lap and warmed her seat until she howled, and during *that* time at least, she'd truly regretted doing what had caused the spanking.

And afterward he had lain with her, bringing her such pleasure that the spanking he'd given had been a small price to pay for the ecstasy coming after. In spite of herself she'd almost begun to believe she meant more to him than his desire to go along with something both their fathers wanted. But then he'd savaged her like that, hurting her more with his uncaring actions than he ever could even with a paddle. He *didn't* care about her, no one did, they were all just interested in doing their duty by her. Her father and brother just wanted her off their hands, and as for *him* he'd refused to have the marriage annulled for all the wrong reasons. Assuming he hadn't even changed his mind about *that* by now

Quiet tears ran down Elissia's face, tears of betrayal and hurt and very deep loneliness. She was a woman and useless and nobody wanted her, and she really wished she were already dead. That was the only thing keeping her going, the promise she'd made to herself about what would happen once Gardal was safely on his way home. She just wished the time would hurry up and come to be, before her strength failed her completely

Princess Brat

Chapter 10

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"Elissia, wake up!" The hissed words brought her out of too deep a sleep, the worry in them immediately banishing all desire to stay asleep. "There are guardsmen downstairs, and I think they've started to search the inn."

Elissia scrambled up and joined Gardal by the window, and unfortunately he hadn't been imagining things. There really were guardsmen downstairs, and from the not-too- distant sound of the thud of boots it was clear he was also right about the search.

"Someone must have finally gotten up the nerve to tell Waysten that his prisoner has escaped," Elissia muttered as she stepped back from the window. "They couldn't have told him right away, or those guardsmen would have been here last night. Do you think you can roll yourself up into a ball under the bed?"

"It'll be a tight squeeze, but I think I can just make it," Gardal allowed. He eyed the bed for a moment, then brought his attention back to her. "What kind of plan do you have in mind now?"

"Something that might not work, but is at least worth trying," she returned with impatience. "Stop wasting time and get under there."

Gardal shook his head at the way he was being ordered around, but he still did as she said. He lay flat on the floor and slid himself carefully under the bed, and a moment later all sign of him was gone. Elissia made sure of that and then hurried to do *her* part, the first of which was to smooth the side of the bed he'd used. A tug and a push and a stroke of her hand removed the signs that someone had been sleeping on that side, and then she hurried over to the other. It took only a moment to get out of her clothes and put them and her cap and boots under the bed with Gardal, and then she got under the quilts.

Elissia arranged herself carefully, with most of her body on her own side of the bed and her head and arms on the pillow beside her own. People who slept alone tended to spread out, and it was vital that she seemed to be alone. The sound of boots on the wood of the floor had gotten louder and louder as she'd worked, and now they stopped just outside her door. If she'd miscalculated and they knocked instead of just letting themselves in

But they didn't knock. The sound of a key scraping in the lock came, and then the door was thrown open and more than one set of boots stomped in. That was when Elissia let herself "wake up" with a start, and when she saw the men staring at her she pulled the quilt up to her chin with a gasp.

"Your pardon, young mistress, but we're searching for an escaped criminal," one of the two men said,

the older of the two. "Have you seen or heard anything of someone creeping around here?"

"N-no, sir, I haven't," Elissia answered in a quavery voice that wasn't all acting. "I've been sleeping, but if anyone had tried to come in, I would have heard them."

"Maybe we ought to make sure by checking under those quilts," the younger guardsmen said with a leering grin, obviously impressed by Elissia's wide-eyed "innocence." "It's a dirty job, but I'm willing to do it."

"Save it for your off-duty time," the first guardsman growled in disapproval, then looked at Elissia again. "We're sorry to have bothered you, young mistress, and we're leaving now. But if you happen to see any sign of that fugitive, send for us right away. There's a reward for anyone who helps us to recapture him."

"A reward?" Elissia asked, less nervousness and more interest in her voice now. "How much of a reward?"

"Ten silver pieces," the guardsman answered, glancing at the younger man with satisfaction. Frightening the "young girl" wouldn't have done anything to make her want to cooperate with them. "Think of all the things you could buy with that much silver."

"Oh, I am thinking," Elissia agreed with a small amount of distraction, then she looked at the older guardsmen again with a smile. "I'll make sure to look around very carefully once I'm up, and if I see anything odd I'll send for you at once. Or will sending for any guardsman do as well?"

"Any of us will do, as long as the fugitive is put back where he belongs," the man answered with a sigh. "But make sure he doesn't find out what you're doing. He likes to play with pretty young things like you before he kills them, so don't take any chances."

"No, I certainly won't," Elissia agreed, back to being wide-eyed and frightened. "I'll make sure I'm *very* careful."

The man nodded before gesturing his companion out with him, and once they were outside the door was relocked. Elissia stayed where she was until she heard them finish up checking the last of the rooms on the floor, then got up as the sound of their boots faded down the stairs. If for some reason they'd come back, she hadn't wanted them to find her dressed in boy's clothing. She pulled her clothes out from their hiding place and began to get into them, and by the time she was dressed, Gardal had slid out from under the bed.

"You sounded awfully interested in that reward," he said as he stood up. "Does that mean you intend to turn me in as soon as I'm not looking?"

"Of course," she agreed as she finished with her boots and also stood. "I knew that freeing you would put a price on your head, and I've only been waiting for it to get high enough. Once I collect, I intend to buy myself some new clothes. This outfit has gone well beyond rank, and if I take a bath it will only be worse."

"I'm in the same position, so I know what you mean," Gardal agreed wryly. "Living in the same set of clothes for days ends up turning your stomach, but looking for new ones could get us caught. We'll just

have to put up with it until we're out of here."

Elissia nodded her agreement, then went to the window. She had no intention of going downstairs until the guardsmen were completely gone from the whole area, not even with her cap on. If one of those two guardsmen happened to see her, they were bound to get suspicious

"While we're waiting for them to leave, why don't you tell me about what happened that turned you so completely against Derand," Gardal said from a small distance behind her. "At first I thought you were just voicing an opinion with nothing to back it up, but thinking about it made me change my mind. You've actually met and talked to him, haven't you."

Elissia hesitated a very long minute, but Gardal wasn't guessing. He'd always been good at *knowing* certain things, and this time she couldn't walk away from the conversation. But that didn't mean she had to tell him *everything*

"Yes, I met and talked to him at the palace," she admitted, speaking the absolute truth as she continued to keep her gaze on the window. "He acted gracious and charming while Father was there, but once we were alone he hurt me. At one point he said he'd let the marriage be annulled, then he changed his mind and afterward changed it a second time. I have no idea where he stands on the question at the moment, nor do I care. I refuse to be his wife under any circumstances."

"I really don't understand this," Gardal said, his voice now showing his disturbance. "I can see you're telling the truth, but that doesn't sound at all like Derand. He's been my friend ever since we were boys, and he's *never* been anything but honest and fair."

"Maybe that's because he had no interest in getting you into bed," Elissia said, forcing herself to sound disgusted and disillusioned. "He made me lie with him, and when I tried to protest he just laughed and said it was something his family believed in doing. And then he used *that* to hurt me even more."

Elissia had carefully slanted the story, but there was enough truth in the last part of it that Gardal couldn't help but notice. His hand came to her shoulder in silent support, commiserating with her without using possibly empty words. She reached over and put her own hand on his, thanking him just as silently, and they stood there like that for quite some time.

The guardsmen were very thorough before they finally left, and Elissia didn't rush from the room as soon as they were out of sight. It was clear they were still in the neighborhood, checking everywhere, and could conceivably come back. For that reason Elissia resigned herself to even more of a wait, and then jumped when there was a knock at the door.

"Your breakfast is now being delivered," Renni's voice came from outside, calming the pounding of Elissia's heart. "Please open the door for me, my hands are rather full."

Elissia put a hand up to keep Gardal from going immediately to the door, then went there herself after gesturing him into standing behind it. Renni hadn't used any names, and it was just possible that she was being forced to say what she had. Elissia unlocked and opened the door slowly and carefully, putting only her head out, but the precautions were unnecessary. Renni stood there alone with a tray in her hands, and she grinned when she saw Elissia.

"If you're not going to let me in, I'll have to eat all this myself," Renni said in a very soft voice, obviously

teasing. "I thought there might be hungry people in this room, but if I was wrong "

"You're not wrong, so come on in," Gardal said at once after having looked through the slit of the opened door. "It's okay, El, she's alone out there."

Elissia had already begun to step back, and once she was out of the way Renni carried the food in.

"After missing supper last night, I knew *someone* would be interested in this," she said, glancing at Gardal. "If you're still hungry once this is all gone, send 'Sentor' down for more. He still has a long way to go before using up the silver he paid when he first got here."

"I'll do that," he said, following her to the bed as though he were on a string. "My, my, but that does smell good."

"Then help yourself," she said, putting the tray down and giving him clear access to it. "There really is enough for two."

She'd turned to Elissia with that, but after closing the door Elissia found that she wasn't in that much of a rush to get to the food. The conversation she'd had with Gardal had done a good job of killing her appetite

"You've got nothing better to do than eat, so you might as well get down to it," Renni said when she saw the expression Elissia hadn't been able to hide completely. "With all those guardsmen prowling around the neighborhood, Wyole won't be by for quite some time even if he's expected. And I got the impression they're checking out *all* neighborhoods, trying to find this escaped criminal of theirs. They've even got part of the army involved in the search."

"The part that's voluntary rather than conscripted, I'll bet," Elissia said, disliking the sound of the whole thing. "That criminal is someone who really sounds dangerous, so I won't be surprised if they have orders to take him dead instead of alive. Waysten would be in a lot of trouble if people found out who the fugitive *really* is."

"She said she's decided to turn me in because she wants the silver they're offering as a reward," Gardal put in around a mouthful of food. "Now that she thinks they'll probably kill me out of hand, I wonder if she intends to change her mind."

"Not if you keep saying things like *that* I won't," Elissia told him as Renni chuckled. "And stop looking at the food on *my* plate. If Wyole makes it through after all, I intend to be ready to leave at once."

Gardal protested his innocence without pausing in taking his meal, so Elissia went over to the bed and began to do her own eating. She really did need the food to keep up her strength, and she knew her brother well enough to know that he would have eaten her portion without a second thought. She would not mind at all going after more for him if he was still hungry when he finished, but she still had a younger sister's hatred of letting her older brother near anything of *hers*.

Renni wished them a good appetite and went back downstairs, leaving Elissia and Gardal to eat in peace. After a short while Elissia discovered that she wasn't able to stuff any more down, and Gardal graciously offered to help finish what she hadn't. So she sipped tea from her cup while Gardal cleaned her plate, and once he was through she gave him the best smile she could.

"If you really do want more, I don't mind going after it," she said when he looked over at her. "Renni's a marvelous cook, isn't she?"

"Yes, she is, but unfortunately I don't have the room for more," Gardal said with what sounded like true regret. "If we're still here by lunchtime, I'll see if I can take you up on your offer."

"All right," Elissia agreed, and then they ran out of what to say. She wished she knew whether they *would* still be there at lunchtime, and the worry that they probably would be obviously bothered Gardal as well. The longer it took for them to leave the city, the greater the chance that *someone* would discover the whereabouts of the "fugitive."

