

Shadowborn: Captivity

by

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Chapter 1

It was no more than mid morning, but the heat was already so intense that it made ripples in the air above the lines of new plants in the field. We'd been moving up the furrows between the lines, pulling out weeds by hand, sweating heavily despite the short, thin rags we wore as clothing. Our guards sat or stood at one side of the field, suffering more than those of us who worked in the field despite the small amount of shade they'd found. Even leather armor is difficult to bear in heat like that, and some of the guardsmen had leather reinforced with small amounts of metal.

I stopped for a moment to straighten up and stretch my aching back, using the opportunity to glance around. The other women working with me were at least two strides behind in their respective rows, which meant they couldn't afford to take the time to stretch. How well we did our jobs was judged by the work speed of the fastest of us, and any woman who didn't keep up was beaten when we got back to the city. It didn't matter whether it was lack of food and general strength that caused the lagging, or pain from a previous beating. Any woman who didn't keep up was punished.

I raised my face in an effort to find the least, smallest breeze, but the heat ripples in the air must have been too heavy to move. They had used men to plow the field, but planting and weeding was done by women - an arrangement the guardsmen preferred. If there had been male slaves in the field instead of female the guardsmen would have had to be alert, not to mention spread out on all sides of the field. Male slaves had a tendency to try escaping, but female slaves...

I wiped the sweat off my forehead with the back of my hand, then bent again to the plants on my left before glancing over my shoulder to the far side of the field. All the guardsmen were *there*, waiting for us to finish the rows we worked and then return toward them by way of the next two rows. I'd done just that in the last three fields I'd been put to weeding, but only because those other fields had been too close to the city. This field was no more than ten strides away from the edge of the forest, and this time I meant to escape or die in the trying. I kept casual watch over my shoulder as I pretended to pull weeds, and saw exactly what I'd hoped to see. One or two of the guardsmen had noticed me when I'd stretched, possibly thinking about the noon rest and mealtime, but their attention had drifted away even before I'd bent to the plants again. No sense in picking a slave for the noon time until the officer had picked *his*. That was another reason guardsmen preferred female slaves to male - or at least it was a reason for most of them.

I counted another ten heartbeats just to be certain and then, still bent over, I scuttled toward the near edge of the field. The hot brown dirt under my bare feet gave way to wild grass and creepers and an occasional root from one of the short bushes, but I ignored the change and just kept going. I had ten strides to cover before I was into the forest proper, and the distance doubled when you scuttled rather than strode.

I had covered about half the distance when I heard the shout, but I still didn't look back and I certainly didn't stop. The shout had come in a woman's voice, and the next instant other female

voices rose to join the first. One of my sister slaves had reached the end of her row a bit sooner than I'd expected, had straightened and looked around, and had seen me. If she hadn't yelled she and the others would have been punished for the escape I attempted, whether or not I succeeded. If I was recaptured I alone would be given punishment, so they were understandably anxious to see me retaken.

But not as anxious as I was to get away. I continued running bent over, ignoring the thudding of my heart and a frantic desire to straighten up and run at full speed, knowing the guardsmen must already have their bows in their hands. With the amount of distance between us they had no hope of catching me on foot, but arrows fly faster than men or women run. If they had a clear target they could get me in the leg, leaving me alive to be taken back to the city for punishment. It would be far better for me to stay bent over and risk a shaft in the back, one that would end my life before I could be returned to the city. A third escape attempt brought slow death to a slave, and I had already tried twice before.

I wasn't far from the treeline when I heard a distant shout, low and garbled but clearly in a male voice. I waited an instant and then scabbled to my left, changing position without changing direction. That shout had undoubtedly been one of the guardsmen, ordering the women in the field down flat, which meant their arrows would soon be in the air. If they couldn't see me well enough, if they only shot at where I'd *been*...

My half-prayer to the gods was answered in the same way it had been tendered: half way. I heard nothing of the twang of bowstrings, but suddenly there was a swarm of angry insects in the air to my right, tearing into the ground and trees in whistling fury. That would have been fine, exactly what I wanted - except for the single shaft that flew too far to the left. It went by me just as the others did, but as it passed it sliced open the back of my right shoulder, nearly making me cry out with the pain. A moment later I was into the treeline, but I hadn't gained the position without cost.

Once I was deep enough into the trees I could straighten up, but I couldn't slow down despite the burning pain in my shoulder. And under no circumstance could I stop. I had already left a smear or two of blood for the guardsmen to find, and even with the broadleaf I held to the wound I would be leaving a trail they could follow if they really wanted to. I had to get as far away as I could as quickly as I could, and count on the devastating heat to keep them from following very far.

I changed general direction every fifty paces or so, but still kept heading deeper into the forest. The air was a bit cooler there under the trees but gasping it in set my lungs aflame, the flood of sweat drowning me adding to the fire rather than quenching it. What that salty moisture felt like going into the wound is best left undescribed, but as I ran it certainly wasn't unfelt. The leather brow band I wore kept some of the flood from my eyes, but the rest blurred my vision and hung my hair in strings down my back.

After ages and eons of running, the time finally came when the god Ahainel took back the breath and strength-of-limb he'd lent me. I would have had to stop even if the guardsmen had been right behind me, but as far as I could tell they weren't. I wanted to lean on the tree I stopped near, more than that I *needed* to lean on the tree, but I couldn't afford to leave any more traces of blood than I already had. I shook my head to clear my vision as best I could, then looked around while I gulped in air. A small thicket of leaves and branches began not far ahead and to my right, so I forced myself into motion again.

After no more than three paces inside the thicket, I had to get down on hands and knees to go any farther. That is, I had to get down on half-hand and knees. My left hand still had to hold the broadleaf in place over the wound, and my right arm wasn't really up to supporting me while I crawled. It took a lot of effort to keep going that way and my progress wasn't very rapid, but eventually I reached a spot where I could simply lie down.

And maybe pass out for a short while. I opened my eyes to the feeling that time had gone by, but it was still daylight and there were no sounds of pursuit. I lay face down in the grass of the

thicket, my left arm under my chest, my right arm at my side, my entire body aching so badly I thought for a moment that I was coming around after a whipping. I knew what *that* felt like well enough, but wasn't prepared to know it ever again.

Even if I had to die to make it so. As I lay unmoving in the grass I could hear the scream of a furred hunter in the distance, a clear warning for all to keep away from the kill it had just made. Those who hunted in the forest shared only with their own, but were willing to take as prey anyone or anything unable to defend itself. It was one of the things that kept most female slaves from running, and my chain sisters weren't entirely wrong. As long as you stay alive you always have the hope of getting free somehow, but some of us reach the end of hope sooner than others.

I forced myself over onto my left side in the grass, trying to ignore the presence of the heavy metal collar locked closed around my neck. I'd worn that collar for almost two full seasons, close to a complete cycle of the sun god's travels through a portion of his domain, and could no longer bear its weight and what its presence made me. By birth I was still Kenoss, and Kenossi aren't known for making quiet, obedient slaves.

"Which would have helped if they'd believed I was Kenoss," I muttered, trying to work myself up to real movement. I had the heavy black hair of the people I'd been born among, but none of those in the city had ever seen or heard of a Kenoss with eyes as light as mine. If I'd had the usual dark eyes they would have offered me to the Morsee or cut my throat, but they never would have put me on the market square for sale. Among the Morsee, traditional enemies of the Kenoss, I would have had the chance to prove myself worthy of freedom; sold in the city, I was expected to prove nothing but what a good slave I was.

I made a very rude sound and struggled into a sitting position, fighting off the dizziness sent by Dakko to befuddle me. I may not have looked like others of the Kenossi, but I'd survived every Trial throughout my childhood and not simply by luck. There hadn't been another Life Seeker with more skill than I, and if I'd remained with my people -

But I *hadn't* remained with my people, not after the Whispers had seen me during the Trial of Passage. Whispers, we children had always called them, for the way no one ever spoke about them out loud. They'd watched me perform during the Trials, seen me qualifying easily, and once all the festivities were over they'd ... *chosen* me to be trained in their ways. I hadn't wanted to go, but I hadn't been allowed to refuse.

Getting myself up on my knees let me look around a little more easily, but it also told me what a meager amount I had left in the way of strength. It had been far too long since the last time I'd had anything decent to eat, and the work I'd been put to hadn't been easy. I needed time to rest and heal, time to recover from too long a fight against what they'd tried to make me, but I was still too close to that city. I had to keep going until the horrible place was a long way behind me, and only then would I be able to stop for a while.

I had something of a struggle getting out of that thicket, and once clear I had to rest briefly before going on. The wound in my shoulder wasn't all that serious, but it was still bleeding and didn't seem interested in stopping particularly soon. I couldn't see the wound very well, but I didn't need to see it to know it was there. The blazing pain of it announced its presence clearly, but I couldn't do more than put a fresh broadleaf over it before going on.

In a strange way the running I'd done earlier had been easier than the walking I did now. The thought of guardsmen right behind me had allowed me to overcome privation and pain, enabling me to use every shadow of strength my body possessed. Simply walking through the tangled forest allowed me to reach almost none of that strength, and it came to me suddenly that the Whispers - the Inadni - would have found nothing of surprise over the matter. I could recall being taught something about that, in preparation for the Higher Mysteries, not long before I'd walked away from the Inadni for good...

I shook my head to clear away the stilted mold my thoughts always fell into when I remembered things about the Inadni. They used the old-fashioned modes of speech of their

founders rather than modern accents, and that was only one of the things about them that had annoyed me. We in the outer world had come quite a way since the founding of their order, a lot farther than I had gone through the forest, but the Inadni made no attempt to reconcile the two worlds, choosing instead to reject all progress and advancement. They were fools, the lot of them -

I stopped very still when the scent came to me, and a tick later I didn't need the scent. The big cat stepped out of the bushes that had hidden her until now, her entire bearing showing contempt for the prey that stumbled along through the forest. If the guardsmen had found the traces of blood I'd left, this could be one of the reasons they'd decided not to follow. Why make the effort to run down a troublesome slave when the denizens of the forest who scent her blood will do it for you? Fresh blood will usually attract one of the big cats, and the nose of the brown, spotted female not far from me twitched with the scent.

I said, "I give you greetings, Sister. Can you tell me if there is water not too far distant from this place? I brought nothing with me in my escape from those of the Cursed Place, not even all of my blood."

"A bit of blood is small payment for the recovery of freedom," the cat answered automatically, startled by the way I'd spoken to her. "You are one of those, then, who speak the tongue of the Strong and Victorious. I now find little wonder in their having been unable to hold you. You are one of us rather than one of them, and that despite the crippled and grotesque form you wear. The water you seek is near for a healthy hunter, not so near for one such as you. Come, I will lead you to it."

She turned then and moved off to my left, but her pace was slow in deference to my "crippled" condition, and she glanced back over her shoulder to make sure I was keeping up. I followed after as quickly as I could, smiling to myself in relief that I'd found a female rather than a male. Females were used to accepting the limitations of cubs with only a small amount of the impatience of males, which meant I might survive the forest after all. The language of the Strong and Victorious was one of the first things I'd learned among the Inadni, but I didn't intend using it more than I had to. The words were harsh for a human throat, especially a human throat that needed water so badly.

The female had exaggerated the distance to water just a little, a ploy for greater effort she might have used on cubs as well as cripples, but I still only just made it. The hardest part was going downhill toward the stream, a stream I wasn't even able to detect until I had worked my way down a good portion of the steepness. I'd been silly enough to think that going downhill would be easier than walking a flat stretch, but by now my balance was just about gone, my right arm was nearly useless, and my left hand had all it could do to hold the broadleaf over my wound. Going down that steep a slope almost did me in, and that despite the number of small trees available to hold to.

The big cat had talked to me quite a bit as we'd walked through the forest, telling me that lack of fear was one of the ways her kind recognized my kind, but while I went down the slope she was silent. I hadn't been afraid when I'd first met her because I'd been trained not to be, but right now even I could smell the fear that mixed with the sweat of effort and pain that poured out of me. If I slipped going down it would certainly be all over for me, the treacherous terrain just about guaranteeing that. All that effort spent in escaping slavery, just to have it come to nothing because of some landscape...

But it didn't come to nothing. The stubbornness that the Inadni had always found so unacceptable kept me from giving up or surrendering to the fear, and I finally made it to the bottom of the slope in one piece. The big cat grinned as she watched me from a few feet away, amused by not needing to stay out of my path any longer. The short distance to the edge of the stream was full of stones, but at least it was level.

I had to take a moment to catch my breath even if I *was* burning up from lack of water, but after that moment I was able to stumble to the edge of the stream and go to my knees in front

of it. The stream bank was low at that spot, making the water easily accessible to the animals of the forest, which meant I had no trouble using my left hand to bring some of it to my mouth. I wanted to gulp the liquid, wanted to drain the wide, swiftly running stream from bank to bank, but even as I was now I knew better than to try. I had to drink slowly, or I would soon wish I'd never made it to the stream.

She-cat crouched next to me to lap at the water herself, her sense of concern satisfied by having given me first chance to drink. She was very close to me, at least as close as she would have been to a helpless cub, and I clearly remember feeling appreciation for that. She was trying to protect someone who couldn't protect herself, and it wasn't her fault that the effort turned out to be the worst thing she could have done.

The other she-cat must have been stalking us, confused about why my own cat hadn't already taken me down, probably deciding there was something wrong with my companion. A decision like that would have encouraged the newcomer to also decide to steal my cat's prey, and that was just what she tried. Voicing a growl of warning to stay out of her way, the newcomer launched herself at me in attack, that being our first indication that she was around.

I began to turn from the stream immediately, but the she-cat beside me moved with the speed of the gods, launching herself into a counterattack meant to keep me from harm. Unfortunately for me she was much too close, and when she turned that fast her large hunter's body struck me, knocking me into the stream.

I had enough time to hear the screaming fury of the two cats coming together in battle, and then the water closed over my head, cutting off awareness of everything else. Or almost everything else. The water wasn't as cold as it might have been, not with the windless heat of the air above it, but the chill was enough to touch my wound with greater pain. In spite of that I struggled to regain the surface where I'd be able to breathe, and found the effort almost beyond me. I was exhausted nearly to the point of the end of my strength, and the stream current was even faster than it had looked from the bank.

After a time that seemed like eternity my head finally broke through to the surface, but it was no more than a partial victory. The stream had me firmly in its grip, carrying me downstream at a speed that would have been very satisfying if I wasn't more than a step short of drowning. Hearing nothing of the sound of fighting cats told me they'd been left far behind, and that was another thing to curse the whim of the gods for. My she-cat would very likely have been willing to hunt for me until I healed, but now I was back to being alone again.

If I lived long enough for it to make a difference. I choked on some stream water and spat out some, horribly aware of how soon I would no longer be able to keep myself afloat. My left arm worked alone along with the feeble kicking of my legs, but only to keep me from going under. I wasn't all that far from the stream bank, but the distance might as well have been leagues. I simply hadn't the strength to fight the current to reach the bank.

And then I saw the dead tree up ahead, fallen half on the bank and half out into the stream. The tree was nothing but bare branches sticking out like the stiffened hand of a corpse, but if I could clasp that hand I just might be able to avoid becoming a corpse myself. The stream obviously intended to sweep me right by the tree, but I couldn't allow that to happen.

If the distance had been more than the body-length it was, I wouldn't have made it no matter how determined I felt. One-handed I fought the stream current in an effort to reach the end branches of the tree, and the first one my hand closed on snapped off with a sickening abruptness. I scrabbled around trying to reach another branch before I was carried past the tree, my heart thudding wildly, and when the second branch *didn't* break under my frantic grip I wasn't sure I believed things would stay like that.

It took the passage of a long string of ticks before I was able to calm myself enough to breathe more easily. I had a weak grip on the tree branch, and being downstream of the tree meant I couldn't afford to lose that grip or I would be immediately swept away. The current was a good deal less with the tree there to slow it, but my meager strength was also less after all the

struggling I'd done. I'd have to get to the bank without delay, or - I heard the sound of a small splash behind me and to my left, the direction the stream bank was now in. The splash was closer than the bank, much closer, and hearing it let me suddenly remember an earlier splash I'd been too frantic to notice at the time. Without bothering to turn to look I immediately let go of the branch I'd worked so hard to get to, but it was already too late. Just as I let go an arm closed around me, the arm of whoever it was who had swum toward me from the bank.

"No!" I screamed with the fury of insanity, refusing to accept the fact that I'd been recaptured, trying to fight my way free again. My own efforts and the stream's had carried me *away* from the city! I couldn't be recaptured, I just couldn't!

But I was. The thick arm around my waist had no trouble retaining its grip, and expending the last of my strength like that sent me down into bitter blackness.

Chapter 2

Consciousness began to return with the awareness of lying face down in the grass, all of me apparently wringing wet. Confusion and disappointment and bitterness and fury all raged around in my head, and I couldn't remember the reason for it until I heard the voices.

"... out of the stream, then carried her here," the first voice said, a deep male voice full of casual authority. "That wound in her shoulder isn't doing too well, and she looks as though she hasn't eaten since the full moon before last."

"Most people consider it foolish to waste much food on a slave," a second male voice said, this one sounding more casually arrogant than authoritative. "Leftovers usually keep them going long enough to earn back whatever price you paid for them, plus a small profit. After that you can always buy a new slave."

"I don't like waste," the first voice returned, now heavy with distaste. "My people currently do the same thing, or at least the upper classes do, and it's time the practice was changed. I foresee a time when we won't have enough - "

"Well, what is it you want now?" a querulous older male voice interrupted, accompanied by the sound of approaching footsteps. "How am I to continue with my studies when I find myself constantly badgered by all of you over trifles? I agreed to ply my arts during this campaign, but not every moment of the day and night!"

"My apologies, Honorable, but this is more than a trifle," the first voice said, sounding not at all apologetic. "I pulled that girl from the stream, and her wound is in need of your healing arts. She's - "

"Girl?" the older voice interrupted, now even more annoyed. "What girl? I see no girl."

I heard exclamations of surprise from the other two men, and I cursed silently while trying to crawl faster. I'd pulled myself along the ground to the bushes at the edge of that clearing and was right now behind one of the bushes, but that didn't put nearly enough distance between me and whoever it was who had captured me. If only that conversation could have continued uninterrupted for a little while longer - !

"Gods rot her, she's actually run off!" that second, arrogant voice exclaimed in outrage. "Even half drowned as she was, we should have chained her!"

"She didn't run, she crawled," the first voice corrected with what sounded strangely like amusement. "Wait here for a moment, Honorable, and I'll fetch her back."

When I heard heavy footsteps starting after me I tried to get to my feet to run, but I managed to struggle no higher than my knees before he caught up. Once again an arm went around my waist and then there was another under my knees, both raising me from the ground with no effort at all.

"No, you don't!" he warned me as I closed my left fist, intending to smash him in the face.

"Hitting me won't do you any more good than trying to run did. You don't have enough strength to do me much damage, but the same doesn't hold true for me toward you. Why don't you save it at least until that shoulder's been fixed?"

He stared at me with a faintly amused smile on his face, his red hair dripping with the same water that soaked his blue thigh-length tunic. His green eyes seemed just as amused as his smile, but despite all that enjoyment he'd made a very good point. If they *were* going to fix my shoulder, I'd be better off waiting until then before starting a fight.

"Well, well, it looks like we've achieved a truce even if lasting peace is nowhere in sight," he said with a chuckle, turning and beginning to make his way back to the clearing. "Introductions now seem to be in order, so I'll begin by saying I'm Talasin of Redann. What's *your* name, girl?"

I was right now paying more attention to where he was carrying me than to what he was saying, as I hadn't done much looking around the last time I'd been in the clearing. It wasn't entirely a natural clearing, that could be seen at a glance, and the direction we were moving in was the way to get back to the stream. I'd been going in the opposite direction, toward the deeper forest, away from the area of fancy tents which filled the clearing. To the left and right of the tents, scattered among the trees, was what looked to be the campsites of a fairly large number of fighters. Guardsmen of some sort would have been *my* guess, but as to *whose* guardsmen...

"A slave?" a voice suddenly said in outrage, and I turned my head to see a short, brown-haired, beardless man dressed in light blue robes. His sallow face was narrow and entirely humorless, and his dark eyes blazed.

"You called me here to tend a *slave*?" he demanded, most of his fury aimed at the man who carried me. A second man standing beside the one in blue was a lot larger, more the size of the one carrying me, a sandy-haired, brown-eyed fighter in dark red tunic rather than blue. He and my most immediate captor wore swords, but no leather other than in the sandals on their feet. There were also a couple of guardsmen who *were* in leather above dark gold tunics, but they stood a short way off and were only casually interested in the goings-on.

"I called you here to tend *this* slave," the man carrying me, Talasin, returned with the beginnings of annoyance. "Didn't you listen to anything Fearin said? I know you were there when he warned us, you were standing less than two strides away from me. You can't mean you've forgotten?"

The sallow-faced little man scowled, half in embarrassment over the accusation, half in what seemed like an attempt to search his memory, and the big man beside him laughed.

"Lokkel here might be quicker to remember if that slave was *worth* remembering," he said, proving himself to be the second voice I'd heard, the arrogant one. "I've seen and made use of worse in my time, but certainly not lately. Those blue eyes don't belong in a face as unattractive as hers."

"You can't expect everyone to be as beautiful as you are, Garam," the man holding me said with a laugh, obviously very amused. "But Fearin didn't say if she was as beautiful as a song or as plain as a sword rag. He just said we had to have her."

"It appears to me that you do have her," the small man Lokkel said, stiffness as well as petulance now filling him. "If she needs to be tended, call one or two of the animal handlers seeing to the horses and mules. They're certain to be perfectly adequate to the task, and I have far better things to occupy *my* time. I trust you'll excuse me now?"

His bow was pure sarcasm, undoubtedly saying he had no need at all to ask anyone's permission to leave, but he was answered in an unexpected way. Without his knowing it a younger man in deeper blue robes had come up behind him, a man with blond hair and beard and blue eyes to match his robes.

"Your trust is misplaced, Lokkel, since you're *not* excused," the man said in a very deep voice, one that caused the smaller, older man to pale and start. "You'll use your arts to heal that slave as you were told to do, and *then* you can go back to your studies."

"I fail to see why you don't use your own arts, Fearin," Lokkel retorted as he turned, false aggressiveness trying to cover extreme nervousness. "A master of your rank should find very little beyond his ability, therefore - "

"Therefore I should do your job for you," the man Fearin interrupted, disgust in his tone as he stared down at the smaller man. "You've been trying to push things off on me since you joined us, Lokkel, and I'm more than tired of the practice. Yes, I can heal the slave as well as you can, but no, I have no intention of wasting my time refreshing the spells in my memory. Learning those spells is what you've chosen to devote your life to, and now you're going to *use* some of them."

"Since you insist, Fearin, of course I'll give you the benefit of my learning," Lokkel came back, now using stiffness to cover his increased upset. "I have no need to be told how many things there are demanding your time and attention, I merely thought the healing spells were among the great many you maintain mastery of. Set the slave on her own feet, Talasin, and then step away from her. This will only take a moment."

"Spend two moments and do the job properly," Fearin said, his attention now on the way Talasin began to put me down. "That wound in her shoulder isn't the only thing requiring healing, something you would know if you had looked at her more closely. Stop thinking of her as a slave and start to consider her someone we've been commanded to add to our numbers." "Commanded," Lokkel echoed, his narrow face now openly disturbed. "I hadn't realized..." Lokkel stopped worrying about the conversation at that point, possibly because of the difficulty he could see I was having standing up all alone. What he'd just been told seemed to mean quite a lot to him, which cut short his fiddling around. He raised his arms, sent an unfocused gaze directly at me, then began to speak his spells.

The passage of time turns strange when one of Power directs a spell at you, and the experience is never easy to describe. Everyone knows, of course, how the entire world seems to turn blue, and how the shade of blue always indicates the amount of strength possessed by the one wielding the Power. Explaining what the Power *does* to you is the hard part, and my experience this time was as confusing as anyone else's. It felt as though half of forever and most of all things ever born or made were used to repair my wound and the ravages of slavery, but it also happened in a single instant through the use of nothing but words. When the forever-instant was over and Lokkel began to lower his arms, I no longer found standing up a problem.

"Now *that's* an example of proper, efficient healing," Fearin said with such deep satisfaction that the Healing Master nearly blushed from the compliment. "You have my thanks, Lokkel, and now you can go back to your studies. You're obviously not wasting your time with them." "You honor me with your words of praise, Fearin," Lokkel answered with a bow he meant this time. "Should you have further need of me, please don't hesitate to call."

The small man turned and walked away with his head held high, his entire bearing saying he was sure he was being watched with awe and admiration by everyone behind him, but that wasn't quite the truth. The two fighters Talasin and Garam seemed more bored than awed, and the High Master Fearin was looking at *me*.

"You were so close to the end you were nearly beyond the help of all but the gods," Fearin commented, his dark blue eyes as calm as his voice. "I don't have to be told you weren't the best of slaves, but that's all over with now. Once you've helped us to our final victory, your reward will be your freedom. What's your name, slave?"

"What my name *isn't* is slave," I answered, using my left hand to rub my shoulder while I gently flexed my re-strengthened right arm. "Whoever your victory is supposed to be over, it means less than nothing to me. Keep your reward, man of high Power. When you come across a slave you can use the reward then to impress *her*."

"Watch your mouth, Ugly!" the fighter Garam barked, taking one step toward me. "Even free men don't get away with talking to High Masters like that, and you're nothing but a scruffy girl slave. If *he* doesn't care to knock you flat, I'll be glad to do it *for* him."

"Prince Garam, please," Fearin interrupted as I shifted my gaze to the fighter, the High Master's deep voice sounding more than annoyed. "I appreciate your offer of help, but I'm capable of answering an insult by myself. Look here, girl, I don't have the time to play around with you. I can take back that healing you were given and then simply stand here and watch you die. If you prefer that to pledging your cooperation, just say so."

"I prefer that to pledging my cooperation," I responded obligingly, still keeping my eyes on the fighter Garam. I didn't trust Garam to keep his distance the way he'd been told to do, but his only reaction to what I said was a tightening of his jaw and a thicker reflection of anger in his eyes. The other fighter, Talasin, simply looked surprised.

"You think I'm joking," Fearin said very flatly, the coldness increasing in his voice. "You think I wouldn't have had you healed if I intended to take it back again. You think - "

"I think I don't particularly care *what* you do," I said, finally turning my head back to Fearin.

"I spent almost two full seasons as a slave and refuse to spend a moment more that way. Free or dead, whichever I become I will be it *now*, not at some future time and at the pleasure of my ... betters. If you think I'm not serious, call my bluff."

"Free or dead are only two of the things it's possible for someone to be," Fearin said, the coldness now reaching for his eyes as he straightened where he stood. "There are worse things than death, worse than you can possibly imagine, horrors so overpowering that strong men have been known to soil themselves from no more than glimpses. Shall I give you one of *those* rather than death?"

His deep voice had begun to take on a faint echo, and the air around him began to darken toward the blue of his robes. He was gathering his Power before casting it in a spell, and all those within sight and hearing started to back away so as not to be caught up. There was very little I could do at the moment, but very little isn't the same as nothing.

"Fear is the enemy of the strongest of hearts," I Spoke, closing my eyes so that the Speaking might reach me more deeply. "To allow fear to rule is to bend a knee and bow a head to the most ruthless of masters. To rule *it* instead is sometimes possible, most often difficult, always a victory when accomplished. To use fear while it attempts to use *you* is a goal of the Wise, a goal of the true Seeker of Life. Even in death may Life be Sought, for Life is not the same in all places. My strength will increase the closer I come to belief in these truths, and I will find it possible to stand against - "

"Hear me!" a voice suddenly shouted, the Power in it reaching through even to the place where the Speaking had taken me. I blinked back to see Fearin looking down at me, his hands wrapped around my upper arms, vast annoyance in his eyes and on his face.

"Why in the name of the End of Chaos didn't you tell me you were Kenoss?" he demanded, apparently on the way to being furious, shaking me as he spoke. "Do you think I have nothing better to do than waste my time? Have you any idea how far ahead of me things are getting while I stand here playing games?"

"No, I don't," I muttered, faintly surprised that he'd recognized the Speaking for what it was.

"The last time I tried to tell anyone I was Kenoss, they whipped me for lying."

"Because of your light eyes," Fearin said with a nod, finally letting me go and stepping back.

"In their place I might not have believed either. Well, it looks like I'm finally being allowed a hint as to why a slave must be added to our numbers. She isn't a slave, she's a Kenoss, and I suspect there's even more to it than that."

He narrowed his eyes at me then, but not because of anger or annoyance. It was my collar he looked at more closely, and when he'd seen what he needed to see he raised his hand and pointed a finger. Dark blue flared so briefly it was almost more of an impression than a happening, and after a lifetime of waiting that cursed collar snapped open and fell from my neck to the ground.

"Kenossi as slaves are more trouble than any profit can possibly balance," he said then, his dark blue eyes amused over the way my hand went immediately to my now free throat. "I'll

have a tent readied for you, and all I ask is that you wait to hear what this is all about. Will you agree to that?"

"In return for being rid of that collar, I do agree," I said, finding his amusement faintly annoying. "Beyond that, though, I agree to nothing. What decisions I make will be made as the free woman I am."