The minutes and hours dragged slowly past, and Elissia discovered that Gardal's pacing was beginning to fray her nerves rather badly. When she knew she couldn't stand another second of it, she decided to take the breakfast tray downstairs and see if anything was ready for lunch. Eating would distract Gardal for a while, and maybe then –

Once again Elissia's heart began to pound at the knock on the door, and this time Gardal didn't have to be told to stand where he couldn't be seen. Elissia went to the door the way she had earlier, but peeking out showed no one but Renni. This time, however, the small woman looked excited rather than amused.

"Wyole is here, and he's come with good news," she said as soon as she was in the room. "The word is spreading everywhere that the fugitive has been recaptured, and it seems to be true. The men from the army have gone back to their barracks, and the guardsmen have stopped searching houses. That should mean that you two will be able to leave soon."

"That *is* good news," Gardal enthused while Elissia tried to forget what it was she would be leaving to find. "And if things go well enough, we might even be able to ride straight through the gates without anyone stopping us."

"Don't think about that even for a minute," Elissia said at once, brought sharply back to the problem of keeping Gardal safe. "If Waysten decided it was taking too long to find you, he could well have called off the search and circulated that rumor just to draw you out of hiding. If you thought it was safe to just ride through the gates you might be silly enough to try it, and then he would have you again without turning the whole city upside down. We'll wait for Wyole's people to find us a different way out, even if it takes longer than we *want* to wait."

"All right, all right, we'll do it your way," Gardal said with both hands held up in front of him. "You always have been better at this sort of thing than I am, so I won't argue with you. But what about going down for some lunch? I'm starving again."

"You're always starving," Elissia said while Renni chuckled, then Renni took the tray and the two of them left. As they walked downstairs, Elissia couldn't help wondering if the story about the recapture was just a ruse. If it wasn't, some poor innocent had been taken in Gardal's place, and Elissia felt really sorry for whoever it might be

Derand, in his male disguise, finished the breakfast Kravil had cooked for him and then he went to a

window to stand and look outside. He, Kravil, and two of the men were the only ones left in the house, everyone else having gone out looking for the girl and her brother hours earlier. Even Listan had gone, joining the search rather than simply directing it. There was also someone keeping an eye on the blue house, just in case the girl took her brother *there*. Derand didn't really expect her to, but the possibility still had to be covered.

"If we don't find them soon, we'll find instead that we've run out of time," Derand muttered, staring out at a neat back garden without really seeing it. "If I'd told her the entire plan, at least she'd understand what I'm up against and do something to ease the situation. But she can't work with a plan she doesn't know about, so if this whole thing comes apart it's no one's fault but my own."

Derand had done a lot of thinking since the fiasco of the day before, and because of that he'd also spent a lot of time cursing at himself. He'd admired the girl's cleverness and ability, and then he'd gone ahead and discounted her entirely. He'd seen her in the future as one of his most trusted advisors, but he hadn't trusted her enough to tell her *everything* he meant to do. Now he stood here waiting and worrying, about her and Gardal both. Time *was* quickly running out, and what could happen to the two if they weren't found soon was something he didn't want to imagine.

"And you know she has to be deliberately hiding from you," he told himself, leaning one hand on the window frame. "You caused her anguish and then walked away, but you're not feeling so righteously justified anymore, are you? You were a fool to do that to her, and now you're paying for it."

Yes, he was paying, all right, and the final price might end up being much too high. It was too late to change the plan he'd set in motion the day before, and couldn't even change the timing of it. He should have arranged for some way to communicate with the others, but that would have added to their risk and so he hadn't. How many other things were there that he should have done but hadn't?

A knock at the front door intruded on Derand's thoughts, a distraction that was very much a relief. Being left alone with his thoughts was something he usually appreciated, but right now it was more like being silently tortured. And going to answer the door was *his* to do. Kravil was busy in the kitchen cleaning up, and the two men left as guards were under orders not to let themselves be seen. Private guards in houses like that stayed out of the way, doing nothing to bring themselves to the attention of guests.

So Derand strode to the door and pulled it open – only to freeze in place. Six guardsmen were right outside, with one of them standing forward as spokesman.

"Excuse the intrusion, my lord, but we're searching for an escaped fugitive," the guardsman began, then he looked a bit more closely at Derand. "Are *you* the owner of this house?"

"No, no I'm not," Derand said at once, reminded of what he looked like by the way the guardsman inspected him closely. "I'm just here visiting, and at the moment the owner is out. What did this fugitive of yours do?"

"He's a murderer, and there's a reward for his capture," the guardsman muttered in answer as he began to move forward. "How can you be here visiting when the owner of the house is out? And why would the owner of a house like this have someone like *you* visiting him? You're not even dressed as well as the servants around here. I think you're lying."

"But why would I lie?" Derand tried desperately, silently cursing the gleam of intelligence in the man's eyes. Guardsmen were supposed to be stupid, but the one in front of him wasn't typical of the breed. "If you'll wait until the house's owner gets back, he'll be able to tell you – "

"I have a better idea," the guardsman interrupted, and at his gesture Derand was suddenly being held by the other guardsmen who had quickly surrounded him. "Instead of waiting for someone who might never show up, let's look a bit more closely at someone who's already here."

Derand tried to pull himself free of the hands holding him without making *too* much of a fuss, but it was way past time for smoothing things over. The lead guardsman reached over and yanked on Derand's false beard, and the fool thing came away much too easily. When that happened other hands came to hold Derand still, and a sword point was even presented to his throat.

"Now, isn't this interesting?" the guardsman said with amusement, glancing at the false beard before throwing it away. "Let's see if there are any other surprises waiting to be discovered."

A pair of minutes later Derand stood there without the wig and shape-altering pillow as well, and the guardsman was positively delighted.

"Do you men see now what can be accomplished if you keep your eyes open?" he said to the others, his satisfied stare resting only on Derand. "We've just earned ourselves that reward in silver."

"I'm not the escaped murderer you're looking for," Derand tried to insist, but a blow to the back of his head cut the words short.

"Tell it to the prince's magistrate when they drag you up in front of him," the guardsman advised while Derand's ears rang. "You men bring him outside and get the chains on him. We'll head straight back, and get the word spread that the search can be called off."

Derand felt himself being dragged out of the house, the knowledge that no one would stop the guardsmen a bitter but unavoidable truth. His fighters must have been able to see the sword at his throat, and for that reason would not have tried to interfere. If they'd attacked, the guardsmen would have killed *him* first before turning to defend themselves, a standard practice and one that made sense. If you know your attack will accomplish the one thing you don't want to happen, you tend to refrain from attacking.

But at least Listan and the others will know what happened to me," Derand thought as he was shoved into a cart where manacles were immediately closed on his wrists and ankles and even around his neck. *And someone has to know what this escaped murderer looks like, so once they find out I'm not him they'll have to release me. As long as I can come up with an innocent reason for having been in disguise*

The cart, pulled by a single horse, was started along the street at a moderately slow pace. That was to allow the guardsmen to continue to surround him, since there wasn't enough room in the cart itself to hold them. Derand set his mind to working on that innocent reason he needed, but after a minute or two he was distracted. There were a *lot* of guardsmen in the streets, all of them apparently searching for that fugitive. Who could the man have killed that even members of the army would be used to –

Derand groaned as the true answer finally worked its way through his thick skull. It wasn't a murderer being searched for it was *Gardal*, the part about his being a murderer added just to confuse the issue. Waysten wanted his unofficial prisoner back, so that's who would be coming to identify the man his guardsmen had captured. Prince Waysten of Ramsond, who would recognize Derand as soon as he saw him

The slow ride to the palace didn't take nearly long enough to suit Derand. He'd been trying desperately to think of a way out of that mess, but absolutely nothing had come to him. Oh, there was one thing he might end up having to use on Waysten, but he would have preferred to think of something a bit more practical. That one thing would be tried to keep himself alive when it looked like the end, but there was no guarantee it would work.

And nothing in the way of other ideas came up. The cart rolled through the palace gates, was turned right, and then was guided along the outer wall until it reached a heavy wooden door. The cart was then stopped and two of the guardsmen surrounding Derand reached for the chains where they were attached to the wooden sides. A moment later the manacles were free of the cart and then so was Derand, the guardsmen pulling him out and to his feet.

Walking through the opened door was slow and difficult going for the manacled Derand, but not as slow and difficult as descending the stone steps he was dragged to. The steps went down and down, curving around in a way that made it perfectly clear they were headed for the palace dungeons. That was a part of Ramsond Derand had no desire to see, but he wasn't being given the choice. The guardsmen refused to relax for a single instant, not until they reached the bottom.

Once there they found an empty cell, unlocked it and pushed him in, then relocked it. That clang sounded very final to Derand as he sat down on the old, dirty straw he'd seen while the door to the cell was still open. He had no idea how long he would have to wait, but chances were it wouldn't be nearly long enough.

And it wasn't long enough. It couldn't have been more than twenty minutes or so before a sound came at the cell door. It opened to show someone carrying a torch held high, and behind the newcomer was a man Derand recognized immediately. Prince Waysten of Ramsond was tall and blond and husky, the strongly defined lines of his face breeding confidence in men and attraction in women – or so it was said. Derand felt neither confidence nor attraction, especially when Waysten frowned for a moment, then showed a wide, insulting grin.

"Well, it looks like my net caught a bigger fish than I expected to land," Waysten said with a laugh. "And all those fools kept assuring me that you couldn't possibly have gotten into the city without them knowing about it. There will be a lot of punishments handed out over this, as well as a promotion or two. It's nice to know that *someone* in my guard is worthy of the uniform."

Derand felt the urge to make the sort of nasty comment Waysten usually hated, but that wasn't the best position to do it from. So instead of speaking he simply relaxed back in the filthy straw, pretending he wouldn't have been anywhere else even if he'd been given the choice.

"Apparently wonders never do cease," Waysten said when it was clear that Derand wasn't going to be speaking. "You've run out of fatuous comments to make, and so you remain silent. Very well, I'll *give* you something to speak about. Tell me where the other one is, and you may get out of this with your

life."

The other one. Derand swallowed a smile, realizing that Waysten had just told him that he thought Derand was the one who had freed Gardal. The misapprehension was perfect where Derand was concerned, as it had just given him a plan of sorts.

"I think I'll reserve that bit of information for the time when we come to a firm agreement," Derand drawled, no longer trying to hide his smile. "And now I'd appreciate being let out of here, and given a chance to clean up."

"Would you really," Waysten muttered, his own amusement entirely gone. "And you really believe I'll make a deal with you. I'd rather see the information tortured out of you, which will be done as soon as my people can be sent for. Only the best for an exalted visitor like *you*."

Waysten's bow was pure condescension and mockery, but Derand ignored it to speak before the man turned away.

"Torture won't get you what you want to know," he said at once. "Haven't you heard the stories, or did you simply disbelieve them?"

"Do you mean about the time you were supposedly captured by one of those savages calling themselves kings in Arvin?" Waysten seemed to be working hard to show skepticism, but that wasn't what came through in the way he'd hesitated briefly before he spoke. "Everyone's heard *those* stories by now, about the way you resisted torture until your people were able to free you. Do you expect anyone above the age of four to believe that?"