"Kenoss, not woman," he corrected dryly. "There's a world of difference between the two. Prince Talasin, will you do me the favor of finding some food for this free woman until I can make arrangements for her accommodation? I'm almost certain she won't harm someone who offers her hospitality."

Fearin waited until he got an amused nod from the fighter Talasin, then gave me a very deliberate bow before turning and walking away. The fighter Garam had already disappeared somewhere, which meant there was only what was left of the onlookers to see Talasin stroll nearer.

"Now I understand why you were so hard to hold onto," the fighter said, amusement once again strong in his eyes. "Just like everyone else I've heard of the Kenoss, but I've never met one before. The men of your people are supposed to be the most fearsome warriors ever born. Come along with me to my tent, and we'll find you something to eat."

Having been healed of most of what I'd gone through hadn't also filled my empty insides, so rather than correct the fighter I simply followed him toward the tent that seemed to be his. The thing was brown and orange and looked big enough to shelter a dozen people or more, but once inside I noticed that there was only the gear of one lying around. The red-haired man gestured to a white cloth on the thick tan and orange weaving that floored the tent, and then I was on my way to the cloth with no interest in noticing anything else. What I'd been offered was clearly leftovers from Talasin's last meal, but right now they looked like a feast.

"I'm curious about something," the fighter said after I'd taken three bites of the first piece of fresh fruit I'd seen in a season or more. The juices were even more marvelous than I'd thought they would be, and I was counting and savoring each bite as I took it.

"What I'm curious about is the fact that you had enough to say to Fearin, and maybe even more than enough," Talasin went on when I moved my gaze to him without pausing in counting and savoring. "When it comes to me, though, I keep getting the feeling I'm all alone and talking to myself. Are you ignoring me for a reason, or do you make a habit of doing this with every man who saves your life?"

The fighter was sitting on the weaving to my right with his back against a large wooden chest, his knees drawn up a little, his forearms resting on them. He had also lost all traces of amusement, a situation I was more pleased with than he seemed to be. One of the candles in the metal floor stand in the far corner of the tent crackled to itself in enjoyment before falling silent again, and that made me realize how close and warm it was in the tent.

"It's not the Kenoss men alone who are deadly fighters," I said after I'd swallowed my fourth bite. "If our women weren't tested and trained just as rigorously, fully half of our men's parentage would be weak. You can call me Aelana, and I could have done you more damage when you caught up to me than you're prepared to believe. No matter how weak I was. Was there anything else you wanted to know?"

"As a matter of fact there is," he answered with a nod, eyeing me where I crouched in front of the white cloth. "You've just replied to almost everything I said to you or asked, but you've still left one thing out. I'm waiting for a thank-you for having saved your life. It's common courtesy to say the words - at least among those who are civilized."

"You mean you civilized folk thank people for saving someone they were ordered to save?" I remarked, holding his gaze as I licked at the fruit. "Well, I'm really impressed. I hadn't realized courtesy had advanced so far among those who aren't savages like myself. I'll have to study hard to see if *I* can learn to be that advanced."

"For a savage you have an unusually cultured accent," he remarked back after the briefest

hesitation, ignoring the faint darkening of his skin - as well as the rest of what I'd said. "I hadn't realized the influence of your capitol city reached this far into the back country."

"The influence of our capitol city reaches everywhere, but it has nothing to do with accents," I said, returning my attention to the white cloth and the small slice of roast meat it held. I didn't know if I could hold down that meat, but my mind and body were clamoring for me to try.

"If there isn't enough food left to fill you I can ask Fearin to create more," Talasin said, apparently watching as I carefully lifted the slice of meat in the hand not holding the fruit. "I know you must be angry over having been offered leftovers, but the High Master is rather busy right now so getting more will probably take time. *Do* you want more to eat?"

"I couldn't hold it," I answered after briefly sucking on the meat, my eyes nearly closed in ecstasy. "I haven't had real food in so long I'll probably throw up even from this. But it'll be worth it."

"Every time I ask you a question, your answer breeds another dozen questions," he said in a way that was just short of complaint. "Maybe that's why you were so reluctant to talk to me. What did they give you instead of food, and how did you fall slave in the first place?"

"Most of the time, on the occasions when we were actually fed, we were given boiled rice," I said, chewing on a very tiny bite of the meat. "Those were the times when they were working us hard, and we needed that one bowl of rice a day to keep us going. When we weren't being worked quite that hard there was a thin wheat soup we were given to fight over. The strongest got the most of it, and the weakest got to lick out the empty pot."

"How in chaos did you have the strength to escape in the first place, not to mention trying to get away from *us*?" he demanded, and I turned my head to see the fury blazing out of his green eyes. "I fed my hunting dogs better than that!"

"Probably because your hunting dogs cost more than we did, and were therefore worth more," I pointed out, not far from finding his outrage naively funny. "We were the dregs of slavery, the troublemakers, the lazy, the uselessly stupid, the otherwise unwanted. I wasn't the only one there already guilty of trying to escape, and me and the others like me were never hired out on the same heavywork. They were afraid we might cooperate and actually manage to get away. We were also the strongest in our cage, because we usually ate the best."

"It's too bad you weren't sold to a tavern or a stop-in house," he said, shaking his head in continued disgust. "Those girls are usually fed by the men who go to the place, and some of them get to be downright plump. If you were pretty you could have had as easy a life as they have."

That time I came a lot closer to laughter, so close he must have seen some sign of it. His skin darkened again a bit, and his disgust began to change to annoyance.

"I'm glad what I said entertained you," he all but growled, straightening a little where he sat. "I usually feel disappointed if I show compassion for someone and they don't get a chuckle out of it at the very least. If you'll tell me what specifically you found so amusing, I may be able to come up with more of the same."

"There was a girl in our cage who *came* from a stop-in house," I said, going to one knee so that I might look into the two brass pitchers standing at the very edge of the cloth to the left. One held the dregs of a cheap wine and the other some warmish-looking water, but the water was still what I wanted. "None of us wasted our time worrying about anybody but ourselves, but if there was one among us we felt most sorry for, she had to be it."

"Because she'd been sold out of the stop-in house?" he asked, the confusion in his tone saying he had the feeling his guess was wrong. "But that's almost exactly what *I* said."

"We almost felt sorry for her because she'd been *in* the stop-in house," I corrected, holding the fruit and what was left of the meat in one hand while I poured some water into a wine-stained copper cup. "The girls who are put in those houses usually want to be there, and if one comes along who *doesn't* want to be there that one isn't treated very well by the others. Especially if she's not just pretty but downright beautiful. And her troubles aren't over once she

gets sold *out* of the house."

"I can see that if the other slaves are jealous they can make a lot of trouble for the girl," he said, a statement that showed just how little he did see. "What I seem to be missing is what, beyond starvation, the girl has to worry about once she's *out* of the house. If it was the hard work that bothered her, she probably would have tried harder to stay in the house."

"The idea of being worked hard from sunup to sundown is enough to bother anybody, even someone who furiously hated what they were doing before that," I pointed out, taking another bite of the fruit while I simply *thought* about the next bite of meat. "But that isn't the entire problem to be faced. Don't you know there are always guardsmen in charge of work gangs, guardsmen who look forward to the noon rest?"

The expression on Talasin's face said he was confused again, as though he couldn't understand the significance of what I'd said. I found it hard to believe he could be *that* naive, and I was right; he wasn't that naive, at least not in the way I thought.

"If you're saying the guardsmen used her, so what?" he asked, apparently trying to fight his way through the mists. "Women are supposed to be used, they're raised to expect it. It might have been a little hard on her if they *all* used her, but I'm sure she got over it. And if she'd made the effort to be good for those guardsmen, they probably would have worked her less and given her some decent food as a reward."

"You think she would have been rewarded, and you're sure she got over being put to the use of seven men," I repeated, no longer feeling the least amount of amusement. "Well, in a way you're right. They didn't work her any less than the rest of us, not when she constantly tried to fight them off, but they wanted her to stay reasonably healthy so they did give her better food. Maybe I should say they *forced* her to eat better food, and that was their mistake. She made herself choke to death on a bite of the food, and that's the way she got over being used like that. The guardsmen lost their off-duty time for three days as punishment for letting a slave kill herself."

Talasin just sat there staring at me while I took another small bite of the meat, his lack of expression hiding everything he might be thinking. For my own part I was beginning to be surprised that my body wasn't rejecting the very rich food I was putting in it, even though I *was* starting to feel very full. I decided the healing must have brought me back to the point of being able to accept normal food, which meant I had to finish the fruit and the meat. My capacity was still too low, and if I didn't build it up as fast as possible my strength would suffer.

"I get the distinct feeling you approve of what that girl did," the man not far from me said after a short silence, still mostly with a lack of expression. "You think she was right to kill herself rather than wait for an opportunity to escape the way you did."

"Of course," I agreed without hesitation, reaching again for my water. "She *couldn't* have escaped the way I did, she simply wasn't raised or trained to do things like that. If she hadn't killed herself she would have been trapped in something she couldn't live with for another four or six seasons at least. After that she would have been too worn out to be attractive any longer, but she would have felt she'd spent a lifetime at it. She understood what the slavers don't: you can't enslave someone who's willing to die to escape you."

His lack of expression turned strange, but rather than say anything else he retreated into silence again. I used the time to finish the food I had left and was just draining the cup of water when a voice called from outside the tent.

"Prince Talasin, it's Ranander," the voice said. "May I come in?"

"Come ahead, Ranander," the fighter answered, apparently pulling his mind back to where his body sat. The invitation produced movement at the tent flap, and a moment later a man I hadn't seen before was inside. The newcomer was as large as Talasin with brown hair and eyes, but something about the way he moved and held himself said he was no fighter.

"Fearin sent me to tell our latest addition that her tent is ready," he informed the fighter and me in an open, friendly way. "If the two of you like, I'll show her where it is."

"Since she seems to have finished her meal, I think that's a good idea," Talasin said, still not moving from where he sat leaning against the wooden chest. "We can continue getting acquainted another time."

"And I can get started," the man Ranander said with a grin as I put the empty cup aside and got to my feet. "She's the first female to join our ranks, and I've always liked women better than men. I'll see you later at the gathering, Prince Talasin."

The newcomer didn't seem to notice how distant the fighter's nod was, or how Talasin followed me with his eyes as I followed my newest guide out of the tent. The fighter seemed to be disturbed over something I'd said, and wasn't *that* an awful shame...

"Fearin told me you're a Kenoss so I should watch what I say to you," Ranander offered as soon as we were outside. "I don't know much at all about Kenossi, so if I say or do something I shouldn't I hope you'll forgive me. I really do want us to be friends."

"Since you don't know anything about me, how do you know you want to be my friend?" I asked, deciding from the slant of the light coming through the trees that it was only a short while to mid afternoon. With all the things that had happened today, by rights it should have been a good deal later.

"Oh, I like being friends with everyone," Ranander quickly assured me, still open and friendly and seeming much younger than his appearance suggested. He wasn't slow in the head, just somehow very ... innocent. "Getting into arguments with people is usually a lot of trouble, and I'm too lazy to enjoy extra trouble. In case you missed it, my name is Ranander. What's yours?"

"You can call me Aelana," I said, giving most of my attention to the dark green and silver tent we were approaching. That particular tent hadn't been there the one time I'd looked around, and the color choice was very interesting. I'd have to find out if it had been done on purpose or was just a rather strange coincidence.

"I'll be glad to call you Aelana," the boy-man said, strong friendliness still in his voice.

"Maybe once we get to know each other really well you'll tell me what your true name is."

I must have stopped short without realizing I'd done it. One tick Ranander was beside me to my left, and the next he was two steps ahead and turning back to look at me curiously.

"Are you all right?" he asked at once, very obviously concerned. "Did you forget something important in Prince Talasin's tent?"

"I don't have anything important to forget," I said, for the most part to hide how surprised I felt. "What makes you think Aelana isn't my real name?"

"Why ... I just know it isn't," he said, staring at me with serious brown eyes. "Does it bother you that I know things like that? Fearin says it's one of the reasons I'm part of all this and I know he's right, but some of the others don't like my being here. They're ... Let's say they're less than kind. I'd prefer to be friends with them, but I won't lie about myself to people when I first meet them. If you like, I'll find someone else to show you to your tent."

"Since that should be my tent over there, finding someone else would be more trouble than help," I said, nodding at the green and silver tent just before starting toward it again. "There isn't anything special I have to know about it, is there?"

"Aside from the fact that there's clothing for you in the wooden chest, it's the same as the rest of the tents around here," he answered, hurrying for a couple of steps before matching strides with me again. "And aside from the colors, of course. Fearin asked me what your choice of colors would be, and once I'd started to go over the list of possibles I knew which ones you'd choose. You like them, don't you?"

"I haven't decided yet," I said, reaching the entrance curtain and brushing it aside to let me walk in. It was the least bit cooler in out of the sun, but it was also closer than what I'd been used to for a while. The weaving on the floor was green and silver, the candle stand was black iron, a darkwood chest stood where the same had stood in Talasin's tent, and despite the absence of a white cloth there was still a bronze pitcher and copper cup. The two stood on the

flat top of the wooden chest, easy to see in the candle-glow, and when I walked over to look in the pitcher I found it filled with water.

"Fearin said you'd do better without wine right now," Ranander offered from the tent flap, having followed me inside. "If you don't agree with him, I'll be glad to go and ask him to change it."

"For now I do agree with Fearin," I said, turning away from the pitcher. "So he created all this, did he? He must have even more Power than I thought."

"I hear there's only one other High Master who can be considered his equal," Ranander said, briefly looking vexed. "I tried to *know* if that was true or not, but I get nothing one way or the other. I've come to believe there's too much Power involved for me to penetrate to the truth."

"And how about the truth concerning what you're all doing here?" I asked, not bothering to make the question casual. "If I'm supposed to decide whether or not I want to join you, I have to know what I'm deciding *about*."

"But *I'm* not allowed to tell you anything," Ranander said with a small laugh of surprise.

"None of us is, and I thought you knew that. You have to wait for the gathering, and then you'll be told everything. Why do you think Fearin didn't talk to you after you were healed? And why didn't you try asking *him* your questions?"

Because I could see he wasn't willing to tell me anything, I answered silently with annoyance. I'd thought I might be able to slide a few answers loose from a man who seemed to enjoy talking nonstop, but my plan hadn't worked out any too well. Which was typical of how my plans had been going for longer than I liked to think about.

"I know you're very tired, so I'll leave you alone now and you can rest," Ranander said with a faint smile. "If you need anything, just let me know and I'll be glad to help you get it. My tent is the white and red one, and if I'm not there I'm usually at Fearin's dark blue one. I'll see you later."

He smiled again and nodded at me before turning and leaving, almost as though he was hoping I'd ask him to stay, but aside from anything else he was right about how tired I was. I'd eaten well for the first time in almost two seasons, and now my body and mind wanted to sleep the same way.

There was a blankets-and-cloth arrangement over near the lefthand tent wall, obviously put there for sleeping purposes, so after I'd poured and swallowed down a cupful of fresher water I went to the blanket arrangement and sat on it. I'd had better beds in my time, but as I stretched out on the cloth-covered blanket I couldn't remember any of them being more comfortable. I'd slept on the ground or in a cage for so long...

The rag I wore was still a bit damp like my hair, so I sat up to pull off the rag and toss it away, then lay down again after holding my hair up out of the way. I had no worries about anyone coming in and deciding to make use of my body, not when I'd glimpsed camp females in the guardsmen's areas who weren't as ... *ugly* and thin as I was. I'd be able to sleep in peace, and if someone *did* decide to come in and bother me they'd find out exactly what it was they were trying to bother.

For an instant that thought brought me satisfaction, but then the instant was gone and the true world came crowding back to my memory. I'd escaped a slavery I couldn't bear and no longer wore a collar, but I'd never be able to escape what I was. The Inadni had gone too far toward changing me, and leaving them behind hadn't done the same with their teaching. When I'd tried to go back to my people... *Shadowborn* they'd called me, and then they'd driven me away - I thought then about Ranander and the way he insisted he wanted to be friends, and the unforced welcome I'd been given in Talasin's tent. They didn't know, either of them, what they were welcoming and offering friendship to, but once they found out the offers would be withdrawn faster than they'd been given.

And they *would* find out. I hung an arm over my eyes to block out sight of the world, a world that, for the most part, wanted nothing to do with me. Whatever those people around me were

up to, the reason they were making me an offer had to be because of what I was. They needed my very special learning, even incomplete as it was, and would put up with my presence as long as their need remained.

Crying wasn't a thing I did easily or often, but I was so tired I could feel the moisture forming under my arm. I'd been alone for so long, had had no one but myself to depend on for even longer; I knew right now that I wished I could have died during my escape rather than having been rescued. I'd had to fight as hard as I could to win through, my nature and training allowed nothing else, but if only I could have died instead...

Don't bother wanting to know them, they won't want to know you. I'd had that proven to me often enough for the lesson to become the most thorough one I'd ever learned, along with the fact that all the wishing in the world wouldn't change it. Once they found out I'd be all alone again, and I was almost too tired to stand it. No matter what happened I couldn't see my life going on for much longer, and that was the brightest hope I had to cling to. It wouldn't be much longer before the loneliness and need for solitary strength was over.

The comfort of that thought let me take my arm from my eyes, but it didn't stop the tears. I felt them trickling down my cheeks in the useless way tears have, as if hoping for something in their presence would make the hope happen. It doesn't, of course, and that was something else I'd learned. What is will be again, so there's no sense in looking for the impossible.

My eyes closed as waves of sleep rolled over me, but temporary lack of awareness was no real solution to what plagued me. The only benefit in sleep was that when I awoke the tears would be gone, and I'd have the strength again to stand all alone. All alone. Alone...

Chapter 3

Or maybe not quite alone. When my eyes opened I could see he'd already been in the tent for a while, and that in itself was almost unbelievable. No one had been able to come that near without waking me since my third successful trial as a Life Seeker, not to mention since my time with the Inadni. Possibly I had passed out earlier instead of falling asleep, and that was the reason he'd been able to enter without my knowing it.

And with food. The white cloth that had been missing was no longer absent, and there was enough food on it to feed every slave in my cage for a full moon. There was also a large pitcher and two cups, a different pitcher than the one which still sat on the wooden chest, and I was certain the new addition didn't contain water. I lay belly down in my new bed at least three strides from the cloth, but still had no trouble detecting the smell of wine.

Ranander had been very busy arranging the food just so, but he must have gotten everything the way he wanted it. He finally straightened away from the cloth to turn and look down at me, then grinned when he saw me watching him.

"What perfect timing," he said with a laugh, still completely open and honest and friendly. "I was just about to wake you, but now I don't have to. We'll have the meal together, and then we'll go to the gathering."

"I see you have everything planned out," I said, turning to my side before sitting up. "The only thing bothering me about all this is that I can't quite remember being asked if I wanted your company. I also can't remember saying I did."

"Fearin did most of the planning and saying," he answered, not in the least disturbed over the cool reception he was getting. "Since you're newest he didn't want you feeling left out and ignored, and he also heard from Prince Talasin how little you ate earlier. I'm not only here to keep you company, I'm also here to make you eat properly. You do want to grow up big and

strong, don't you?"

"I think Fearin is getting ahead of himself," I said as I ran my hands through the tangle of my hair, ignoring his question and the grin that went with it. "I'm not newest among you because I haven't yet joined you, and I'll begin eating properly as soon as my capacity for food increases. As far as wanting company goes, I don't. I think that covers everything, so you can leave now." "Oh, but I can't leave," he said, this time the open innocence anything but real. "Even if we overlook the fact that people like me don't ignore the orders of High Masters like Fearin, we still have to remember that my food is over there with yours. If I have to move it back to my tent before I can eat it I'll just about have to swallow it whole to keep from being late to the gathering. And I'm afraid you were wrong a moment ago. That *doesn't* cover everything, but that tunic over there should."

He flicked a finger to my right, toward the foot of my bed, and when I looked I saw a sleeveless tunic of green and silver that would probably fall just below mid-thigh on me. The wet slave rag I'd taken off was nowhere in sight, and that annoyed me. If I decided against joining that group I'd hardly be able to take my new finery with me, but the one piece of clothing I'd brought here was now gone. Well, if and when the time came I'd see to it that somebody returned the rag or replaced it. I could always go back to the forests naked, but I was still human enough to prefer being clothed.

It didn't take long to get into the tunic, and that was a faint disappointment for my ... company. Ranander had seated himself on the far side of the white cloth, and staring at my body until it was covered didn't seem to embarrass him. As far as I was concerned there wasn't much for him to stare at, but I suppose some people are easily satisfied. Especially people who aren't treated well by those around them.

"Those scars don't bother you as much as they would someone else," he said as I walked over to sit on my own side of the white cloth. "I'm glad they don't, because they don't bother me either. You have a nice body, and once you get used to eating on a regular basis again you'll be back to looking the way you should. Girls can be thin, but they shouldn't be gaunt."

"I'm glad you approve of the way I look," I said, reaching first for the pitcher of wine. "If you were unhappy with me I'd probably be very upset. When and where is this gathering going to be?"

"It's going to be where it always is," he answered, taking a cup and holding it out in a wordless request to have it filled. "After we eat we'll go over to Fearin's tent, and once everyone is there and the guardsmen are in place around the tent we'll start."

"Why would Fearin need guardsmen around his tent?" I asked, putting the pitcher down after pretending I didn't see Ranander's raised cup. "If his Power can't keep the unwanted away, nothing can."

"Fearin can't use his Power during a gathering," Ranander said, finally losing most of that boyish-friendly look as he stared at me. "There's a reason for that, which you'll find out once the gathering starts. Right now I'd like to know the reason you're treating me like something not really worth your time and attention. Were you a slave so long you've forgotten how to get along with people?"

"There's a difference between *knowing* how to get along with people and *wanting* to," I said, leaning over the cloth to see which of the food I most felt like starting with. "I wasn't the one who asked you in here, so I don't have to bother pretending to be polite. I'm also not the one looking for friends, so any time you don't like what you hear you don't have to hesitate over leaving."

"There's something wrong with what you just said," he told me, and I looked up after taking a small wedge of cheese to see his frown. "What you said isn't precisely *untrue*, but it also isn't completely true. You want me to leave, but you *don't* want me to leave; that's the closest I can come to defining two feelings that would be fighting one another in somebody else, but aren't in you. You want both things just about equally."

"Personally, I'm for the feeling that says I want you to leave," I informed him around a mouthful of cheese, privately wondering just how deep his talent was able to go. "If I had to guess, I'd say that second feeling was more a matter of your imagination."

"I don't imagine answers," he said with a small shake of his head, immediately and completely dismissing the idea. "Either I *know* or I *don't* know, nothing in between. And I must say how awfully well educated you sound for a former slave. Are all Kenossi that well educated?"

"No," I answered very shortly, looking down at the food again. "And I thought you were in a hurry to get through this meal so you could leave. So far all you've done is talk, wasting time which could have been better spent moving your food to your own tent. Why don't you - "

"Now just you wait a moment," he interrupted, this time sounding annoyed. "I told you that after this meal *we* would leave, and I think you know it. You seem awfully anxious to be rid of me, but it doesn't have anything to do with my *knowing* things. Would you like to tell me what it does have to do with?"

"It has to do with *you*," I said, looking up again with my own annoyance. "You're dull and boring and I have no interest at all in associating with you. And you also don't know how to take hints, so let me say this straight out: go away!"

"Well, how about that," he drawled, his head to one side as he began to grin at me. "Most of what you just said is a total untruth, except for wanting me gone, which is still part yes and part no. You don't find me boring at all, and once you sleep with me you'll probably like me even better."

"Sleep with you?" I repeated with an incredulous laugh, finding it hard to believe he'd actually said that. "I'm not even enjoying sharing a meal with you. The only way I would ever sleep with you is if I were unconscious or dead. What's the matter, can't you even get any of the camp women to look at you?"

"The camp women have done more than look at me and they're decent enough, but I want something else," he answered, his widened grin saying my attempted insult was too far off the mark to touch him. "You intrigue me, Aelana, and I want to learn more about you. Do you distrust my interest because you think you're not pretty enough to attract a man?"

His question was more serious than the rest of what he'd said, but not so serious that I was supposed to be upset over it. What I was supposed to do was take his interest as a sincere attempt at gentle flattery, but that was something else that would never work out.

"Why don't we wait until you *have* learned more about me before we discuss all this interest you feel?" I suggested, then deliberately looked away from him and back to the food. "And if that gathering will be waiting for *us*, then they won't appreciate us taking our time. Besides, I've had more than enough conversation for a while."

My cutting everything off that abruptly surprised and bothered him, but you really do need some response to keep a conversation going. Ranander tried both talking and asking questions, but when I continued to ignore everything he said he finally gave up. We shared a tasty meal in even tastier silence, and I discovered that the sleep I'd had seemed to have given me more strength for eating. I finished part of a small bird that had been baked in honey, three mouthfuls of a vegetable mixture, a bite of heavy bread, a second small cheese wedge, and a full cup of wine. By the time I finished I felt close to bursting, but after almost two full seasons it was a feeling I revealed in.

For some reason Ranander didn't eat much more than I did, and we were already out of my tent before the words began to come from him again. I let the words flow around and past me as we walked toward the deep blue tent that was Fearin's, aware of the way the man beside me was trying to lighten my mood, aware but hearing none of it.

My mood was as dark as the sky had grown, as deep as the night was beginning to be.

Occasional bursts of laughter floated to us from two or three points in the surrounding guardsmen's camps, but the sounds felt as out of place as their campfires in the forest looked. Anyone who built a campfire could never truly be a *part* of the forest, and as far as humanity

went, my campfire had long since been built.

There really were guardsmen ranged around Fearin's tent, but not immediately around it. They stood at least five strides away from it in a circle, each guardsman no more than two strides distant from the ones to either side of him, all of them armed with sword and spear as well as wearing heavy leather.

Ranander and I were stopped beyond the circle until an officer was called, and only when *he* passed us did his men step aside. I felt my curiosity stirring over what they might be guarding so closely, but it was just a passing thought. By now I knew there would be revelations galore in the tent I walked toward, and at least one of them would center around *me*.

Stepping through the entrance flap was like stepping into a room in one of those palaces I'd heard about. The golden floor weaving was as soft and thick as fur, golden panels of silk adorned the deep blue tent walls, thick blue pillows were scattered all over the floor weaving, and small, dark wood tables were arranged here and there among the pillows. Four golden stands held candles in each of the four corners of the tent, and three females moved around serving the four men taking their ease in the place. They all looked up as Ranander and I entered, but the first to speak was Lokkel the Healing Master.

"Really, Ranander, I would have thought that even *you* knew better than to be late to a gathering," he said in a tone that was sharp enough to cut with, his dark-eyed look withering.

"Making the rest of us sit around toying with our thumbs is boorishly inconsiderate."

"Possibly he was too busy toying with something of his own to think about us," the fighter Garam suggested in a lazy drawl, arrogant insult clear in his own dark eyes. "If it wasn't Ranander we could consider it the slave he was toying with, but even if he had the stomach to touch her he probably wouldn't know what to do. You really should find someone to give him lessons, Fearin. Leaving him as he is tends to be an embarrassment to the rest of us."

"Since we *are* assembled later than we should be, let's get on with it," Fearin said, apparently not noticing that he'd interrupted the fighter Talasin just as he was about to speak. "Ranander, you and Aelana sit there to complete our circle, and as soon as you both have wine we'll begin."

The man of Power had indicated two places on the floor weaving to his left, between him and Talasin and somewhat opposite Garam and Lokkel. Garam sat to Fearin's immediate right with Lokkel to *his* right, and I was glad not to be seated in *their* part of the circle. I was about to sit nearer Talasin than Fearin, but Ranander put a hand to my left elbow, shifting me over.

"I don't want any wine," I said to Fearin as I reluctantly sat not far from him, finding it impossible not to notice the way Ranander avoided looking directly at the loud-mouthed Garam. The man I'd shared a meal with was much more subdued in the company we'd come into, and all good humor seemed to have gone out of him.

"You'll take what you're given, slave," Garam said before Fearin could respond, his arrogance even thicker than it had been. "In a collar or without it, you'll still do as you're told."

For some reason good food and comfortable, uninterrupted sleep tend to make one *less* willing to be imposed upon rather than philosophic and patient. I suddenly found myself voicing a deceptively small hissing growl at Garam, a phrase in the tongue of the Strong and Victorious which meant, "The sight of your blood will give me a great deal of pleasure."

The phrase was a standard response to a challenge that would be eagerly answered by the one speaking, but the mighty Garam didn't seem to count knowledge of that tongue among his possessions. The fighter was excruciatingly unimpressed by what he saw and heard, but another of our number reacted differently.

"Aelana, the wine is necessary for the gathering," Fearin said quickly, surprise lowering his brows a bit. "Just take the cup, and then the servants can leave."

Only then did I notice that one of the camp women was standing behind me to my left with a cup of wine in her hand. Ranander already had his cup, and the other two women were over by the tent flap, obviously waiting for their third to finish her serving and join them. There seemed to

be nothing for it but to take the cup, and once I did the woman turned and hurried out of the tent behind the other two. We six on the golden floor weaving were then alone in the tent, and the next thing I expected was that gathering to get under way.

In *some* way. What I didn't expect was the way we all just sat there, Garam and Fearin sipping their wine, Lokkel and Talasin staring into theirs, Ranander so deep in thought he seemed to have forgotten he had any wine. Along with sipping wine Fearin seemed to be studying me, so after enough heartbeats had gone by to make me feel I'd aged, I took advantage of having the High Master's attention.