"I'll show you the scars, if you like," Derand offered, holding the other man's gaze easily. "My then enemy wanted to know where my main forces were, and I couldn't afford to tell him if I wanted my campaigns to continue to be successful. The pain was like nothing I'd ever experienced before, but I still found it possible to hold out. This time, though, I have a different end in mind. You'd better understand that if I'm hurt in any way at all, I won't even *consider* exchanging the other's life for my own."

"I'm supposed to believe you'd do that under *any* circumstances?" Waysten demanded with a snort of ridicule. "You're the one who's supposed to be so honorable, and aren't you and the other old friends?"

"Yes, we certainly are old friends," Derand agreed easily. "But honor has to be kept in its place, otherwise it does you no good. I'd never exchange the other's life for anything *but* my own, and that's as honorable as I'm prepared to be. Now, about getting me out of here "

Waysten actually took a moment to think, which surprised Derand no end. The man had always before acted *without* thought, and whether or not the change was for the better depended on what his final decision turned out to be

"Yes, I believe I do want you out of here," Waysten said after a long moment, looking down at Derand with no friendliness whatsoever. "But if you're picturing yourself being released entirely, I'll advise you not to be a fool. Or to consider *me* one. There's a private room in my wing that should do nicely as a place for you, and I'll see you settled in after I have them scrub you clean. We'll come to that agreement you mentioned rather quickly, or you'll have more than scars to show for *my* methods of

extracting information. Or should I say you'll have less? Bring him."

Derand made sure that the shudder he felt at Waysten's comment was kept completely on the inside. That, however, did nothing to protect him from the icy clutch of it. The stories never mentioned how short a period he'd actually been tortured that time, or how long it had seemed to *him*. Waysten was diverted for the moment, but how long could he delay giving the man what he wanted? Derand didn't know, but he was certain he would find out very shortly

Wyole had been gone again by the time Elissia and Renni went downstairs, so Elissia took a tray of food up to Gardal and then went to have her own meal outdoors. After eating she fully intended to go back up to keep Gardal company, but she remembered that she'd spent a lot of time outdoors the day before. If she rushed right back to her room someone might begin to wonder why, and even beyond that Gardal might appreciate a short time of privacy. He hadn't seemed to have had much of it during his captivity, so he might as well have some now.

It was a fairly nice day despite the way clouds seemed to be gathering, so she sat and enjoyed the private garden while firming up her plans for after they left the city. That took some of the enjoyment out of the day, and she was just about to go back inside when she saw Gardal coming out to join her. He wore a cloak as though cold and walked bent over to suggest advanced age, but even the staff he used as a walking stick didn't fool her. It was Gardal, all right, and the idiot was right there where anyone could see him.

"Don't start scolding me, sister," he murmured low as soon as reached her, heading off what *she* was about to say. "I've had too much of being locked up in places lately, and need some time in the peace of outdoors. I won't stay out long, and we'll pretend we don't even know each other."

"It's still not a good idea, but I can understand how you feel," Elissia gruded after a moment. "But do your enjoying of the peace behind that row of bushes, sitting on the bench behind them. You'll be hardest to see there, and I'll stay here on guard."

Gardal muttered something rebellious about being guarded by a woman, but he still hobbled over to the bench without argument. Once he sat he really was hard to see, so most of Elissia's objections disappeared. She really should have used that spot herself the times she'd been out here, but the grass beside the hedge had appealed to her more. It was in the open to a certain extent rather than being completely separated from the world, and enough of Elissia's life had separated her from the world. Now, almost at the end of it, she found she couldn't endure any more of it

She stood in a patch of bright sunlight for a moment or two, then turned around to go back to the hedge. She'd forgotten to ask Gardal where he'd gotten the cloak and staff, but they had probably come from Renni. Without Renni none of what she'd done would have been possible, and Elissia knew she'd have to get Gardal to promise to find a really special way to thank the small woman. Elissia would have preferred to find that way herself, but there would hardly be enough time before –

"Please don't be frightened, I'm a friend," the man who had suddenly appeared in front of her said, standing with one hand up. "I'm here because I need your help."

"What help can I give?" Elissia asked at once in her boy's voice, wondering who this plainly dressed man could be. "If you need something carried into the inn – "

"Please, Your Majesty, I do know who you are," the man interrupted, but the words weren't as shocking as they might have been. The man was really upset, something Elissia hadn't noticed earlier. "One of my men located you for the High King a short while ago, but when we went to tell him we'd found you we discovered that he'd been taken by guardsmen. He's in Prince Waysten's hands by now, and if we try to fight our way into the palace he'll be killed before we can reach him. But we *have* to get to him before the prince kills or maims him anyway, and you're our only hope. Do you have any idea how we can – "

"Derand is in the city?" Gardal demanded, suddenly striding out from behind the bushes where he'd been sitting. "And he's in Waysten's hands? How could *that* have happened?"

"It happened because we were all out looking for *you* and your sister, Your Highness," the man said to Gardal with a bow. "I'm Listan, the man in charge of the High King's fighters. We found the place where you were being held, but when we tried to rescue you we found that it had already been done. We came to the conclusion that your sister had gotten there ahead of us, but it was vitally important that we locate you both."

"What made it so vitally important?" Elissia interrupted Gardal's next comment to ask. She knew how stiff her voice sounded, but she found it impossible to change the attitude. "Was it because I'm a helpless woman, and so needed the aid of you exalted men to be safe and get Gardal safely away? Well, if *that's* the case, then let me tell *you* – "

"No, no, that's not it at all," the man Listan interrupted in turn, gesturing the idea aside. "We had to find you before dark, because we knew you would probably wait until dark before you tried to leave the city. And anyone out on the streets after dark tonight could very well end up dead, because that's the time our people in the High King's personal guard are scheduled to begin taking the city."

"Your people in his personal guard," Elissia echoed, more than a little confused. "You're going to try to take this city with twenty men?"

"Of course not," Listan replied with a small sound of ridicule. "Twenty is the number of men the High King takes with him when he goes to visit your father. He's convinced he's safe there and so would go even without the twenty, but I refuse to allow that. His enemies could use the opportunity to try reaching him, and twenty are enough to hold off anything but an army until the rest of the guard can be summoned. They're never camped very far away from where he is, and their full number is five hundred."

"Five hundred?" Elissia said, wondering if she would be nothing but an echo from now on. "Five hundred men are going to try to break into this city tonight?"

"They came in *last* night, by scaling the walls in a number of different places," Listan corrected again. "Once they were in they scattered and hid, which is why I can't contact them. There's no possible way to call off tonight's attack, and I'm not sure I should even if I could."

"Yes, Derand might have plans of his own that are based on the attack," Gardal commented

thoughtfully. "So what *are* we going to do?"

"That's for your sister to decide," Listan said at once, again shocking Elissia. "The High King felt that her ability at this sort of thing was far and away better than most people's, so we have to try taking advantage of that. She slipped *you* out from under our very noses, and I'm hoping she can do the same for the High King."

"I think we might have to try an exchange," Gardal said, apparently ignoring what Listan had told him. "It's me who Waysten really wants, so we can – "

"Give him the chance to get his hands on the two of you?" Elissia interrupted to finish. There had been so much scorn in her tone that Gardal flushed and tried to protest, but she refused to allow that.

"Making a deal with Waysten would be useless, because he'd never uphold his end of the bargain. He'd get his hands on *you* and then refuse to release your friend, and what would you do to make him sorry? Besides, you're forgetting about that attack tonight."

"So what do *you* suggest?" Gardal challenged, partly in embarrassment but also partly in hope. "What bright idea can *you* come up with?"

"I don't know how bright it is, but I do have an idea," Elissia murmured, her mind working furiously. The idea of the savage in Waysten's hands was upsetting for some reason, almost as though she cared what happened to him. Of course she didn't, not when *he* cared nothing about *her*, but still

"Listan, how much gold do you have?" Elissia asked as she turned to the man. "I hope it's a lot and I hope you have contacts in this city, because we don't have much time at all. Here's what we have to do."

Listan paid close attention as she outlined her plan, nodding even when Gardal began to protest. It was the only thing they *could* do, and the savage's lieutenant began to grin with full understanding

"Oh, good, you're already settled in," Derand heard. He looked up to see Waysten coming into the room, and unconsciously pulled at the thick leather bindings holding his wrists. "I may not use chain in here, but I don't think you'll find it possible to get loose."

Derand had already found that out for himself. He'd been trying to free himself from the restraints ever since the men who had put him in them had left the room, but he'd had no luck. He was seated in a wide, high-backed chair of heavy wood, his wrists clamped to the chair arms with thick leather cuffs. There was also a leather strap around his middle, and his ankles were cuffed with more leather to the legs of the chair. The restraints also seemed to be padded for some reason, but that fact did nothing to help him get out of them.

"I usually bring women in here rather than men, but in your case I'm making an exception," Waysten went on from where he'd stopped, about three feet away. "I'm sure it will be harder to convince *you* to be cooperative, but we'll find *some* way to manage it. Now about where your friend can be found "

"We still haven't made our deal," Derand reminded the man, keeping his attention away from the two men behind Waysten. Derand was sure he knew why they were there, but he couldn't afford to *show*

that he knew. And that comment about the room being used for women rather than men It explained some of the other pieces of "furniture" and accoutrements found in there

"Oh, yes, our deal," Waysten drawled, clearly having a marvelous time at Derand's expense. "What sort of conditions did you have in mind?"

"The first condition is that I don't deal while tied to a chair," Derand stated flatly, trying to project dignity despite being stark naked. "I want out of here and my clothes given back, and then we can sit down to a meal like two gentlemen to discuss this. We'll also have to work out a way for *me* to be out of your reach when my friend is finally in it, otherwise – "

"I think that's enough," Waysten interrupted, no longer showing ridiculing amusement. "If you'd had any intention of going through with a deal, you would have the conditions all worked out and ready to present. Instead what you're doing is stalling for time, probably hoping that your people will somehow get in here and free you. But that isn't going to happen, and you need to believe it as truth before you'll be ready to speak. Let's get started with that now, shall we?"

He stepped aside to give the two men with him access to his captive, and Derand had to grit his teeth to keep from saying something wild and frightened. The men were carrying rolled up packages that *had* to contain torture instruments, a certainty that turned Derand's blood cold. He'd have to hold hard to the awareness that it was almost dark out, and even if his men weren't able to free him, at least they'd be able to end his pain

Just as the men approached Derand, a servant entered the room and went over to whisper something to his prince. Waysten looked surprised, but there was some sort of pleasure behind the surprise. Something had clearly happened, and Derand expected the torture to be delayed so he could be told about it, but that didn't happen. Waysten simply walked out of the room, and the two men started their work –

Elissia tapped a foot impatiently as she waited for Waysten to appear. She now stood in the palace's main entrance hall, dressed in a gown and a cloak. Behind her stood her "maid," with a uniformed guardsman in Waysten's guard behind the two of them. Her maid also wore a long cloak, and Elissia had announced herself as the Princess Elissia, here to speak with Prince Waysten. She'd insisted on having Waysten come to her *there* at once, rather than letting any of the servants show her to "a more comfortable place to wait." There were a lot of people coming and going – and standing – in the entrance hall, and she wanted all of them to see Waysten greet her. It would hopefully go a short way toward seeing that she didn't "disappear mysteriously."

Also, Elissia admitted to herself, it might be of help to the savage. If Waysten was having him hurt, he could well suspend the torture until he was able to return. The whole situation was chancy, but Elissia knew it ought to work if she handled it right –

"Princess Elissia, what a delightful surprise," she heard, and then Waysten was striding over to take her hand and bow over it. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

"It's hardly a pleasure for *me*, Prince Waysten," Elissia told him coldly when he straightened up. "My father is terribly worried about Gardal, and I've come to find out if you know yet who is responsible for his kidnapping. I know you haven't found him, otherwise you would have sent a messenger with the

good news."

"Yes, of course I would have," Waysten replied, instantly showing compassionate tragedy. "And unfortunately you're quite right in saying I haven't yet found your brother, but that dismal fact could well change at any moment. My people have captured someone who knows where your brother is being held, and we're in the midst of questioning him right now. I'll have you shown to an apartment where you can rest, and as soon as I have the answer I'll – "

"Absolutely not," Elissia said, using the tone Waysten had heard more than once before. "If there's someone being questioned, I intend to be there to make sure the procedure isn't being botched. There's been talk about how long it's taking you to find Gardal, but there will be much less of it if *I'm* there to witness what's being done."

"You know, that's very true," Waysten murmured, the anger his eyes had shown having given way to surprised satisfaction. "Quieting the talk will be to *my* benefit, and being in the midst of things will be to yours. Very well, then, come along."

He offered her his arm, and Elissia made sure to show reluctance before taking it. Waysten knew she didn't like him, so her being too eager to go along with him would have been out of character. They were only a few minutes away from it not mattering *how* suspicious he got, which meant it paid to be extra careful.

Waysten led her to a set of stairs and then up, but he must have been thinking. They'd only climbed half way before he turned his head in her direction.

"It's odd that my gate people told me nothing of your arrival," he mused, now watching her closely. "They have strict instructions to inform me when any of my neighbors come to call."

"It's not odd at all," Elissia immediately told him with a sound of ridicule. "They didn't let you know I'd arrived because they didn't know themselves. With people around who dislike my family so much that they kidnapped my brother, you expected *me* to let the world know I was here? My escort watched me enter the gates and some of them even saw me enter the palace, so my father and his allies know I've gotten here safely. The people who kidnapped my brother, though, have no idea."

"Yes of course," Waysten muttered, his expression now hooded. "What a lucky thing you're so clever "

Lucky thing, right, Elissia thought as they continued to the top of the stairs. We'll find out how lucky you think it is if – when - this scheme works. And it had better hurry up, because we're quickly running out of time

Waysten led the way to another wing of the palace, and from there to one of the inner rooms. Elissia's "maid" followed them with the guardsman behind *her*, and they all walked into the room behind Waysten.

"I'm afraid he really is rather stubborn, Your Highness," one of the two men standing in the room said to Waysten while the guardsman closed the door behind all of them. "He withstood the pain until he fainted from it, and will probably do the same again when we rouse him. I have to recommend that we begin to remove parts of his body."

"I wanted to avoid that," Waysten said with annoyance as he moved toward the man. "We'll eventually have to turn his body over to someone, and the worse condition it's in, the worse I'll look. Well, he *is* the one responsible for kidnapping Prince Gardal, after all. Getting the prince back alive and unhurt will be all the vindication I'll need. All right, wake him up and get started."

Elissia had nearly been sick at seeing all the blood that covered the savage's unconscious body, but there wasn't enough time for her to be delicate and womanlike. It looked like they'd gotten there just in time, so she turned to Renni and took what had been hidden under Renni's cloak. The bow was strung a moment after she had it in her hands, and an instant later there was an arrow in the string. She also held two more arrows in her left hand, where they would be quickly available.

And now that she was completely ready, she turned and loosed at the man who was standing ready to "remove parts" of the savage's body. Waysten jumped back with an exclamation of fear as the man choked from the arrow in his throat and began to collapse, and the second man who had been trying to rouse the savage froze where he was. By then there was a second arrow in her string, and she turned to aim it at Waysten.

"What are you doing?" a terrified Waysten demanded in a cracking voice, and then he seemed to notice the guardsman for the first time. "You! Don't just stand there, get that bow away from her before she kills *me* as well!"

"You *can't* kill him, Your Majesty," Listan said with his hand on her shoulder, ignoring Waysten completely. "We may need him at some point, so we have to keep him alive."

Waysten goggled at the man he thought was one of his own, an expectation Elissia had been counting on. When you see a man in the uniform of your guard and you're as thick in the head as Waysten, you assume he's one of yours. Other people learn the faces of those who belong around them, but Waysten had always been much too good to bother with the lower orders.

"I'm not sure I can imagine a time when we might need him," Elissia said, the bow held steady and the arrow aimed at Waysten's heart. "After all, who could possibly care about *him*?"

"Please, Elissia, please don't kill me," Waysten whispered, his face a mask of terror. He also looked as though he were about to faint, which was what Elissia had wanted. If Listan thought the slime ought to be kept alive, Elissia wasn't going to ignore the advice. But Waysten had a lot to pay for, and letting him off easy wasn't something she felt prepared to do.

"I'll *think* about letting you live," Elissia granted after a long moment that nearly saw Waysten collapse. "But you're not going to be allowed to stand there as if you were of some kind of importance. You, the other butcher! Take Prince Slime and tie him to that device over there."

The second torturer was being watched by Listan, who now had his sword in his hand. The man started when Elissia spoke to him, then followed the motion of her head to see what device she meant. The thing was a wide bench with a high padded mound of sorts in the middle, with leather buckles and things at the base of both sides of the mound. Elissia didn't know what the thing was normally used for, but she knew well enough what *she* intended with it.

"Oh, come now," Waysten actually protested when he realized where Elissia wanted him. "You don't

really mean to put me *there*. There are so many other places in this room – "

"Your choice is there or nowhere," Elissia interrupted quietly. She wanted Waysten to understand that she was deadly serious, not playing some kind of game. "If you're not tied down in one minute from now, no one will ever have to worry about tying you again."

"All right, all right, don't let that arrow loose," Waysten quavered, then he moved to the device with great reluctance. But he did move to it and then arranged himself face down over the mound, whereupon the second torturer began to fasten the straps and buckles. It turned out that they went around both arms just above the elbows and around both legs just above the knees, and in little more than the minute she'd specified, Waysten was firmly held by the thing.

"Perfect," Elissia proclaimed, releasing the tension on the bow but not putting it down or taking the arrow from the string. "Now go and get that heavy switch hanging on the wall."

Waysten began to babble something in protest, but the torturer only glanced at Elissia before doing as she said. If her expression was half as unyielding as the rest of her felt, the torturer was very wise to obey. The bow could be bent again as easily as it had been relaxed, and the man seemed to know that very well indeed.

"Good," Elissia said when the switch had been gotten and brought back. "If I can't kill the man yet, that doesn't mean I can't give him my thanks for having kidnapped my brother and almost causing his death. You'll be using the switch on your former master, and you'd better not take it easy on him. But haven't you forgotten something? He's not completely ready for your attention yet."

The man hesitated with worry in his eyes, but he knew that he had no choice at all. After the brief hesitation he put the switch aside for a moment, worked to loosen and lower Waysten's trousers, then picked up the switch again.

"You can't do this to me!" Waysten bellowed, struggling uselessly against the leather binding him. "I'm the ruler of this kingdom, and soon I'll be ruler of every kingdom!"

"If you're very lucky, you'll be the ruler of a prison cell," Elissia told him coldly. "But I really would not count on that if I were you. They'll be fools if they let you live, and I don't think they're fools. All right, you can get started now."

The torturer had Waysten's bare bottom now before him, and it seemed clear that he knew what to do with one. He raised the switch and brought it whistling down, and Waysten jumped and howled. Elissia was about to tell the man not to be so gentle, when she really looked at his expression. He was a professional engaged in the job he knew best, so she just stood there and watched him work.

Each stroke left a long mark on Waysten's bottom, one that was an angry red. The torturer struck him half a dozen times in one direction, then shifted his stance to strike him the same number of times with the strokes landing in the opposite direction. In a very short while Waysten's bottom was criss-crossed with angry red lines, and Waysten himself had started to cry.

That was when the torturer shifted his stance again, and now brought the switch down on Waysten's seat directly across those other, sideways strokes. Waysten howled and screamed and fought to get loose, but it wasn't possible to avoid what was being done to him. His entire bottom and a bit of his

thighs were taking the brunt of the very serious spanking, and the torturer just seemed to be warming up.

"It's too bad his father didn't do something like that to him many years ago," Listan murmured from Elissia's right. "If he had, we all might have been saved a good deal of trouble. How are we going to tell when our people have entered the palace?"

"I'll wait outside and listen for them if you like," Renni offered at once. She'd been flinching every time the switch reached Waysten, clearly feeling sympathy for a man who deserved none at all.

"That doesn't strike me as the safest arrangement," Listan told her with a supportive smile. "If any guardsmen come running up looking for the prince, they'll be frantic enough not to care *who* they run over. I'd better stand outside the door myself."

Elissia nodded her agreement to that, so Listan went and slipped out the door. He was obviously being careful not to keep the door open long enough for anyone to hear Waysten's screams, but it really didn't matter. People must be very well used to hearing screams from that room

"Renni, will you please go over and see if there's anything you can do for – Waysten's victim?" Elissia asked, not quite up to calling the man a savage when he lay covered in his own blood because of someone who called himself noble. "I've got to keep my eye on *that* pair."

"I'll be glad to, Elissia," Renni agreed at once, then hurried over to the unconscious man. Her hurry was probably caused by the way Waysten was now screaming, "No! No! No more! No!" His seat was more than just blazing red, the weals caused by the heavy switch beginning to open and bleed. But the torturer was ignoring *him* the way *he'd* undoubtedly ignored past victims, and just kept stroking his bottom with that switch.

Elissia let the spanking go on until it had undeniably become a beating, and then she ordered the torturer to stop. By then Waysten lay with his head hanging and his screams muted to high-pitched, frantic whimpers, and probably wasn't completely conscious any longer. The torturer was directed to throw away the bloody switch, and then he was told to crawl into a small cage which stood to one side of the room. The man wasn't very anxious to go into the cage, but with the bow spanned again and the arrow aimed directly at him, he did as he was told. Elissia followed to latch the door of the cage firmly behind him, and then she was free to walk over to the chair where the savage still lay unconscious.

"Most of the bleeding has stopped, but he isn't coming around," Renni fretted when Elissia came up beside her. "He must be really badly hurt, more so than I can see. Those cuts are deep and must be very painful, and he really needs a doctor. I've removed the restraints from him, but there's nothing else to do that I can think of."

"If he'd told them *I* was the one who set my brother free, they probably wouldn't have hurt him as badly," Elissia said, reaching out to gently brush back a lock of his hair. "My plan against Waysten would never have worked after that, but I don't think he considered that. He simply refused to betray me, even after I turned my back on him."

"What do you mean, you turned your back on him?" Renni asked, the sharpness suddenly clear in her

eyes. "What could you possibly have to do with him? And what – "

Renni's list of questions ended abruptly when the door was flung open and Listan led a large group of other men inside. The newcomers held bloody swords and were dressed in the black leather of the savage's guard, and Listan wore an expression of great satisfaction.

"A good portion of the palace is already ours, and the rest will fall to us in its turn," he announced, then turned to a man in the midst of the others who *wasn't* wearing black leather. "The High King is over here, Doctor, and he needs your attention rather badly."