"Is this all there is to this gathering of yours?" I asked, making no attempt to keep the impatience out of my voice. "We all gather here and just sit staring at one another?"

"We're not just sitting here staring at one another," Fearin answered, a faint smile playing around his lips. "At first we were waiting for the servants to leave the area completely, and now we're waiting to be noticed. The next effort belongs to someone other than us."

I was about to demand to know who this someone else could be, but Fearin suddenly straightened where he sat as his complete attention went to the center of our circle. I had enough time to notice that the others were doing the same, and then I had time for nothing but staring.

In the center of the circle a white mist had begun to form, a mist that could have been produced by the use of Power but clearly didn't have that as its source. When Power is used you can feel a light, faint tingling in the air, but right now the feeling was entirely different. There was a ... heavy sharpness of some sort all around, an experience that can't be described in any other way.

The mist that formed was very compelling, but then something began to form *inside* the mist that was even more riveting. The shape was manlike in form but much larger, and as more and more details came clear it became evident that no man had ever looked the way that form did. It was very large and hugely muscled, with mahogany-red skin and black hair and eyes; its face was more beautiful than any man's could ever be, but the sternness of the expression was impossible to miss. I nearly gasped when I realized who it was - who it *had* to be - and finally understood why Fearin couldn't use his Power.

"We give you greetings and welcome, Lord," Fearin said after rising to his feet, his bow low and sincere. "Once again you honor us with your presence."

"Your gathering was late, High Master," the form rumbled in a very deep voice, faint annoyance rather than accusation to be heard. "Since this undertaking is not my only concern, try harder next time to be more prompt. How go the preparations?"

Fearin began to tell the form details of numbers and troop distributions and estimated marching times and such, but I paid no attention at all to what he said. All I could do was stare at that form, trying to tell myself I was mistaken, but I knew I wasn't. We were all of us right now in the presence of Diin-tha, god of justice and revenge. Fearin and the others moved in the cause of a god, and that made everything a good deal more complicated than I'd expected.

"You continue to do well, Fearin," Diin-tha said when the High Master finished his recital, faint approval showing on that very beautiful face. "Accept the victories that come as your own as you have so far done, and when you reach your ultimate objective we'll find our enemies unprepared for the true state of affairs. You may now retire."

"Yes, Lord," Fearin said, then raised his cup of wine. "The will of Diin-tha shall ever be mine." The god nodded regally as Fearin drank from his cup, then turned toward the fighter Garam while the High Master reseated himself on the golden floor weaving. Garam rose immediately to his feet, his usual arrogance pushed well behind him.

"We give you greetings and welcome, Lord," Garam said, looking up at the giant figure before him. "As always, you honor us with your presence."

"How goes your planning for the taking of the city, Prince Garam?" the god asked, acknowledging the fighter's words with a movement of his finger. "Have you yet finalized your

intentions?"

"In all details but one, Lord," Garam answered, working very hard not to look as frightened as I knew he felt. I could smell the fear on him even with the god and his mist between us, and wasn't particularly surprised.

"I still need someone who knows the city to guide me and my infiltration force to the places where we want to be before the attack," Garam explained, gently swirling the wine in the cup he held. "If we have to find those places ourselves, the risk of detection goes up rather alarmingly. It also delays the attack, and every delay threatens our possession of the element of surprise."

"Be at ease, for you will soon have the assistance you require," the god told him, a faint soothing now evident in the deep rumble. "Use the assistance wisely, and continue to plan as successfully as you have. You may now retire."

"Yes, Lord," Garam said, then raised his cup of wine the way Fearin had. "The will of Diin-tha shall ever be mine."

For the second time the god nodded acknowledgment of the words of dedication, and then he turned to the Healing Master Lokkel. Garam sat down while Lokkel stood up, but my attention wandered from the now-familiar greeting being spoken by Lokkel. It was fairly clear that it would eventually be my turn, and I was having trouble deciding what I would say and do. Dealing with a god was not like dealing with men, something I didn't have to be told. The problem took me so deeply into my thoughts that I came back to awareness only to discover that Ranander was speaking the words of dedication. I'd missed what had been said to three of the men here, including what talent or ability the fighter Talasin had. It was clear *everyone* at the gathering had a talent or ability, which was why they were here in the first place.

Ranander spoke warmly and happily, as calm as Garam had been frightened, and then suddenly those very black, more than human, eyes were on *me*. I got to my feet rather more slowly than Fearin and Garam and Lokkel had done, and simply stood there in silence.

"And you have something of a dilemma, have you not, child?" the god said as he looked down at me, faint amusement on that very beautiful face. "Having been dedicated to Bellid makes you unable to dedicate yourself to *me*, no matter your own wishes in the matter. Surely you would join my effort willingly if that were not so."

"Join an effort I know nothing about?" I came back, annoyed at having been worried for nothing. Of course Diin-tha would know I'd been dedicated to Bellid; gods had a habit of knowing everything. "Is that the way you got these others to join you? First demanding that they dedicate themselves, and only later telling them what it's all about? If that's the way they let it happen, you won't get as much out of them as you expect to."

"Bellid must surely have been greatly pleased with your dedication to him," Diin-tha commented, a definite dryness in the deep rumble. "He has always had an unexplained fondness for rudeness and effrontery, a fondness few of the rest of us share. He takes pride in being the patron of those who are called Shadowborn, those mortals who live such singular lives."

I heard Fearin draw in his breath sharply, as though he'd almost said something out of turn, but apparently he had more self-discipline than that. He'd heard the word Shadowborn before now, and knew what we were - or, more accurately, knew what *I* was. Lack of reaction from the others probably meant they knew nothing of the same, but I doubted if it would be long before they did.

"You stand silent but unrepentant," Diin-tha remarked, still staring down at me with those deep black eyes. "Your nature has become such that you are now truly one of Bellid's own, his despite the fact that your original dedication was in no manner your own doing. With such a truth in mind I will do as I had not intended, and shall speak to you as though you were male." There was a stirring around the circle, as if most of those in the tent shifted in place, but no one

spoke. I knew I was being accorded a rather high privilege, but somehow my enthusiasm wasn't as great as it might have been.

"Those about you have been enlisted in a proposed war of conquest, but not a war of the sort you mortals engage in," the god said. "It will seem as though the desire for conquest is Fearin's, but once his final objective has been reached it will be *my* desires which are satisfied. One who is my enemy thinks he has taken my followers from me in a city which has ever been mine, and the return of that city to the rest of my domain is the victory those about you now bend their efforts toward."

Most of my attention was on the god, but I had no trouble noticing that the men in the circle were listening carefully to what was being said to me.

"My active support will be available to this group in the last of the effort, but none save those of this gathering must know of my involvement before then," Diin-tha continued. "Your skills are necessary for my success, so necessary that I spoke with Bellid, who graciously allowed me your loan. The decision of your joining this gathering has already been made for you, by the one who holds your destiny-oath, but I would have you understand what occurs about you and through that receive the greatest effort you are capable of. Do you understand what you have been told?"

Those black eyes stared at me soberly, possibly trying to judge how I was taking what I'd heard. Out of habit my face showed nothing of my feelings, I knew, but the god had no real need to see an expression before he had his answer.

"You understand completely and are extremely agitated," he observed, an unreadable expression on his own handsome face. "Such a state of mind is hardly conducive toward excellent performances by mortals, therefore I shall add a further datum. When you are all victorious on my behalf, each of you will receive two blessings from me, one a thing you desire, the other a thing you have need of. Between the two, you will find yourself well repaid for having striven to the utmost for me."

"Why would *I* be given those blessings?" I asked at once, the churning inside me overriding the prudent silence I'd been trying to maintain. "If my skills and I have already been given to you by Bellid, your appreciation and thanks should be his rather than mine."

"Bellid and I have made other arrangements concerning my appreciation," Diin-tha said, a faint smile now curving the corners of his mouth. "You, not being a god, would have little understanding of what such an arrangement entails. However, your being mortal guarantees an appreciation of being rewarded for a service. Am I now to have your *willing* assistance, rather than little beyond your mere presence?"

The urge to ask why he didn't simply force willingness on me was almost overpowering, but I wasn't as completely Bellid's as I might have been. The gods do things in their own way for their own reasons, and those who question a beneficial way too often find one less easy to live with. I had very little interest in Diin-tha's game of conquest, but I also had very little choice about joining it.

"My willing assistance, such as it is, is now yours," I acknowledged with a small nod. "What skills I have will be exercised fully and enthusiastically on your behalf."

"Enthusiastically," the god repeated with something of a look of reproach, then he shook his head. "I'd wondered at Bellid's amusement when I presented my proposal to him, but now I wonder no longer. Your service will clearly be an experience I have not before encountered." He stared down at me again, possibly wondering if hitting me with a lightning bolt would do *too* much damage, then he sighed and turned to Fearin.

"The circle is now complete, High Master," Diin-tha said. "As that is so, I have certain instructions for your ears alone."

Since I had just reclaimed my seat on the floor weaving I thought I would have to get up again to give Fearin and the god privacy, but that turned out not to be necessary. The god went on speaking while Fearin nodded in understanding or asked an occasional question, but none of

the sound of the conversation reached the rest of us.

A glance around showed me that the others weren't even looking at the two, a gesture adding even more to the privacy of the conversation, and I had the distinct feeling the same thing had been done any number of times before. I felt tempted to try reading the words on the lips of the two, then decided it might be wiser to wait until I was more fully recovered before I tried the patience of the god any further. Mortals need all the strength they can bring to bear when they have to face the anger of the gods.

I expected the private conversation to go on for some time, and was faintly surprised when it didn't. Without warning the god returned himself to the exact center of our circle, and then the mist that had clung to him in graceful patches began to thicken again. As the mist thickened the giant form inside it faded, and within a matter of heartbeats both form and mist were completely gone. Those in the circle seemed unwilling to break the silence that held them, but Fearin came out of distraction to take care of the matter.

"Since the gathering is now over, you can all go back to your tents or to wherever you like," the man of Power said, then turned his head to look at me. "All, that is, but Aelana. There are a few things we need to discuss, so leave the guardsmen where they are. I'll dismiss them later." Even without looking at the others I could sense the hesitation in the four men who nevertheless got to their feet to leave. I had the distinct feeling they wanted to know what would be said between Fearin and me, but the High Master's attitude told them there was no room for argument. Rather than voice any protests the four filed out of the tent, and after a long moment of considering me Fearin showed a very faint smile.

"I've never before met anyone who was trained by the Inadni," he said, his tone odd. "Most of those who complete their training are apparently sent ... somewhere to do things outsiders never learn about, and the rest stay a while to work with others after them before going off wherever it is they go off to. Also, I understand that the trainees are usually male."

"As far as anyone knows, the trainees have *always* been male," I answered, considering the cup of wine I hadn't needed after all before putting it aside. "No one, including me, could understand why the Inadni chose a female, but they make a practice of never explaining themselves. And to answer the other question you implied, no, I didn't complete the training. The Inadni and I ... didn't get along."

"I see," Fearin said, the expression in his dark blue eyes now hooded, his hand stroking his short blond beard. "You didn't get along with the Inadni, but they still let you live. How far did you get in the training?"

"I achieved the eighteenth level before leaving," I said, then gave him a faint smile of my own.

"If that means anything to you, the Inadni don't keep secrets as well as they think they do."

"And you have no intention of explaining what it does mean," he said, something of faint annoyance beginning to tickle him. "How am I supposed to use your skills most effectively if you won't even tell me exactly what they are?"

"If I had to guess, I'd say you've heard as many whispered rumors about what Shadowborn are capable of as anyone else," I said, for the most part unimpressed with his annoyance. "For the purposes of this game you can consider the rumors all true, and if you have any specific questions about whether I can do something, all you have to do is ask. I won't lie no matter what the answer is."

"But those rumors are - " he began, deeply disturbed as he stopped the words in mid sentence. For a moment I thought he would change the subject, but he apparently decided against it.

"But those rumors are the next thing to unbelievable, not to mention designed to frighten the wits out of people," he said, studying me soberly. "Can you speak to the wild animals of the forest, for example, and at certain times become like them? Can you reach a man surrounded by guardsmen, kill him silently, then melt away again into the shadows? Can you create dazzling beauty or produce horrifying ugliness, as the situation or your own inclinations demand?"

"Yes." My one-word statement answered the questions that were only supposed to be examples, smiling again at the way Fearin reacted. This time disturbed was far too mild a description, but the look in the man's eyes made me lose the smile. "I can do all of those things and a number of others, especially now that Bellid is no longer angry with me. He took away my ability to do a lot of that when I left the Inadni without their permission, but now that the abilities are back you don't have to worry. I doubt if Diin-tha will let me do it to you or the others, at least until he has what he wants."

"I've never believed someone without the Power could do that much," he said, gesturing away something I'd said without losing the really deep disturbance he'd been showing. "Under other circumstances I might be tempted to doubt you, but with a god standing witness to the truth of what you're saying... I'd wondered why you hadn't managed to escape slavery sooner. Your god was angry with you."

"Yes," I said again, this time looking away from those serious blue eyes. "But you can stop feeling sorry for me. I expected nothing else when I left the Inadni, so I wasn't surprised. Was there anything else of vast importance that you wanted, or can I go back to my tent now?"

"So you use insolence and arrogance to keep people from reaching too close to you," he said, a calculating tone to the words. "You won't accept having someone feel sorry for you no matter what you've got to go through, not even if it's friendly concern rather than pity. Hasn't anyone ever told you how dangerous a defense reaction that is? If I didn't have the self control that I do, you'd already have gotten more than one good beating from me."

"Possibly if you used your Power," I said, turning my head to meet his level blue gaze and letting amusement color the words. "Without the Power you'd need those guardsmen you have stationed outside, and they'd have to be really good. If I didn't have the use of my skills they wouldn't have to be all that good - but you'd still need them."

"I can see you also *enjoy* insulting people on purpose," he growled, straightening a little where he sat in reaction to what I'd said. "If I ever decide to give you a good beating, I won't need the Power *or* those guardsmen. If you don't believe that, just keep pushing me."

He paused then, possibly to give me a chance to enjoy myself a little more, but I really was too tired. I could have defended myself if I'd had to, but it would be a good deal easier once I had more rest and food to add to my strength. Rather than saying anything I simply continued to hold his gaze, but that didn't do much to lighten his mood.

"Under certain circumstances, even the gods have more patience than men," I was told with the same growl, dark blue eyes glinting at me. "I think you'll have the opportunity to learn that. A few days from now, when all our preparations are complete, you'll be taken back to that city where you were held as a slave. You'll guide our people to the places they have to be, and then you'll see to the individual tasks I assign you. When you enter the city you'll be dressed and collared as a slave, so be prepared to also act like one."