The group of men edged Elissia and Renni out of the way in their eagerness to get closer to their king, and Elissia made no effort to keep it from happening. In fact, her business there was completely done, so when the next group of black-clad fighters came into the room, Elissia eased out the door behind them and headed out of the palace.

Princess Brat

Chapter 11

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Derand awoke to find someone smoothing some kind of salve on the wounds on his chest. He still hurt quite a bit, but the sight of a lot of black leather was both a relief and a surprise. He'd been sure he was waking up to more of what had sent him down to blackness to begin with

"Don't try to move yet, my king," a voice said, and then Listan was bending over him. "The palace is almost completely ours, so there's nothing you have to move around *for*. Just let the doctor finish seeing to you, and then we'll get you to a chamber where you can sleep."

"Listan, have I ever told you what a beautiful sight you are in spite of that uniform you're wearing?" Derand asked, delighted with this very unexpected turn of events. "I don't know how you come to be here – with *me* still alive to see it – but I do know what kind of reward you'll be getting. Not to mention a promotion to the place of my chief strategist."

"I'm afraid the reward and promotion belong to someone other than me," Listan replied with a grin. "We located the queen just before we found out you'd been taken, so I went to *her* for help. Prince Gardal was with her and immediately offered to trade himself for you, but she refused to allow that. Instead she ordered gowns for herself and her woman friend and a guardsman's uniform for me, and then she just walked us into the palace and demanded to see the prince. When he appeared she got him to bring us right to this room, at the same time soothing away his suspicion. Her woman friend, pretending to be her maid, had a bow and quiver hidden under her cloak. Once we were in here she took the bow, killed one of those who had been torturing you, and then held Prince Waysten at arrow point. The prince hadn't bothered to bring any other guardsmen with him because he thought *I* was one of his. Then we just waited until our fighters made it this far."

"Seea did all that?" Derand asked, but the shock in his voice wasn't for the accomplishment. Instead it was for the fact that she'd done it for *him*, making his rescue possible after what he'd done to *her*. It made him feel very small and worthless, but it also brought him new determination. She'd now earned the right to have her life go in whatever direction *she* wanted it to, and he'd see that her wishes were followed. But he'd also do his damndest to make sure that that direction led straight to a life with *him*.

"Prince Gardal should be here any minute," Listan added as he looked around. "I left some of the men with him until the city was ours, and a little while ago I sent for him. The city's guard force is either dead or taken prisoner, with only a few holdouts left here in the palace. The rest of the populace has no idea they've been taken, as there weren't many people out on the streets once night had fallen. Not many *honest* people, that is."

"And the other kind usually stay in the shadows and out of harm's way," Derand said in agreement, also looking around as best he could. "What the - !"

Derand had finally seen what looked like Waysten, strapped to something on the other side of the room. He was an odd sight with his trousers down around his knees, and he also seemed to be crying.

"That was the queen's doing as well," Listan explained when he realized what Derand was staring at. "She had the surviving torturer use a heavy switch on him, and I've seen no reason to have him released. That decision would be hers or yours, and you know I don't believe in taking liberties."

"Stop sounding so virtuous," Derand told him with a laugh that didn't hurt as much as it would have earlier. The doctor had almost finished with his ministrations, and now seemed ready to bandage him. A length of cloth had also been thrown over his lap to cover his privates, a courtesy Waysten would probably have appreciated.

"My guess is you're enjoying Waysten's humiliation too much to want to see it end," Derand continued to Listan. "I can understand how you feel, as I have no sympathy for the poor fool whatsoever. When it comes time to execute him, he'll most likely be relieved."

"He couldn't possibly hope *not* to be executed," Listan said with a headshake. "When you kidnap a prince and then take a king and torture him in an effort to get that prince back, you have to know you're betting everything that you'll win. If you happen to lose instead, even your life is forfeit."

"Don't forget to find out what he's done with his father," Derand reminded Listan, no longer interested in looking at Waysten. "If the old man is being held prisoner we'll see about restoring him to the throne, but if he just sat back and let his son do the dirty work it might not be wise to give him the throne back in any event. A king is supposed to protect his people from *all* threats, and that should include his own offspring. If he isn't strong enough to do that, he has no business sitting on a throne."

"Ah, here's Prince Gardal now," Listan said as he looked toward the door. "I offered him an escort home for the time after the city was ours, but he refused it. He insisted on staying to find out how *you* were."

"That's what friends are for," Gardal said as he came up, obviously having heard the last of Listan's words. "Derand, man, that looks terrible! Why aren't you in bed?"

"And miss out on all the fun?" Derand countered, wincing only on the inside when the doctor began to bandage him. "When have you ever known me to do that? And while we're on the subject, how are *you*? I came by your temporary residence to say hello, but you were out."

"Thanks to my sister," Gardal said with a grin. "I had no idea you were also in the city until your man there showed up at the inn. And I appreciate the intention to rescue me even if Elissia *did* beat you to it. Where is she, by the way?"

"She was right here on guard until the first of our men showed up," Listan said, glancing around. "After that her bow wasn't needed any longer, so she must have gotten out of the way. It's odd that she didn't take her friend with her to wherever she went to sit down Mistress Renni, a moment of your time, please?"

Derand saw a small, pretty woman walk over to join them, a woman who didn't seem as happy as everyone else in the room.

"Renni, where did Elissia go?" Gardal asked, obviously knowing the woman. "She must have found someone able to get her a cup of tea, but where is she drinking it?"

"I have no idea," the woman answered with a weary sigh. "I was tending the High King until his men showed up, and when I looked around she was gone."

The woman seemed to be holding something back, but Derand felt too disturbed to wonder what.

"Listan, send some men to find her," he ordered at once. "Tear this place apart if you have to, but I want to know where she is."

"Immediately, Your Majesty," Listan answered, now looking almost as worried as Derand felt. "I'm sure she just went to find someplace quiet to sit down, but – We'll find her."

Listan strode away to a group of his men, but Derand still wasn't satisfied. He needed to do something *himself* to find Seea, but he suddenly remembered that he also needed some clothes. He was about to call after Listan and tell him so, but Gardal stepped close to block his line of sight.

"Derand, I need to talk to you about my sister," Gardal said in a soft voice, keeping the discussion private between them. "She said certain things that disturbed me, and I'd like to hear what *you* have to say about them. She said you hurt her. She also said you talked about having the marriage annulled, then changed your mind a few times. You didn't do any of that – did you?"

Derand closed his eyes for a moment, glad the doctor had finished up with his bandaging and was no longer nearby. What Derand was about to say would do his reputation as a fair man no good whatsoever.

"Your sister spoke the complete truth," Derand admitted, now looking directly at Gardal again. "I was a damned fool and I did hurt her, and I also gave her the impression that I would let the marriage be annulled, and then changed my mind. I shouldn't have done what I did to her and I'll be the first one to admit that, but I'm only a man, not a god. The way she treated me drove me so crazy that I didn't know *what* I was doing. From the very first, she even refused to admit that we *were* married."

"She's always hated the idea of marriage, and only now do I have some idea of why," Gardal said with a sigh. "She told me that marriage was like being put in the sort of box those people had *me* in, but no one would be allowed to come by and help *her* escape. I told her that you would never do that to her, but now "

"Of course I would never do that to her," Derand protested. "Even if I believed in doing that to *any* woman, I certainly wouldn't do it to *her*. She's too talented, too all-around capable not to mention the fact that I'm also in love with her."

"But that isn't true," another voice blurted, a female voice. The woman Renni hadn't been as far away as Derand had thought, and now she stepped even closer to join the discussion. "I didn't know it was you she was talking about, but - Elissia told me herself that she knew you cared nothing about her. She said you don't want the marriage any more than she does, but you're reluctant to hurt her father. She also said she'd rather be beaten than stay with a man who cares nothing about her."

"So that's why she acted like that toward me," Derand said in a dead voice, closing his eyes again. "She thought I didn't care about her, and then I even proved the point. She despises me and wants nothing to do with me, and how can I blame her?"

"Something just occurred to me," the woman Renni said slowly. "When she talked about not being cared about, she sounded more forlorn than angry and that isn't anything like the Elissia I used to know. If she despised someone, she announced the fact loud and clear to the world. This time, though it was almost as though she were disappointed and hurt."

"And you don't feel disappointed and hurt if someone *you* don't care about doesn't care about you in turn," Gardal pointed out rather briskly. "When I spoke to her she seemed to feel betrayed, I suppose you might say. But when your man Listan came by to tell us you'd been taken, she brushed aside the admittedly bad plan *I* came up with and immediately set her own plan in motion. She didn't have to be talked into it, and she wasn't reluctant."

"She certainly wasn't reluctant when we first got here," Renni put in when Derand opened his eyes to stare at Gardal. "She took the bow from me and strung it so fast it took my breath away, and then she put an arrow into that horrible man who told Prince Waysten it was time to start cutting pieces off you. Her face was terrible when she did it, and I don't blame Prince Waysten for thinking she really would put the next arrow into *him*. If that man Listan hadn't asked her not to, I think she would have killed the prince without blinking an eye."

"That doesn't sound to me like the actions of a woman who hates a man," Gardal said, again drawing Derand's attention. "It sounds more like a woman taking revenge on the people who *hurt* the man – *her* man."

"But I still don't understand the last thing she said," Renni added, making Derand dizzy when he immediately turned back to *her*. "She said you wouldn't have been hurt as badly if you'd told the prince that *she* was the one who had freed her brother, but you'd obviously refused to betray her. You couldn't have known anything about her plan, but you still refused to betray her even after she turned her back on you. That was the way she put it, and she sounded as if what had been done to you was all her fault."

"*Her* fault?" Derand echoed in outrage, starting to get up from the chair. "I drive her away, and it's *her* fault? That girl needs a good talking-to, and maybe something else as well. Since there's no time like the present – "

"Derand, calm down," Gardal said hastily, pushing him back into the chair. "You almost lost your lap robe, and on top of that you're in no condition to go running off in all directions. As soon as your men find Elissia, you'll be able to talk to her all you please."

"And don't think I won't," Derand muttered as he rearranged the cover over his privates. "In the meanwhile I'd appreciate it if you got one of my men to find something more than this for me to wear. I have to be fully dressed when I talk to that woman, otherwise I won't stand a chance against her. But at least there's one good thing about this mess: she couldn't have gotten out of the palace. My men will find her, and then she and I can have our talk."

Gardal clapped him gently on the shoulder to agree, and then he went off to tell someone about the

clothes Derand wanted. Derand watched him go, but the satisfaction he'd felt only a moment earlier was suddenly beginning to thin. It was foolish to feel a cold premonition, not when Seea really *couldn't* have gotten out of the palace. When a city and palace are taken, people aren't allowed to walk in and out as they please. She *couldn't* have gotten out, she simply *couldn't* have

When Elissia stepped out into the hall, one of the men who had just walked into the room turned around to look at her. His doing that made him the one she would have to use, so she gestured him over to her.

"Here, take my bow," she told him briskly, handing the weapon over into his startled grasp. "There's something else of major importance that needs to be done before this city can be considered completely ours, and I'll need your assistance for a short while. Come with me, please."

She turned then and marched off toward the stairs leading downward, and the poor fighter hesitated only an instant before hurrying to catch up with her.

"Excuse me, my lady, but are you *sure* you're supposed to be walking around here?" the fighter asked once he'd reached her. "The palace isn't totally taken yet, and you could end up walking into a fight."

"That's why *you're* here," Elissia pointed out without slowing, then she relented enough to smile. "But fighting is more in your province than in mine. If you think we need to add to our numbers, by all means choose the men and tell them to come along with us."

"That might be the best idea," the fighter agreed. He was a young man, but not so young that he still had something to prove. "I'll pick three or four others, and that should be enough to keep you safe. Ah – do you mind my asking by whose authority we're doing this?"

"Not at all," Elissia said with another smile. "Listan told me that now that the High King is safe, it's time to take care of this last matter. I'd suggest that you speak to him to ease your mind, but I really don't have the time to go back."

"That's all right, my lady," the fighter said with a smile of his own. "I saw Lord Listan there in the room where you were, taking care of the High King. Since you were right there with him, it must be all right."

Elissia just nodded and continued to the staircase, relief lightening her step. If the man had insisted on turning back she would have gone on without him, but that would have made things a good deal more difficult. She would have gotten out of the palace *one* way or another, but doing it with an official escort was the easiest.

By the time they reached the front entrance, she had an escort of five. The man she'd chosen first also seemed to have some rank, as he'd had no trouble getting the other fighters to come along. The men on guard at the front entrance tried to stop them, but her own fighter stepped forward and spoke softly to their leader, and then they were being waved through the line.

When they were three streets away from the palace, Elissia thanked the men and told them to go back to their previously assigned duties. Her fighter of rank didn't care for the idea of leaving her alone on a dark street in the middle of the night, so she asked the man to wait a moment. She'd called a halt near a public convenience, which she then entered quickly to look around. She'd never used one of those

herself, of course, but she remembered a report she'd read about the best way to arrange them. If the builders of Ramsond had only read the same report

Elissia breathed a sigh of relief when it became obvious that if they hadn't *read* the report, they might even have been responsible for writing it. The convenience had two entrances, the second on the next street over, which gave access to the facilities to the people of two streets at once. It was what she'd been hoping for, so she didn't waste a minute. Her boy's clothing was hidden under the slightly large gown Listan had found for her, and it didn't take long to pull the gown off. She'd even gotten away with wearing her boots under the longish gown, only needing to be careful to keep Waysten from noticing.

As soon as she had her cloak back on, she left the facility by its second entrance. The street was dark and quiet as she hurried away, and as she'd already replaced her cap - which she'd carried in a pocket of the cloak - she didn't expect to be bothered. She now had to find the place Wyole had agreed to meet her, something she'd been able to arrange only just before leaving for the palace. If the man hadn't come by at the right time she would have ended up wandering the city all night, with no place at all to go. She certainly couldn't go back to the inn

Elissia only lost her way in the dark once, due entirely to needing to avoid a patrolling group of the savage's fighters. They were harder to see than Waysten's guardsmen had been, so she'd been forced to duck into an alleyway to keep from being seen herself. The alleyway had led to a street she didn't know at all, and she'd had to go back to the original street she'd been on in order to continue according to the directions she'd been given.

When she finally reached the tavern she'd been told to look for, it was closed and dark the way it was supposed to be. After making certain there was no one around to see her do it, she knocked three times on the heavy wooden door. It took a long, agonizing moment, but then the door was opened and Wyole stood in dim lamplight.

"Come inside quick," Wyole said, stepping aside to let her do it. "Those patrols are coming around more often than the prince's ever did, and they're not just going through the motions. If you hadn't warned us to stay off the streets, we might have been picked up - or killed - the way a lot of the thieves and criminals are. Those men don't joke around. If you refuse to be detained until you can explain what you're doing wandering the streets and you try to resist being detained, you don't live long enough to know how foolish you're being."

"They're not stupid enough to leave potential enemies behind their backs," Elissia agreed as she looked around. She recognized many of the faces from the rescue of her brother, all of the men sitting at various tables with drinks in front of them. They were also now getting back to low but animated discussions, probably wondering how the new events would affect *them*.

"Ah, our distinguished visitor has arrived," another voice said. Elissia looked up to see Torban coming through a doorway to the right of the tavern's counter, and he carried a cup of something. "Since I thought our visitor might be in need of some refreshment, I'm now pleased to supply it."

He came over to the table Wyole had gone to after closing the door, and when Elissia joined them she discovered that the cup contained tea.

"Thank you, Torban, this *is* just what I needed," she said with the best smile she could manage as she

joined the two men in sitting down. "It's been a rather hectic night."

"So tell us how things have gone," Wyole urged after she'd taken the first two sips of the tea. "The High King's fighters are all over the city, but what about the palace? Is Prince Waysten still resisting?"

"Prince Waysten wasn't given the chance to resist," Elissia said, feeling some small amount of satisfaction. "When I left they were still working to clear away the rest of his guardsmen there, but the High King was safely back among his own and Waysten was their prisoner. I seriously doubt if that will change."

"Then *our* lot could very well change," Torban said with restrained excitement. "If the High King is as fair a man as I've heard Prince Waysten won't find him fair or understanding, but maybe the rest of us will."

"Have someone bring a message to Prince Gardal tomorrow," Elissia advised. "If anyone can get your problem put in front of the High King, he's the one. And since the prince does owe you a debt, you have every right to ask. It may turn out that none of your people need to relocate after all."

"But what about *you*?" Wyole asked as Torban sat back with an eager nod. "What are you doing *here* instead of still being back at the palace with everyone else? You said you needed to meet with us tonight, but for what reason?"

"I still need to get out of the city without anyone knowing about it," Elissia said as she studied her tea. "If necessary I'll go over the wall the way the fighters did on their way in, but I'd rather find some easier way. Have you had any luck with that?"

"It so happens we did, but I still don't understand," Torban said after exchanging a glance with Wyole. "Why should you need to sneak away after everything you did? Why aren't you staying around to collect the reward you're certainly due?"

"For me there won't *be* any reward," Elissia told him slowly, reaching to her cap to take it off. "You may or may not have known I was a woman, but you *ought* to know that women aren't rewarded because women are useless. All they're ever allowed to do is marry someone, and even if that someone is important, so what? They still don't allow their wives to *do* anything, and I can't face a life like that. For me it would be worse than being declared a criminal."

The two men exchanged a second glance, pained compassion clear in each gaze. She'd put her situation in terms that they were able to relate to personally, and they certainly couldn't argue about how useless women were. Their own ranks contained not a single woman, probably for the double reason that no woman had anything Waysten had wanted, and women weren't fit to be put in his army. The men sat silent for a moment, and then Torban reached over to pat her hand.

"Anyone who considers *you* useless certainly doesn't deserve your company," he said, a comment Wyole seemed to agree with. "We owe you quite a lot, and it would be boorish of us not to repay the debt. Wyole and I will show you a private way out of the city, but it can't be done until just before first light. You'll need a horse to leave the area quickly, and riding in the dark is dangerous once you reach the forests. If you get there at daybreak, your chances will improve tremendously."

"Thank you," Elissia said, then moved her gaze to Wyole. "Thank you both. I'll remember your

kindness for the rest of my life."

They both assured her in different words that there was no need for her to thank them, and then Torban suggested she use one of the tavern's upper rooms to get some sleep. She agreed and followed the man to the stairs, saying nothing about how long – or short – her memory of their kindness was likely to be.

"She *couldn't* have gotten out of the palace, it just isn't possible!" Listan raged as he paced back and forth in front of Derand. "She must be hiding somewhere, and that's why the men haven't been able to find her. It will take time to go through every room in this place thoroughly, but once we do – "

"Once you do, you still won't find her," Gardal interrupted to say. "If you know anyone foolish enough to want to lose some gold or silver, I'm even willing to bet on the point. I know my sister better than you do, and I'm not surprised at all that she managed to get out of this place no matter *how* many guards you have. In case you hadn't noticed, she's rather good at things like that."

Listan found nothing to say to that, and Derand couldn't blame him. He'd obviously forgotten for the moment that it was Seea who had gotten *him* into the palace along with herself and a weapon, but his nose had just been rubbed in the memory. It was hard for many men to think of a woman as being a better tactician than they were, especially when it was *their* guard lines she'd gotten through.

"All right, we have to accept the fact that she's gotten out of the palace," Derand said wearily from the comfortable chair he sat in. They'd found clothes for him and then they'd insisted on his moving to a nearby apartment, and he couldn't deny that he needed the comfort. He still felt quite a bit of pain, and what he really needed was some sleep. "Now we have to figure out where she's gone. Is she likely to have gone back to that inn you all told me about?"

"Hardly," Renni said with a sound of ridicule from the chair *she* sat in. "She'd expect the inn to be one of the first places you look, so she won't go anywhere near it."

Gardal and Listan grunted agreement with that, and Derand agreed as well. Someone else might decide that she'd go there because she knew she'd never be expected to do it, but Derand didn't believe she would. She'd had a definite destination in mind when she'd left, and by now she'd probably reached it.

"By the way, thank you for letting me send word to my husband about where I am," Renni said. "I can't walk away without knowing that Elissia is all right, but if my husband hadn't heard from me he would have worried."

Yes, husbands did worry about wives they cared for, Derand thought as he gestured to show that Renni's thanks were unnecessary. Just as *he* now worried about his own wife

"I think it's time we helped the High King to bed," Gardal suddenly announced to Listan. "If he were standing he'd be dead on his feet, and his passing out won't do our efforts any good at all. No, Derand, don't try to argue. We can make lame guesses about where Elissia is without you, and you know you need the sleep. After you get some, you may even be able to make a few guesses that *aren't* lame."

Derand knew that Gardal was right, but he still made an effort to argue. He tried to explain that going to

sleep felt too much like giving up, but neither of the two men wanted to listen. They "helped" him out of the chair and into one of the apartment's bedchambers, and once he was lying flat his eyes refused to stay open.

But once they did open again, Derand became aware of voices speaking softly just outside the bedchamber door. Through the windows he could see it was only just getting light out, which meant he'd been asleep for a number of hours. And those hours would have to do him, as he wasn't about to waste any more in the same way.

He sat up slowly and carefully, knowing from experience that that was the only way to keep the dizziness away. His wounds felt stiff and painful and they protested loudly when he began to move around, but ignoring that sort of thing was something else he had experience with. Once he was on his feet he took a slow, deep breath and then let it out, glad for once that he'd slept in his clothes. He was ready to go without having to struggle his way into coverings, something he wasn't quite up to at the moment.

When he opened the door and walked out into the apartment's sitting room, Gardal and Listan turned to him with surprise. It was their voices he'd heard while still in bed, and they seemed to have been arguing about something. Also, neither one looked as if he'd had any sleep, which was to be expected. When people rush *you* into bed, chances are they don't intend to do the same with themselves.

"There, now, you see?" Gardal said accusingly to Listan. "Your insistence on being stubborn woke him, and probably before he had all the sleep he needs."

"There are some things a man needs more than sleep, Your Highness," Listan returned in a way that suggested he'd said the same thing any number of times before. "The High King will *want* to talk to those men, whether or not they really do know anything about the queen. The very fact that they might is enough to – "

"What in the world are you men fighting about?" Renni asked from where she'd appeared in the doorway of another of the bedchambers. "If you don't keep it down, you'll wake – Too late, you've already done it."