"You expect me to accept being enslaved again?" I asked with a laugh that had absolutely no amusement in it, abruptly sitting up straighter. "If you do, you're in for a great disappointment. Now that I'm free again, I intend to stay that way."

"You'll only be pretending to be a slave," he answered with continuing annoyance, gesturing aside my refusal. "If you enter that city as a free woman, you run the risk of having someone recognize you as a runaway slave. If you're still ostensibly a slave, Prince Garam can always say he found you in the forest and is trying to return you to where you belong."

"Garam!" I said with more incredulity than I had earlier, wondering if the man of Power was losing his grip on reality. "Even if I did agree to pretend to being a slave, I'll be damned if I'd do it with *him* holding the chain. After the way he's been talking to me, I've already promised myself his blood. If you need a slave act all that badly, you can find someone else to take Garam's place."

"All right, girl, I can see it's time you were told exactly how things stand," Fearin said, abruptly back in complete calm control of himself. "You may be dedicated to Bellid and the possessor of

more skills than any of us completely understands, but you, just like the rest of us, are subject to the commands of Diin-tha. The god said you're to pretend to be a slave, and Prince Garam, because of our need to have *him* in the city, will be the one you pretend to be a slave *with*. He would be the one even if we didn't need him in the city; he won't have any trouble *treating* you like a slave, whereas Prince Talasin and Ranander would. If you try to refuse this command, you'll find a good deal more than the beating you would have had from *me*. Do I need to go into details?"

Once again I didn't answer him in words, but my silence was answer enough. Even those who had no truck with the gods knew what it could mean to face their wrath; I, who knew better than most and not simply through personal experience, also knew that a quiet, final ending would not be what I faced. Had it been, I would have gotten to my feet and happily left the tent and the camp as well.

"Prince Garam will be under strict orders not to cause you any harm," Fearin said after a pair of moments, and I realized I was no longer looking at him. "Above that our attack won't be long in coming after you've entered the city, so you shouldn't have to wear the collar beyond the length of a single day. And just remember: once the city is ours, you'll be free to ... go looking for anyone there you feel you'd really like to see again."

"Except in certain specific cases, I'm not allowed to take revenge," I said, still staring at the place that had been the center of the circle. "No one in the city meets those requirements, so it's a waste of time wishing they did. Was there anything else?"

"No," he said, this time sounding definitely weary. "No, right now there's nothing else. I'll tell you what else I need you to do just before you leave for the city. Go back to your tent and sleep well."

Since there was nothing else to say, I simply got to my feet and left. I spent the short walk back to my tent realizing all over again just how much I hated to be pitied.

Chapter 4

It wasn't a very pretty mid morning as we rode through the forest, but the threat of rain didn't bother anyone in the party. The others were undoubtedly thinking about the city we rode toward, but certainly not in the same way I was thinking about it. This was only the fourth day since I'd escaped from the place, and to say I was reluctant about going back, even in pretend slavery, was like saying the world contained many unexplained mysteries. The words were true, but didn't tell the story by half.

The previous three days had seen quite a lot in the way of military preparation, with a bustle that gave me the feeling everyone was running in a different direction all the time at top speed. Talasin, Lokkel, and Garam spent most of their time with the troops of guardsmen who were spread out thicker through the forest than I'd first believed. Fearin divided his time between the troops, the men leading them, and setting the air atingle from inside his tent, and Ranander was either with Fearin or carrying messages for the High Master.

I was the only one who hadn't chased hither and yon with grim purpose, but that didn't mean I hadn't been given orders by Fearin. I was ordered to sleep and eat as much as I possibly could, which took away something of the pleasure I should have felt over doing just that.

The ground rose under our horses hooves as we angled away from the stream, and a small covey of birds began to scold at us from the surrounding trees. Aside from the creak of leather and the soft breathing of men and mounts, the birds and the hoofbeats were the only exceptions to the silence all around. In an innocent, unknowing way it was almost peaceful, just like the last few days had been peaceful - almost.

"Things are too hectic right now, Aelana, but just you wait," Ranander had told me once, taking time out from his busy schedule to reassure me. "As soon as that city falls to us, you

and I will have the time to get to know each other a little better. And I'm really curious to know what Shadowborn means."

He'd flashed me a grin and then he'd hurried off, happily continuing on with Fearin's errands. I'd found myself standing there shaking my head, wondering at the same time if I'd finally found a real, live, beneficial use for the horror, fear, and revulsion that was the truth about Shadowborn. For some reason beyond my comprehension Ranander had decided to sleep with me, and the only things that had kept him from carrying out his decision - or at least trying to carry it out - was at first my weakened condition and then the preparations for war. Since I didn't want to have to hurt that strangely innocent boy-man, I was actually relieved that the details of what I was would send him hurrying out of my life.

Details which would be forthcoming from Fearin, as soon as the High Master had the time to pass them on. The afternoon before I'd been invited to the man's tent, to be offered wine and told what I'd need to do the following day.

"No, I haven't discussed your abilities with any of the others yet," he'd said when I put the question a bit impatiently, gesturing for me to sit on his golden floor weaving and help myself to a cup of wine. He seemed to be ignoring my unhappiness with him, not knowing or not caring how hard it was waiting for the grand announcement to be made.

"Why *haven't* you told them?" I'd demanded, sitting down but doing nothing about taking wine.

"Don't you think they have a right to know what they're sharing a camp with? Will you be happier if one of them finds out the hard way?"

"First *I* have to find out what we're sharing a camp with," he'd returned as he'd leaned one elbow down to a cushion, the words definitely on the arid side. "Since the only one who knows for certain refuses to part with more than hints and innuendoes, I've begun to research the matter in my own way. By the time this skirmish is over I should know something definite to pass on, which I will then do. Until that time, I don't think any of us has to worry about accidents. Our Guardian is the sort to anticipate and prevent any unnecessary ... complications."

"Complications," I'd echoed in a dissatisfied mutter, not caring much for the way he dismissed what could turn out to be a real problem. "And isn't 'skirmish' a rather lighthearted description for the taking of a city? Your force won't be the first to try getting through and over those walls. What makes you think they'll have any better luck than those who came before them?"

"Those who came before my troops didn't have *me* to help," he'd answered with what had seemed more like amusement than boasting, then he paused to sip his wine before continuing.

"You'll be surprised to see what a little Power can do in the way of aiding a campaign. Or, possibly, I should say you *won't* be seeing it, since you'll be occupied with another task during our attack. Why don't you take some wine and then we can get down to details."

"Let's start with a detail about wine," I'd said, finally seeing that I would have to explain why I kept refusing his hospitality in so rude a way. "I can drink a very small amount of wine without worrying, but if I tried to swill it the way the rest of you do your ... Guardian would have to be here in person to stop what would probably happen. One of the first things the Inadni teach is a ... reaching out, an intensification of everything you see, hear, feel - in any and every way experience. A whisper is like a shout, a glimmer is like a blaze - and a cup of wine is like a keg. I can handle the cup, but after that things start to get fuzzy and uncontrollable."

"Uncontrollable," he'd repeated the way I had, a peculiar expression crossing his face briefly before he had it in hand again. "I see. Or at least I'm beginning to get a glimmer. If you say you don't want something, it's best to ask before insisting, just in case you have a reason other than stubbornness for refusing. I'll be sure to remember that."

He'd examined me briefly with a stare then, possibly waiting to see if I had anything to add; when he was sure I didn't, he'd nodded and continued.

"As I said, it's time you knew the details of what will be happening tomorrow. A group of our people will enter or have already entered the city, and there are certain places they have to be.

Some of those places, like the guardsmen's barracks and the wing of the palace housing the city Administrators, aren't hard to find so the men assigned to those places will manage on their own. If they have to ask directions they can do it openly, and no one will get suspicious. Other places, however, won't be the same, and those are the places you'll be guiding them to." "If too many of those places are in the better part of the city, you might have to find yourself another guide," I'd said. "I was a slave, remember, and not the kind who's allowed to wander as she likes. From time to time I was put to work in the city and those locations I remember how to reach, but for places I've never been... "

I'd shrugged to show him there was nothing I could do to make the truth sweeter, but he'd waved a hand in unconcern.

"The places we're most interested in are maintained with slave labor, so that shouldn't be a problem," he'd said, unperturbed by the suggestion that I might not be as useful as he'd expected. "Ranander has the complete list, and as soon as he gets here with it we'll all go over it together. Right now we need to discuss how you'll guide a group of men to different places without someone getting suspicious."

He'd paused to swallow his wine again, and it's possible I wasn't supposed to notice that he was also studying me again. For that reason alone I'd kept my expression the way it had been, but inside I'd been more than annoyed. So it was *Ranander* who had the list of places I was supposed to guide people to, and for that reason alone Ranander would be here when Fearin asked if I knew how to get to those places. Ranander, who *knew* when people were telling the truth - and when they were lying.

Remembering that almost made me hiss my breath out in vexation, and that despite the relative peace and quiet we rode through. It had been fairly clear that Fearin didn't want to spend time wondering if I really didn't know how to get to the places I would claim as unfamiliar, or if I was actually trying to prove my pretending to be a slave would be a waste of time. The fact that I'd already thought of that very same point made it all doubly annoying, but there hadn't been anything I could do to take advantage of the idea. Insisting that Ranander not be there would have been tantamount to announcing that I intended being as truthful as a southern caravan merchant.

"Prince Garam and I developed the plan together, and now it's up to you to find fault with it if you can," Fearin had continued after his pause. "Having a slave guide a group of free men would be unusual enough, but having that same slave guide men who aren't supposed to know each other would be bound to make a city spy follow along to see what was going on. You do know that the city uses paid spies to keep an eye on its people and find out what they're up to." "Everyone in the city knows that," I'd answered his half-question, making a face over the situation. "Those of us who were slaves found it really funny, to think that all those nobly wonderful free people were being watched as closely and as carefully as those free people watched us. The only difference between us seemed to be that we were in cages and they weren't."

"I understand there were numerous times when that distinction abruptly didn't apply," Fearin said with a sound of derision, shifting on his elbow cushion. "If those spies find *anyone* doing what they shouldn't be doing, the city usually ends up with more gold in its treasury because of a fine, or the ownership of another slave because of the gravity of the crime. One of the few things they don't bother people about is how they treat privately-owned slaves, and there's an excellent reason for that. If people spend their anger on abusing their own property, they're less likely to notice how unhappy they are and then turn on the city and its officials."

"Why do I have the feeling that what you just said is more significant than analytical?" I wondered aloud, keeping my eyes on him while I slowly straightened where I sat. "And why don't I like it even one little bit?"

"We never expected you to like it, so that part of it is no surprise," Fearin said, this time trying to keep from showing his amusement. "I do find myself delighted, however, at how quickly you

jump to the heart of a matter. Since one of the few things no one will pay attention to is the disciplining of a slave, that's the signal you and Prince Garam will use to let the others know when a particular location has been reached. You won't be telling them anything, only showing them something no one else will understand the significance of."

"You've decided that Garam and I will take turns beating each other?" I said as if I really believed that was what he'd meant and was therefore considering the idea. "Don't you think people will wonder every time it gets to be *my* turn? After all, you said *we'd* be using that signal, so - "

"So you thought you'd pester me with nonsense to show how well you like the idea *and* my choice of words," he interrupted, not nearly as annoyed as I'd expected him to be. "You're waiting for me to say that slaves don't *do* the disciplining, they just find themselves on the receiving end of it, and then you'll announce that you won't be allowing that. Let's save ourselves some time and effort and consider all that already said."

"You're taking all the fun out of it," I commented as I narrowed my eyes at him, knowing he was up to something but not knowing what. "If you don't try to talk me out of my refusal, how can I tell you the various things I'd like to suggest you do with yourself?"

"I'm glad to see you're feeling stronger than you were the last time we talked," he commented back, no more than a faint glitter showing in the blue of his eyes. "You're now willing to take the chance of getting me angry, but there's really no need for that. Prince Garam will only be *pretending* to discipline you, just as you'll be pretending to be a slave, and all you two will have to do is make sure it looks real even though it won't be."

"And I'm supposed to believe that?" I asked with a laugh that was, to a large extent, real amusement. "You tell me Garam will be gentle as a loving mother, and I'm supposed to be backward enough to believe it? As soon as I stop laughing I think I'm going to feel really insulted."

"Aelana, Prince Garam *can't* do you any true harm," Fearin said in exasperation, straightening off the cushion in an effort to put strength behind his words. "There are five major locations and three minor ones that he and his men have to be guided to, and then you have a job of your own to see to, an important job you'll be attending to by yourself. If Prince Garam does something to keep you from being able to see to all that, don't you think our Guardian will find out and ... remonstrate with him?"

He hung the demanding question in the air in front of me, giving me the chance to examine it and then put forth reasonable objections. He didn't believe I would *find* any reasonable objections, of course, and in that he had an excellent point. As frightened as Garam was of the god Diin-tha, I couldn't quite see the fighter doing something that would be guaranteed to anger the god. It was a very strong argument in favor of believing, but I couldn't quite bring myself to accept the matter as being as simple as that.

"If Garam isn't right now looking for a way around that restriction, it's only because he's already found one," I'd answered sourly at last, letting my gaze lock to Fearin's. "The only thing I can say in answer is to give you my solemn word on something, and then let *you* decide whether or not the plan gets changed. If Garam hurts me I *will* take his life, even if that taking ruins your chances to win the city. If you're willing to go ahead with the plan on that basis, whatever happens can't be blamed on things having been hidden from you. Do you understand and agree?"

"What I understand is that you're much too young to be that untrusting, not to mention unemotionally bloodthirsty," he'd said, his frown as disturbed as it had been the last time we'd talked. "Have you any idea what the god would do to someone who deliberately ruined his plans? Even if he wasn't watching closely enough to disallow it in the first place?"

"All a mortal can do is try," I'd answered before leaning down to an elbow cushion of my own, deliberately ignoring the first part of his question. "If the try doesn't get you anywhere, you concentrate on staying alive so you can try a second time. And a third, and a fourth. And if my

attitudes come as a surprise to you, that only shows you haven't known many people who were once slaves. Slavery tends to color your attitudes in a very permanent way."

"If you don't think I know this goes beyond slavery, then it's my turn to be insulted," he'd said with a snort, but still leaned down to his cushion again. "Once we have this city business settled and behind us, you and I are going to spend some time talking. It's essential that I know what moves my people, and if necessary I'll ask the god's help. Think about what you'll be saying in answer to my questions, but don't waste time trying to think of a way to refuse answering. One way or another you'll be telling me everything I want to know."

His dark blue eyes had been hard with immovable decision, all but challenging me to start a real argument by disagreeing. If I hadn't been so impatient to be out of his tent I would have done just that, but there was no real need to get into it then and there. Time enough to tell him to mind his own business if the time ever came when he actually tried to ask his questions.