"That's all right, I *want* to be awake," Derand assured all of them at once as he walked closer to the men. "Now tell me what's going on."

"Two members of the group that helped free me have come to the palace with a message for me," Gardal said with a sigh of resignation. "They meant to just leave the message, they said, thinking I would never be up this early, having no idea that I haven't even been to bed yet. But I'd been down checking with the fighters at the front entrance, so they *knew* I was awake. Because of that they held the two men and sent for me, letting me take the message personally."

"Why were you checking with my fighters at the front entrance?" Derand asked, looking around to see cups and a pitcher on one of the tables that might mean tea was available. "And if that's tea, is it fresh and hot?"

"Yes to both," Listan said at once. "If you'll sit down, I'll bring you a cup."

"I'm better off standing right now," Derand said, one hand to his bandaged middle. "Gardal, why were

you checking with my fighters at the front entrance?"

"To find out whether or not Elissia went past them," Gardal responded. "She had the choice of sneaking around and possibly getting caught, or walking out as if she had a right to. It finally came to me that she'd probably done it the easy way, but she'd actually done it even easier than that. She left with an escort of your fighters, and it was those fighters who got her past your door guards."

"I tracked down the fighters and got an apology," Listan said sourly as he returned with Derand's tea and handed it over. "The man gave me the gown the queen had left behind her when she separated herself from the escort, and then he apologized for not giving it to me sooner. He meant to, but he and the others involved had duties to see to, and returning a dress the queen didn't need right now wasn't terribly important. After all, he said, / knew well enough about the matter she was seeing to, since I was the one who had told her to take care of it. And he also didn't know she was the queen."

"I'm beginning to believe she could become empress of the world if she ever decides to put her mind to it," Derand muttered after filling his insides with some of the delightfully hot tea. "I can't think of another woman who could do what she's done, and there aren't that many men on the list either. So what message did you get from those two men, Gardal?"

"The message was a request that I intervene for them with you," Gardal supplied without hesitation. "They know that Waysten won't be running this kingdom any longer, and they'd like to stop being considered criminals and be allowed to go back to their old lives. It was resisting Waysten's unfair new laws that got them condemned in the first place, and they're hoping you'll rescind those laws."

"So the question now becomes, how did they find out that Waysten will no longer be running things?" Derand said with a nod of understanding. "Most of the people in this city still have no idea that anything's happened, but these men know all about it in detail. The only way they could have found out was by talking to Seea."

"Exactly," Listan said, glancing at Gardal with a trace of vindicated satisfaction. "I told you the High King would see that right away, and that's why he would want to speak to the men. They *have* to know where the queen is, and if we put the question to them properly they'll tell *us*."

"There's no guarantee of that," Gardal protested, taking his turn at sounding as if he'd said the same thing more than once. "Telling us where she is would be betraying her, and I don't think they'll do that to her."

"At the very least we can ask," Derand said, overriding Listan's immediate response to that. "Let's get them in here and see."

Listan bowed his agreement and went off to take care of the matter, and Gardal shrugged and went to get his own cup of tea. But the shrug looked odd to Derand, giving him the impression that Gardal wasn't as eager to find his sister as he claimed to be. There could be only one reason for that, and Derand decided to bring it out into the open.

"Gardal, I'm not going to hurt her again, I swear I won't," Derand said, speaking gently to his friend's turned back. "I really do love her, and I *need* the chance to make her understand that. She and I can be really happy together in spite of the way this all started, but it will never happen if I can't find her."

"Yes, I believe you and understand that," Gardal answered after a moment, his shoulders now rounded with weariness. Then he turned to look directly at Derand. "But she's still my sister and doesn't want to be married to you, and I may well owe her my life. I definitely owe her my freedom, so I don't know what to do. You're the best friend I've ever had, Derand, but she's *my sister* "

Derand tried to find something else to say that would set Gardal's mind at rest, but the words hid themselves until the door opened and Listan brought in two men. One was of middle years and seemed more scholarly than otherwise, and the second seemed nonviolent despite his greater size. Both looked extremely nervous, and after they'd bowed to him Derand hastened to reassure them.

"Don't be afraid that you're in trouble, because you're not," he told them. "We simply need some information from you, information that's very important to me. The woman who told you that Prince Waysten won't be running this kingdom any longer Where is she?"

The two men exchanged a glance, and the older one shook his head with a sigh.

"I knew we should have waited longer to bring our request by," he said, pausing to rub at his eyes. "Even though half the city's people will be by with requests of their own once they find out what's happened, we still should have waited. Getting lost in the crowd would have been a good deal better."

"It's my fault we came by now, so I'll take the responsibility," the larger man said with his own sigh in a toneless voice. "I'm the only one who knows where the girl went, Your Majesty, but I'm not saying. You'd better send for your torturers."

"Don't say that word," Derand told him with a definite inward wince. "Even if I liked the idea of torture before this, last night would have changed my mind. I'm not going to hurt the woman, my friend, I just want to talk to her. You *are* aware of the fact that she saved my life? I don't hurt people who do that, I reward them."

"She knows she's not going to be rewarded," the man replied with a sound of mild ridicule. "As *she* said, you don't reward women, you marry them off. She doesn't *want* to be married off, so why don't you reward her by leaving her be?"

"The request you put can be granted or refused right here and now," Listan interrupted to say, his voice no-nonsense hard. "If you want it granted to keep yourselves and your friends out of a cell, you'll tell the High King what he wants to know."

"No, that's not going to happen," Derand said at once, frowning at his friend and advisor. "Their request will be granted because it's right to do it and because they've earned it. I'll never fault a man for protecting someone he cares about, especially when I care for that person even more. And I do, my friends, I really do."

"Wyole, he *does* care," Renni put in when the big man just stood stubbornly silent. "He loves her, and not just because she's his wife. There's been some kind of misunderstanding between them, and if he doesn't find her they'll *never* get it straightened out. Do you want her to continue being as miserable as she is now?"

"No, which is why I'm not saying anything," the big man returned, still unconvinced. "If she's his wife,

then he's the one who turned her so much against marriage – and who made her believe she's worthless because she's a woman. How any man can do something like that – "

"Wyole, no," Gardal said, finally coming forward to join the discussion. "The High King isn't the one who made her feel like that, they haven't been together long enough. I happen to know that for a fact, because the girl is my sister. And where did you get the idea she thinks she's worthless because she's a woman? I've never heard anything more ridiculous."

"He got the idea from the same place I did," the older man contributed while the other stood silently frowning at Gardal. "The girl told us that herself, and the way she said it showed she really believed it. The question now is, do any of *you* believe it?"

"Oh, certainly we believe it," Derand said with a headshake and a sigh. "Her brother believes it because she was the one who freed him from capture. My advisor Listan there believes it, but went to her for help when I was taken just because he had nothing better to do with his time. And I definitely believe it, because she was almost solely responsible for saving my life. Are we all supposed to be blind and deaf, not to mention stupid?"

"No, not really," the older man said with his own sigh. "The only problem is she really was very unhappy at the thought of being caught. What if she doesn't want to come back no matter *what* you say? If you bring her back anyway, then *we'll* be responsible for her misery. I don't think I can go happily back to my old life knowing that."

"All I can do is give you my solemn word that I won't hold onto her against her will," Derand said, looking from one to the other of the men. "If annulling our marriage is the only reward that has any meaning for her, then – that's what I'll – give her. I don't want to, by the gods I don't, but if I have to I – will."

The words had been very hard for Derand to say, but even so he meant them. If Seea refused to accept his apology he *would* free her – and spend the rest of his life hating himself for having thrown away the most marvelous gift he could ever have been given. The gift of her presence in his life, the gift of hoping that someday she would return his love

"I think everyone is forgetting something," Renni said into the heavy silence. "Even if the High King decides not to let her go after all, is there anyone here silly enough to think Elissia will be trapped with no hope of escape? You do know she left the palace during a time when no one was supposed to be allowed in or out? And that she somehow managed an official escort to do it? If she *really* doesn't want to stay with him, he'll have to tie her hand and foot to keep her beside him. If a man did that, how ridiculous would he look to the world?"

"Assuming even *that* kept her in place the next time," Derand muttered under his breath, not about to mention how little good tying her had done when he'd tried it. Then he raised his voice to add, "A man who did that would look *very* ridiculous, and once people stopped laughing they would immediately try to take over his position in life. I really don't need that kind of trouble, so please let me get on with finding and talking to my wife "

The hint of desperation he'd put into his voice seemed to do the trick. The two men glanced at each other again, and then the older man relented.

"As Wyole was ready to face the torturers alone, it has become *my* turn to face possible regret alone," he said with resignation. "The young lady in question left the city this morning just before sunup, so she must be well along the road to Sollera by now. She – "

"What?" Gardal yelled. "I thought she was still *in* the city! How could you let her leave all alone? Even if she *is* on the main road, the trip isn't a safe one for a woman traveling by herself."

"Just a minute," Derand interrupted, suddenly feeling a chill. "Did the woman *tell* you she meant to go to Sollera and would stay on the main road, or are you just assuming that?"

"Well, she actually seemed to be talking to herself," the big man admitted. "It sounded as if she were going over her plans aloud, and we happened to overhear them. Why are you looking so upset?"

"Because I have the feeling she was protecting you," Derand answered after finishing his tea and putting the cup aside. "She gave you a destination and a plan in case you *had* to tell someone, but it's not what she really intends doing. She isn't going back to Sollera."

"But why not?" Gardal demanded, now looking even more upset. "It's our home, and our family is there – "

"I think you just got it," Derand said to him. "The home and family that's no longer hers, not when they married her off without her knowledge or permission. Listan, I want a horse and some food I can eat on the way, and I want them five minutes ago. And see if you can find Omree just as fast. I have a feeling I'm going to need our best tracker."

"But you can't go riding off!" Listan protested, clearly so upset that he forgot about adding the usual "my king." "You've been hurt badly and need to rest, not go traipsing all over the countryside. I'll send some of the men, and – "

"Listan, now," Derand interrupted flatly, using the tone Listan knew better than to argue with. *He* was the one who would go after Seea and, the gods willing, he would also be the one to find her wherever she was

The new day had finally turned light around Elissia, but there was very little brightness. Gray clouds rode the skies above as she rode the woods below, keeping her a fitting company for her mood. She'd had a very early breakfast before leaving because Torban and Wyole had insisted, and had also accepted a package to be used for lunchtime. Then she'd followed Torban through the tunnel someone had dug under the wall a good distance from the main gates, leading the horse they'd found for her. They'd refused payment of any sort, so she put a hand to Torban's arm in thanks before mounting and riding away into the darkness.

And now, with half the day gone behind her, she approached the cabin she and the savage had used before entering the city. The skies continued to darken above her, but so far the promised rain hadn't come. Which was all to the good, as soon it would not matter at all if she became a soggy mess.

She unsaddled her horse in the small stable-shed and gave it oats in one of the stalls, but made no effort to put a halter on it or to close it in. When the time came for the horse to leave, she wanted it to

be able to do so without needing anyone to free it. Chances were no one would be there to do it

When the horse was taken care of, Elissia made no effort to go into the cabin. Sitting down and relaxing wasn't what she was there for, and in full truth she'd had enough of delays. She wanted everything over and done with, so she left her cloak and other possessions in the shed and headed straight for the stream where she'd had that bath. It had been perfectly clear that animals used the place to drink, and not all animals were as relatively harmless as skunks. At some point in time a predator ought to show up, and all she had to do was wait until it did. It shouldn't take *too* long, not in a place like that, and then all the pain would be over and done with.

The stream was as pretty as it had been the first time she'd seen it, but without bright sunshine most of the gleam was gone. Birds and insects made their sounds in the surrounding woods, pointing up how alone Elissia was. She had been alone through most of her life, so it was only fitting that she die the same way. There was only so much of it a person could take, and she'd not only reached that point she'd gone well past it.

Thinking about nothing was a trick Elissia had had a chance to practice a lot lately, so she stood for an unmeasured amount of time staring at the stream and thinking about nothing. It was easier than thinking about how much her life had lacked, something she'd only been distantly aware of before that trip. Now, she –

The snarl that came from not very far away almost made her whirl around, but she stopped herself just in time. The predator she'd been waiting for had obviously arrived, but there was no need to watch it come at her. There would be just a little more pain, and then all pain would be over and done with forever. Elissia's heart pounded hard in her chest, but she made no attempt to move from where she was. Leaves and grass crackled and stirred under the predator's paws as it began to move, and then came a sound of leaves and small branches scattering in all directions as the beast launched itself –

Elissia nearly fainted at the animal's next scream, so close and yet not as close as it should have been. There had also been another sound, a very familiar one, and she found she could no longer keep from looking to see what was happening. When she turned she saw a hunting cat in the midst of its death throes as it writhed on the ground, a death caused by the arrow protruding from it. Shock took Elissia by the throat as she turned even farther, to see the savage sitting a horse not far away.

"I'm glad to say I'm finally getting started with paying back what I owe," the savage said, his voice not as easygoing as the words would suggest. There was a lot of strain behind those few words, and the man sat slumped in his saddle rather than straight and tall. "This was only the beginning, mind you, but if you run away from me often enough, we should be even in no time."

"What are you doing here?" Elissia tried to demand, her heart still pounding in spite of the cat's being dead. Her own words came out on the weak side as she thought about which direction she could run in.

"Obviously, I was looking for *you*," he answered, and suddenly Elissia noticed that his eyes were closed. "When I realized where you had to be heading, I – "

"Oh, you fool!" Elissia exclaimed, hurrying over to put a hand up to his arm. He looked as though he were about to fall out of the saddle, probably because of his wounds. "You have no business riding a horse and using a bow, not in *your* condition! You ought to be in bed with a doctor looking after you!"

"Cabin " he whispered weakly, something Elissia had already thought of. She carefully took his horse by the bridle and turned it, then led it back toward the cabin while watching the savage closely. If he ever fell, she would have her hands full keeping him from slamming into the ground. Picking him up again would be completely impossible

But picking him up turned out to be unnecessary. She got him to the cabin and then did her best to help him dismount, urging him to save his strength by leaning on her. He did lean on her but not very heavily, so she was able to get him inside and to a chair without collapsing. Once she had him sitting down she turned to go out and take care of his horse, but his hand came to her arm, stopping her.

"Thank you," he said with what happily sounded like more strength, looking up into her eyes. "You keep helping me in spite of the lousy thing I did to you, and I can't figure out what I've done so well that the gods let it happen. Whatever it is, though, I'll be grateful forever that they *are* allowing it."

"You don't have to thank me," Elissia said as she looked away, confusion now mixing with her pain. "The reason we got together in the first place is over now, so you can get back to your life without worrying about complications."

"I'll always worry about *one* complication," he returned, still holding to her arm. "It's one I never expected to be bothered about, but I can't get her out of my thoughts. And I can't stop cursing myself for what I did to her. Do you mind if I tell you *why* I did it?"

"You don't have to," Elissia said as she continued to look away from him, wishing she could cry. "You're probably feeling guilty because I helped to save you, but that's completely unnecessary. Your own people would have saved you eventually, and all I did was hurry the time a little. Your horse needs looking after – "

"Never mind my horse," he interrupted, sounding really upset. "Is that the reason you think I came after you? Because of gratitude or guilt? Don't you know the guilt set in long before Waysten got his hands on me? I did something stupid because I felt so hurt, and before I could undo it and apologize I lost the opportunity."

"You felt hurt?" Elissia couldn't keep herself from asking, the confusion almost more than she could bear. "I guess I hurt you and didn't even know it, which doesn't surprise me much. I seem to be very good at messing things up "

"No, you're not," he said very firmly, and then she was pulled back with surprising strength to sit on his lap. "I'm the expert at messing things up in *this* family, and you really had very little to do with the hurt I felt. It took a while, but I finally made myself understand that it wasn't your fault that you didn't feel about me the way I felt about you. I did that stupid thing to you because I wanted you to feel what *I* did, desperation to have the attention of someone who doesn't care anything about you, but it was wrong. You can't make someone care about you when she so obviously doesn't want to."

"Why are you talking about caring?" Elissia demanded, now fighting to keep the tears from starting. "You know you don't really care about me, you just don't want to disappoint my father and brother. But you don't have to worry about that, because I'm taking care of it. You'll still be as close to them as you want to be, without being lumbered down with some stupid, useless – "

"Stop!" he ordered with such anger that Elissia jumped. "Don't you dare say anything against the woman I love! Yes, you heard me right, I happen to love her! She's brave and creative and more able than anyone I know, and I'll kill any man who tries to say different. If it's a woman who's doing the saying she won't be killed, she'll just wish she would be."

"You're not strong enough for that," Elissia murmured as she brushed a lock of hair back from his brow. She barely knew what she was saying and certainly didn't believe what she'd heard, but it was very difficult to doubt the man. It was almost as if he'd spoken the absolute truth rather than a convenient and soothing statement of tact

"I'm strong enough to do anything I have to," he disagreed at once, but his burst of anger seemed to have drained him quite a bit. Once again he looked as he had before she'd gotten him into the cabin. "Do you understand what I'm saying to you? I don't want you because of your father or your brother, I want you as my wife because I love and admire you. And if you want the truth, Gardal tried to keep me from coming after you. He knows how much you hate the idea of marriage, and seems to think I ought to let you go."

"Well, he's right about my hating the idea of marriage," she agreed, looking down at her hands. "I want you to know it doesn't have anything to do with *you*, I just don't want marriage with anyone."

"I hate to say it, but I can understand why you don't want it with *me*," he told her with a sigh. "If you continued to be my wife you'd be so busy it would drive you crazy. The Federated Kingdoms of Arvin aren't all that federated yet, and you'd have to help me come up with workable plans to change that. And now that I've also taken Waysten's kingdom, I have to decide what to do with *it*. Listan wants me to let you teach my commanding officers what strategy and tactics are really all about, but that's a job and a half all by itself. You'd have no time at all to run my household, especially if I find I have to expand my kingdom even more. No, I can't see any woman wanting a life like that, especially not with a man she considers a – savage."

"Why are you doing this?" Elissia blurted, losing all trace of self-control. "You know I won't be anything but an embarrassment to you, so I don't understand why – "

"You will *never* be an embarrassment to me," he interrupted to state, speaking slowly and forcefully. "I feel nothing but pride when I look at you, that and love. I know you don't love *me*, but isn't it possible you might learn to in time, even if it's only a small bit? I'm not asking for more than that, Seea, I swear I'm not. You can try it for a while to see that I'm telling the truth, and if you decide I'm not I know I won't be able to hold you. And I also swear to try being less of a – savage."

"Stop that!" she found herself ordering, angry enough to make him blink. "You may be a savage, but if I stay with you you'll be *my* savage. If you're sure you really want me"

"I've never been more sure of anything in my entire life," he said, and again Elissia found it very difficult to doubt him. "I'll even promise not to spank you again, if that's what it takes to keep you. Not that you don't deserve a good spanking for almost getting yourself killed. Running around in the woods without even your bow for protection "

Elissia saw the spark of anger in his eyes, and that made her pause to think. No matter what he'd said,

he'd find living with *her* around a constant exercise in frustration. He'd wake up one day to find that he couldn't stand it any longer, unless

"I thought you said you cared about me," she put almost at once, making herself look at him accusingly. "I've been told that when a man really cares, he doesn't let his woman do all sorts of things that aren't good for her. I know you aren't strong enough to do anything much right now, but once you're healed I'll *expect* you to spank me, every time you think I need it. Have I made myself clear?"

"Very," he agreed, a slow grin finally beginning to crease his face. "And I care so much, I'll even make the effort to get started with it right now. Are you ready to take what's coming to you?"

"If you insist," Elissia responded with a sigh, looking down again to hide the smile she felt curving her lips. He really *wasn't* strong enough to do much of anything, so he'd release his frustrations and *she* would find the time a lot easier to take than the previous ones. Women might be useless in general, but *she* seemed to be doing rather well with planning things

"You'll have to help a little," he said, patting her in an effort to get her to stand after taking off her cap. "Just hold still while I take down your trousers and drawers."

"You know, it might be a good idea to wait a few minutes," Elissia said with her head turned to the open door. "It's started to rain, and even though your horse has taken himself into the shed, he really should be unsaddled. Why don't I – Oh!"

"What's the matter?" the savage asked in an amused voice as he settled her face down across his lap. He'd gotten her trousers and drawers down really quickly, and the way he'd pulled her across his knee hadn't shown much of his previous weakness

"If you're worried about how weak I am, don't be," he went on as Elissia discovered that she couldn't free herself from his grip on her. "I always find the necessary strength to do what I need to, especially when the doing is so important. By the time I'm finished with you, you'll never even *think* about risking yourself again, let alone try it. You have my word on it."

"Ow! But what about your wounds?" she protested as the first smack reached her with a *lot* more force than she'd been expecting. "You couldn't have been pretending in the woods? Oh! Ow! That really hurts!"

"It's supposed to hurt," he pointed out calmly while his hand kept coming down again and again. "You're going to learn to be a good girl, or you'll never want to sit down again. Do I hear anything in the way of regret for the way you almost made me lose you?"

"Yes, I'm sorry!" Elissia cried, writhing at the really hard spanking she was getting. He seemed to have even more strength than usual, and his hand definitely felt harder. "Please! I promise not to do it again, I really promise!"

"You'd better," he said, the smacks still coming just as hard and frequently. "But just to make sure you remember the promise, you'll have something to help remind you for quite a while. And I'd better not ever hear you call yourself worthless again. If I do, you'll know what to expect."

"Yes, husband, I'll know," Elissia whispered very low as she cried, wishing the spanking was already over with. But not just because her bottom ached and throbbed and he'd really only just gotten started. She wanted to be held in his arms and comforted, and then she wanted to make love with him. He'd cared enough to trick her into worrying about him when he could just as easily have forced her into doing anything he pleased. She finally had someone to really *care* about her, a fact attested to by her squirming, aching bottom.

The spanking went on a very long time, long enough to make Elissia thoroughly regret everything she'd done wrong. She knew her bottom must be bright red by the time he stopped, but once he took her in his arms to comfort her, that no longer mattered. Nothing mattered but the fact that he loved her, possibly almost as much as she'd begun to love him. But she knew she'd better never let him find out why she'd *really* been in the woods. If he ever did.

The End