"All right, let's get back to our original topic, and this time finish the discussion," he'd said after a moment, his attitude having turned somewhat more brisk. "You and Prince Garam will spend a bit of time practicing tonight, to be sure your performances will be convincing, and the arrangement will work this way: whenever you reach a location on the list, you'll either make a strenuous effort to escape, or you'll try a half-hearted attack on the prince. Either attempt will cause him to discipline you, and then the two of you will continue on to the next location. The men assigned to the various locations will drop off in the proper places, and after the last place has been passed you and the prince will part company to see to your individual tasks."

"You mean he won't have to be guided to his own destination?" I'd asked, still not the least bit happy with the arrangements they'd made. "What a pity. He'll have to give up on his last chance to ... discipline me."

"Aelana, I've already given you my word that he won't harm you," he'd come back with a sigh, half weariness, half impatience. "I've also told you *why* he won't harm you, and you've given your word to me on what will happen if he harms you anyway. What more do you need to soothe away that sharp edge that's keeping you from settling down to work?"

"Another plan," I'd said succinctly, but Fearin had ignored that as nothing more than the final effort before surrender that it was. I'd had no choice at all about going along with them, and that was what undoubtedly bothered me most about their arrangements.

Somewhat earlier one of our group had ridden ahead and left us, and now two more men did the same. Those were three of the men we would meet/not meet when we got to the city, three among more than a dozen who had already joined the usual, steady stream of new arrivals to the city. The city, called Faerza by strangers, Lettitu-Suam by those who were citizens, was large enough to attract a great number of men - and women - who were eager to make their fortunes amid the protection of her stone walls. Most of them ended up losing the few coppers or solitary silver coin they'd intended using as a stake, some ended up enslaved before they could run, one or two occasionally found the fortune they'd dreamed of. Faerza was hard on innocent new arrivals, but her citizens made sure never to mention that aloud.

"A bit closer, I think," Garam said to the guardsman riding beside him, one of those who were there to escort the rest of us and who would then go back to camp. The man nodded as we continued on, and neither he nor Garam looked back to see if everyone was following.

It hadn't been long, the previous day, before Ranander had shown up with his list of places in the city. The three of us went over the list together, and it turned out there was only one minor location I didn't know how to reach. Fearin came up with an alternate that I did know, the substitution was made, and then the stops were arranged so that we could take them in their turn rather than tramp back and forth all over the city. The man of Power had had me memorize the list in its proper order, and then Ranander had taken the list away to show it to those who would need to know what was going on.

Shortly after that Garam had arrived, impatient to get the practicing over and done with so he could go back to important work. His brown eyes had barely acknowledged my presence, his

sandy-haired head held high as he'd accepted a cup of wine from Fearin, but I'd sat there on the floor weaving without being bothered at all. Under the laws of the Inadni, Garam had already established himself as someone who might be dealt with without hesitation; as soon as the proper time came I would see that it happened.

The practice session was not at all difficult for Garam, but the same couldn't be said about my part. Once we got through the gates Garam would push me ahead of him, to "keep a better eye on me in the bustling crowds," and I would have to pretend to be choosing directions at random. Garam would be strolling along behind me just seeing the sights, and every once in a while would have the bother of keeping me from escaping or turning and attacking him. At those times he would supposedly hit me, backhanded or straight on, and then I would have to recoil from the blow before it actually landed.

If I was fast enough to do it. If at any time I *wasn't* fast enough, I would pay for the lack by really getting hit.

"Which might have to happen anyway, if one of the city spies takes too close an interest in what you're doing," Fearin had fretted, giving Garam a brooding look with quite a lot of frustration in it. "If one of the spies sees a slave getting hit without any bruises or blood to show for the effort there could be trouble. You might swing at a slave and miss once, but the same thing happening three or more times in a row would make a stone wall suspicious."

"If I see anyone watching too closely I'll just have to soothe their suspicions," Garam had answered with bland satisfaction, a faint smile on his broad face. "It would never do to give ourselves away when the problem can be so easily avoided."

"There's no doubt our Guardian would want it exactly that way, Prince Garam," Fearin had returned, a sudden matching blandness in his attitude. "I have, however, been given certain very strict instructions regarding this former slave, and once the city is ours we'll be questioned about how well we complied with those instructions. Your answers will be listened to by our Guardian himself, Prince, and for your sake they had better be absolutely truthful. I believe you know what will happen if he discovers they aren't."

The smile had disappeared from Garam's face then, and a faint pallor had seemed ready to replace the expression entirely. The fighter had apparently known exactly what Fearin referred to, but nothing in the way of words had come out of him. Garam and I had gone back to practicing after that, and the subject hadn't come up again.

Darkness had already fallen by the time we decided we had our routine down well enough to go with, and then Garam had simply taken himself back to the rest of the preparations for the next day. After Fearin's warning Garam had taken more care in how close he came to really hitting me, and once he was gone the High Master had seemed to be in better spirits. He'd created a meal for the two of us, had insisted we discuss nothing but inconsequentialities while we ate, and only after the meal was over had he gone into the details of the task that was mine after I had finished guiding men around the city...

"All right, this should be close enough," Garam announced from the front of our group, reining in his mount as he looked around. "If we go much farther we'll begin to run out of forest."

The head guardsman beside him nodded a casual acknowledgment of the order, and the entire group came to a halt. I'd had opportunity to notice over the last few days that the guardsmen tended to obey Garam, but not with what might be described as enthusiasm. The fighter was good at planning, very good and very clever, but when it came to getting men to follow those plans Garam couldn't do it. That part of the job belonged to Talasin, and once I'd seen the way the guardsmen cheered his tritest speech then jumped to volunteer for the most hazardous duty, I no longer had to wonder what the second fighter's talent was.

"Tell Fearin the slave and I will reach the city well before dark," Garam said to the head guardsman as he handed over his reins before dismounting. "If we aren't all in place by the second bell of the night watch, it's only because we're dead. And we won't be dead, not with tomorrow's victory celebration to look forward to."

Some of the guardsmen around us chuckled, but not the way they would have if it had been Talasin making the comment. I did my own dismounting while Garam took his pack from the horse he'd been riding, and then we two stood watching as the guardsmen turned around and went back the way we'd come. Once they were well out of earshot, the fighter stepped up closer to me.

"Put your arms behind you, slave," he said in his usual, arrogant way, once again sounding faintly impatient. "Since the others can't do anything until we get there, I won't have you wasting any time. If one or more of my men get hauled in for fining as idlers, I'll make sure the Guardian knows it was your fault."

The threat he used was doubly interesting, doubly in that he wasn't promising to do anything to me himself, and he didn't go into any details about what the god would do in his stead. He seemed to think I already knew what would be done and considered that enough to make me jump the way he would jump. In a way I *did* have some idea as to what could be done, but I wasn't about to react to it the way he did. Without moving terribly fast I put my arms behind me, and the gesture wasn't lost on Garam.

"I've heard that you defy men and gods alike, you Kenossi," he growled, the first indication I'd had that he knew something about my origins. "I've always been of the opinion that the reason you make such useless slaves is that none of you have ever belonged to men who really know how to manage slaves. Possibly the opportunity will soon arise where I can prove the argument."

His hands closed the iron cuffs around my wrists with a double click then, and it took quite a bit of self control not to give him the satisfaction of seeing me pull at the shackles. He'd said what he had in an effort to get me mad, I knew, but not for the simple sake of baiting the slave. Part of the agreement Fearin had insisted on said that if at any time during our pretend conflict I attacked Garam with the intention of doing him real harm, Garam was then free to do to me the equivalent of whatever I'd managed to do to him. The fighter wanted an excuse to hurt me, and was therefore going about laying the groundwork that would make the episode no one's fault but mine.

"With only a single link between these cuffs, you won't have much freedom of movement," Garam remarked as he made sure the things were locked tight before coming around to stand in front of me. "I certainly hope you won't have trouble dodging your punishment because of them."

The grin he showed at the thought was one of eager anticipation of exactly the opposite, but he didn't waste any time pushing at the point. Instead he took the slave collar Fearin had supplied and closed it around my throat, then examined me critically while adjusting the long length of braided leather tied to the collar's lead-ring.

"Now you're looking more the way your sort should," he said, his eyelids drooping in lazy satisfaction as he smiled. "I'm even enjoying seeing you in that rag Fearin supplied with the rest. You may be an ugly bitch, but your body's starting to look not bad at all."

Very casually and with no hesitation his hand went to the ragged tear down the front of the faded green slave rag I wore, and a heartbeat later the hand was inside the tear and holding my flesh. My own hands curled to fists beneath the cuffs imprisoning my wrists and my mind cursed silently at the softened roundness just beginning to return to my body, but even those reactions were carefully kept where Garam couldn't see them. I endured his groping fondle for a moment long enough to show my extreme disinterest, and then I shook my head.

"If you try to mark down *this* waste of time as being my fault I'll laugh in your face," I told him in the sort of cold and deadly voice one was supposed to use to a blood enemy. "I thought only very young boys engaged in this kind of nonsense. Grown men are supposed to have more of a sense of duty."

His sun-darkened skin flushed enough for me to notice, but he didn't snatch his hand back like the boy I'd accused him of being. His dark eyes smoldered with the teeth-gritting wish that he

might hurt me, but something - like the memory of Fearin's threat - kept him from doing it. He let his damp palm move over my breast another time or three, and then he withdrew his hand as slowly and deliberately as he'd slid it in.

"Once we've achieved the final victory and the god has no more use for you, that's when you'll find yourself really belonging to me," the fighter growled, unwavering decision hardening his features. "You think you know what slavery is like, but you won't really know until that time arrives. You can take that as a blood-oath, girl, because that's exactly what it is."

He wrapped the braided leather around his left fist while he continued to stare at me, and then he turned and started off through the woods in the direction of the road. His yank on the leather jerked me after him, but not in the sort of frightened state of mind he would have preferred. His blood-oath pleased me rather than filled me with fear, primarily because I had already sworn a blood-oath of my own. When all that fighting and nonsense was over then he and I would see whose oath was upheld, but right now we had a "pretense" to take care of...

Chapter 5

It didn't take long to reach the road beyond the woods, but the walk along the road to the city was dusty, hot, and boring. It would have been worse if the sun had been high in the sky, but once we left the shade of the trees we had the clouds to keep us from squinting and broiling. Garam strode along at a pace that was just a little too fast to be comfortable, his pull on the leather adding to the chafing of the collar around my neck.

It took a small effort to keep up with Garam, but I had the distinct impression he wasn't trying to force me into asking him to slow down. If you've never been dragged along a road with your arms cuffed close behind you, you'll probably have trouble understanding exactly what it takes to keep up.

I made sure not to look at the fields that opened up to either side of the road beyond the forest, and by the time we reached the city I was close to believing those fields weren't there at all. I paid more attention to the people on the road, those heading toward the city and those walking or riding away from it.

Even at this time of day the new arrivals were fairly large in number, and Garam's dusty gray tunic, darker gray trousers, and black boots didn't bring a second look. His sword merited a glance or two, but even that was hardly unusual. Mercenaries often came to the city looking for hire, and if they were any good they usually found it.

The guardsmen at the gate made no effort to stop anyone from entering, and were really only there to make sure the wrong someones didn't leave. Slaves were kept chained and free men with silver or gold came and went as they liked, but those who were bondsmen - not quite slaves but not quite free either - were another story.

Bondsmen weren't supposed to leave the city until their bonds were worked off, and if one of them tried it he usually didn't get very far. It was the practice of the citizens to shave the head of any bondsman - or bondswoman - indentured to them, and anyone leaving the city without a retinue had to show a full head of hair. If they couldn't they'd damned well better be able to show an official pass instead.

Garam passed through the gate and continued on a short way into the hurrying crowds, his head turning this way and that as he took in the first sights of the city, and then he stopped and used the braided leather to pull me up beside him.

"I wouldn't put it past some of this scum to cut my leather, steal you away, and then sell you off, slave," he said, talking to me but not looking at me. "If I thought you'd bring a decent price I'd sell you myself, but you won't so I won't bother. At least you save me the price of a street

slut - as long as I do you in the dark. Walk ahead of me, and none of that nonsense you tried on the road this morning."

He gave me a little push to set me in front of him, and just that easily the game was started. I let the push send me in the proper direction while making it seem as if I just happened to be going that way, and as we walked I flexed the muscles of my arms against the position the cuffs held them in. Garam probably expected me to be stiff and in pain by the time he freed me, but I'd been doing the exercises at intervals since the cuffs had first been closed on me to make certain there would be no trouble at all. It was a trick all Kenossi knew, and was so subtle a thing that even Garam, who walked directly behind me, never noticed it was being done.

When we reached our first destination I set my neck against the collar and tried to pull the leather lead out of Garam's hand. He let the leather slide a short way, then tightened his grip to yank we back to where I belonged, a faint look of annoyance touching his features. He aimed a backhanded slap at me which came very close to connecting, but I was able to roll with the blow and only seemed to get hit. After that I was shoved back to my place in the lead, and we went on.

Deeper into the city the crowds weren't as thick as they'd been near the gate, but the streets were a far cry from being thinly populated. Twice more we went through our routine of me trying to escape, and each time we reached a place where men of the army had been assigned I tried to figure out *why* they'd been assigned there.

The closest we would come to the central marketing section would be two twisty streets away, and there weren't even any guardsmen's kiosks in the designated locations. I hadn't been told why Fearin wanted men there, only that he did, and asking straight out had gotten me no more than a secret smile and a finger to the High Master's lips. His reasons weren't to be discussed, but presumably the men who followed casually with the crowds, some of whom I recognized, would know what to do when the time came.

As we approached our fourth stop, I decided it was time to use the variation of attempted attack. The area was wider than the others had been, a place of old buildings of wood that had sagged back far enough to allow small street stalls to be set up in front of them.

Hawkers sat or stood beneath tattered awnings of faded cloth, shouting out their wares or haggling with those who were trying to buy. What they offered was far below the quality of produce and goods to be found in the central market square, but because of that the offerings were also cheaper. The people all around sweated in the cloudy, oppressive heat, but were too involved with their selling and shopping and looking to take notice.

I waited until more than half the stalls were behind us before making my move, only fleetingly wondering what would happen if I actually did manage to escape. Before being enslaved I'd lived for a short time in this part of the city, which was the reason why I knew it to begin with. Even with my arms locked behind me I could be gone from sight in a dozen heartbeats of time, and then I could -

Spend the rest of my time waiting for Diin-tha to drop a building or a tree on my head. I shook a strand of damp hair out of my eyes in annoyance, annoyed that braiding hadn't kept the hair out of my way, annoyed with the people all around who didn't spend an instant's worth of concern on a slave, annoyed with myself for almost forgetting I was only pretending to be a slave. What I was doing right now was playing a game, but the taste and memory of slavery doesn't fade quite as quickly as some people think. It takes being a slave to really know what slavery is about, but the experience usually touches all the wrong lives.

Which led me to take a short breath and then turn on one of those who would really profit from the experience of being a slave. Garam was still pretending to be absorbed in sightseeing, but he was definitely watching me out of the corners of his eyes. That meant I didn't have to worry about surprising him, so instead of hesitating I went right for it.

I used my right foot to kick down hard on the braided leather, pulling it out of his hand, then shifted to follow through with a left-footed kick to his middle. Originally they'd wanted me to

run after kicking the leather loose, but that would have put too much risk of success in the escape attempt. I'm faster than most at kicking and running, and for a fighter Garam was slower than he should have been.

Rather than run, then, I kicked at Garam to give him a chance to stop me. If I'd really been trying to escape I would have kicked to cripple him, but our Guardian Diin-tha wouldn't have liked my doing that. I had to make the try look as clumsy as possible, an amateurish effort Garam would have no trouble coping with - and that's when things started to go wrong. The hard-packed dirt of the street had a hole gouged out of it, and my deliberate clumsiness threw my balance off just enough to let the hole get the better of me.

Garam used his right arm to block my kick the way he was supposed to, but that was the last thing that went the way it should have. With his face twisted in supposed anger he swung that same arm in an arc to his left, then brought it across to hit me on the backswing. I was *supposed* to roll with that blow and probably could have salvaged the roll if my arms hadn't been behind me, but my arms *were* behind me so I couldn't do any salvaging. Garam's hand smashed into my face as I frantically tried to keep from falling, and then I was flying back and to one side to land hard in the dirt.

For a short time the entire city swung in a slow circle around me as I lay there, memory of the surprise in Garam's eyes the last thing I could remember clearly. I wasn't even aware of having hit the ground, only of the pain that came after contact, and my entire left side felt smashed. As I shook my head to drive the dizziness away I didn't think anything really was smashed, but it sure as hell felt like it.

My vision began to clear after the headshake so I looked up, just in time to see Garam start toward me. He seemed to be fighting to look furious rather than worried, and despite the pain that observation amused me. I'd been determined to kill him if he hurt me and he'd been determined to do it anyway, but here I lay cursing at my own clumsiness and there he strode worrying about the state of my health. The situation was the sort to make the gods roar out their laughter, which was why I had such a low opinion of the sense of humor of deities.

And then, of course, to the certain delight of the gods, things got worse. Garam was, at most, two strides from me when a shadow fell across my body and I had to look way up to see whose shadow it was. Most of the people in the crowds had either laughed or ignored the matter when Garam hit me, but the man standing very tall to my right was neither laughing nor ignoring. He stood looking across at Garam with a very ugly expression on his face, something the fighter noticed quickly enough to stop a pace and a half away.

"You seem to enjoy knocking girls around," the stranger rumbled to Garam, his deep voice very cold. "It probably makes it better for your sort that her arms are tied. If they weren't it might not have been safe enough for you to hit her."

Garam's skin darkened as he fought to control his temper, and I had to grudge him the admission that he didn't look as nervous as most would be in his position. The stranger was really big, broad as well as tall, wearing supple leather leggings which disappeared into high, soft-soled boots, both of a dark reddish-brown. Rather than wearing a tunic the man stood bare-chested, and the array of weapons closed around his waist added to the belief that this was a barbarian of some kind from the hinterlands. His long blond hair was close to the color of Fearin's, but his blue eyes were much lighter and he wore nothing of a beard.

"That's not a girl I was knocking around," Garam said after a moment, his head high, his gaze locked to the stranger's. "That's a slave lying there in the dirt, *my* slave, and I can do anything I damned well please to her. If you're having trouble understanding that, I'll be glad to ask some of the city guardsmen to explain the law to you."

The last thing we wanted was to get involved with the city guardsmen, but the stranger didn't know that. He may have been a barbarian, but the way he tensed just a little showed he knew the trouble he'd have if guardsmen *were* called. His left palm caressed the hilt of one of the two swords he wore, just as though he were considering starting a fight anyway, but abruptly he

came to a different decision.

"All right, then I'll buy her from you," he stated, apparently seeing nothing of the shocked vexation ghosting for a tick across Garam's face. "From the way you treat her she can't be worth much to you, so name your price."

I felt the absurd urge to get to my feet and tell that stranger to mind his own business, but that wouldn't have helped anything at all. I glanced at Garam to see a very odd look on his face, and had the sudden conviction that he was laughing inside. If he named a price and the stranger was able to meet it, would Diin-tha be able to accuse Garam of deliberately selling me? The possibility really seemed to be tempting him, but then he must have remembered that I hadn't finished my job as guide and I had another job to do after that. He raised a hand to rub his face as he studied the stranger, and then he showed a small smile as he shrugged.

"Oh, but this slave *is* worth quite a lot to me," the fighter assured the stranger, a smooth greasiness now in his voice that every seller in that market would have recognized. "The only question is, how much is she worth to *you*?"

"You expect to walk away with every copper I have," the stranger said very flatly, showing he wasn't as innocent as the average barbarian who visited the city. "I'll tell you right now what I'm prepared to pay, and there won't be any bargaining. One silver piece."

"That's not good enough," Garam answered, his expression deliberately neutral, most likely in an effort to keep the stranger from drawing on him. "If you change your mind and decide later that she's worth more after all, I won't be hard to find. Right now you can step back away from my slave."

The stranger's head went up even higher as his jaw tightened, and for a tick I believed we had a fight on our hands. I was trying to figure out how I might mix in without giving the game away when the gods decided they'd had enough fun at our expense and it was time to let us get on with what we were supposed to be doing. The people on the street suddenly began to move out of the way of a section of guardsmen who were marching in rank, and with a quick glance in their direction the stranger turned fast and slid his way deeper into the swirling, surrounding crowd. Despite his size the man was quickly gone, and then Garam was bending over me.

"Mark my words, he'll be back with a higher offer," the fighter chortled, mostly to cover the almost-gentle way he lifted me to my feet. "That sort always has to meddle, and he won't be happy until it's his own throat you're jumping for. It's a shame his eyesight's so poor, but his loss will certainly be my gain."

The few people who had gathered at the prospect of a fight chuckled their agreement with what Garam had said, then they drifted away with good-natured disappointment. With the lead-leather in his hand the fighter headed off at a stroll in the direction opposite to the one the stranger had taken, but his out-loud playacting wasn't yet over with.

"Yes, as soon as he meets my price you'll be his, girl," he said with a snicker, moving slowly so that he might watch my face. "They say barbarians are hard on the women they take, but the women seem to love it. Are you ready to love it?"

I showed him my teeth with a very low snarl, and that was enough to let him laugh in triumph. He'd finally succeeded in forcing me to acknowledge one of his sallies, a reaction I'd given him on purpose in the hope that it would then be out of his system. Being back on my feet and walking was bringing out the aches I had from the fall, and all I wanted was to get on with that guiding job until it was finished.

Since Garam was leading me in the direction we had to go anyway I hadn't resisted, but suddenly he turned a corner to the right that took us into a dead end between an abandoned stall and the blank back end of a splintery wooden building. There was barely enough room for us to stand facing one another in the garbage that had accumulated back here, but the fighter raised his hand in a demand for silence, slid back to the corner to peer around it, then returned to stand opposite me.

"We can only stay here for a handful of ticks, so tell me quickly," he whispered while

inspecting me narrowly. "How badly were you hurt?"

"I was bruised worse than this during my first Trial as a Life Seeker," I answered in a matching whisper, faintly surprised that he was bothering to ask. "You don't have to worry, I can still do what I'm supposed to."

"That bruise on your face may make it harder to stay unnoticed at the Guest Pavilion," he grumbled, not as pleased with his handiwork as he should have been. "I thought you weren't going to have any trouble keeping out of my way?"

"Our Guardian must like *you* better than he likes me," I said with a shrug, not caring to make any more of an excuse than that. "Don't you think we ought to get back to it?"

"After I take care of our supposed reason for being in here," he said, still not in any way happy with me. "And from now on we'll be doing things differently. When you reach the next location, don't try to escape or attack me. Let something catch your eye that you slow down to stare at, and I'll curse at you for almost tripping me, then shove at you to get you moving again. That will do for the signal, and should also make sure I don't have to turn down any more offers for you. I was able to do it once, but a second offer might prove too tempting to resist."

He gave me a very bland look as he picked up the collar leather he'd dropped, then turned his back on me and moved a few steps to the right, deeper into the alley. I didn't know what he was doing until I heard the sound of water striking the wood of the old building, and with complete understanding of his prepared excuse for stepping into the alley came a reason for giving thanks that he'd thought of it to begin with.

The head that edged around the corner from the street belonged to a narrow-faced, scruffy specimen, but one who had let a hint of cruel power show briefly on his face. The man was without doubt a city spy, but his abrupt disappointment showed that he'd expected a scene very different from the one he was looking at. The smell in the alley said it was far from unusual for men to stop here to relieve themselves, and the infraction was so minor that it wasn't even worth the spy's time to report Garam for breaking the law. The head shook once in total dismissal before withdrawing, having no idea that I'd seen it checking up on us, and that was the end of *that* particular suspicion.

When Garam finished up his excuse for our being in the alley, we continued on our way. Twice I had trouble finding something sufficiently interesting to stare at when we reached a location, so the first time I used the face of a very old man, and the second a deep rut in the dirt that could only have been made by something very heavy. Our new arrangement worked out well, though, but only after I realized I'd have to help out the shoves I got. Garam was apparently trying to make sure nothing else happened to me, and that was a point of view I didn't care to argue with.

The shadows of the end of the day were already growing and spreading by the time we reached the last location. The crowds that had been everywhere were thinning down to those who had one or two final chores to see to before going home, and Garam took the opportunity to stop and ask directions to the closest hostel that "didn't charge everything a man owned" for a night's bed and fare. The shopkeeper he asked was hurrying to board and lock his shop before the sun was entirely gone, so the directions Garam was given did nothing more than supply us with a reason for turning off the way we had intended to turn to begin with.

The turning off took us through two narrow streets that followed one another, and just before the end of the second street I ducked into a crack between two buildings that was hard to see if you didn't know it was there. Garam followed without hesitation, joined me in standing there just listening for a long string of ticks, and then, when it was close to certain that no one had seen or followed us he turned as best he could to face me.

"Is this where you're going to stay until the first bell of the night watch?" he asked, his lowered voice still heavy with doubt. "It looks like the perfect place for the rats of the city to take refuge in."

"It is and they do, which is why I'm not staying here," I answered, turning around to give him

better access to my wrists. "Can you see well enough to unlock these cuffs?"

"If I can't, you can strike a light and hold it for me," he said with a grunt, the sarcasm dimmed in the face of the struggle he was having with his pack. "By the greatness and glow of the High One, girl, couldn't you have found a narrower crack for us to crawl into?"

I would have enjoyed answering him in the same vein, but that was not the safest place in the city for private conversations, only the closest, and I didn't want to distract him from finding what he needed to free me. Too much time passed to the accompaniment of low mutterings that sounded like cursing, and then the sounds cut off just before hands touched my wrists. A bit of fumbling and then the sound of a click, a little more fumbling and a second click, and then the weight of the iron was finally gone from my arms.

"Stand still and let me do the collar," Garam ordered in that same low growl, apparently annoyed that I'd brought my arms forward to rub at them. "Unless, of course, you'd rather I left the thing on."

"At this point I don't think it'll make all that much difference," I muttered, this time feeling the fumbling at neck level before hearing the necessary click. Garam lifted the collar away from me, but didn't shift immediately to put it in his pack.

"What do you mean, it won't make that much of a difference?" he demanded, his tone aching to be louder than he'd kept it. "And why does this thing feel wet? What could have gotten spilled on it?"

"My blood got spilled on it," I answered, again unsurprised that he hadn't noticed even in full daylight. "When I was healed the scabs and calluses I'd built up were sent away with the rest, so I had no protection against the collar. Anyone who sees me will know why my neck is bleeding, and that's why the presence or absence of the collar will make very little difference."

"And you didn't say anything back at camp, when we could have thought of a way around the problem?" he demanded, the sole mode of speech he seemed to have left. "What in the widest hell do you expect me to do to keep people from seeing you?"

"That part of it *I* get to take care of," I replied, breathing deeply to get a more accurate sense of the city. "Give me the rest of my things and then you can leave. You know how to get where you're going from here?"

"Yes. I know how to get where I'm going from here." The words sounded as though they were being forced through tightly clenched teeth, and it probably wouldn't have made any difference if I'd told him I hadn't realized what the collar would do to me until it was too late to say anything. I also could have pointed out that I'd spent a lot of time in front of him, and if he'd bothered to look he would have seen what was happening, but that comment would have done even less good than the explanation.

Without adding any further words he stuffed my former collar in his pack, pulled out the tunic wrapped around a knife and thrust the bundle into my hands, and then he was edging out of the crack to be on his way. I turned far enough to see that he wasn't silly enough to back out, and then stayed only long enough to watch his shadow-form slip away to the right, back in the direction we'd come from. Once he was gone I went to my knees, then crawled three-legged to the left and the hole in the wall that was there.

The hole let me through into the abandoned building, behind a stack of bales containing something that had gone badly spoiled a long time before. I listened carefully for a while to make sure I was alone, then quickly stripped off the slave rag, dabbed at my neck with it before tossing it away, then got into my tunic. The tunic was a solid dark green, silver trim being less than desirable for night work, and the knife was a dagger that I very well might need. I was more tired than I'd expected to be, and when your own strength isn't full and sure the wise Life Seeker falls back on weapons-skill.

I left the abandoned building by a different hole hidden in another wall, heading for the place I intended to spend my rest time. That Guest Pavilion Garam had mentioned... It was more of a small palace than a pavilion, and I would have to get into it, find the two women Diin-tha wanted

protected, put the women together, then guard them until the city was won.

"As soon as it looks like the city is lost, they'll kill the two girls," Fearin had told me the day before, the idea of that no more than annoying him. "If you let anyone get past you, anyone at all, our victory will be incomplete even if the city officials turn around and declare for us."

"Why will they consider it so necessary to kill two women?" I'd asked, feeling a good deal *more* than annoyed. "How can the two be so important?"

"You'll find that out if you keep them alive," Fearin had countered, his dark blue eyes amused. "In the gathering everything is shared, including most information. Do you think you can do it?"

I made a soft sound of ridicule as I checked the street before easing out into it, the same sound I'd made when Fearin had first put the question. It didn't matter whether or not *I* thought I could do it, it was more than clear Diin-tha thought I could. And what the gods believe had damned well better happen, or the mortals involved were in for it up to their necks and beyond. I blew out a breath of vexation through my teeth, cursing myself for a fool. Most people were bright enough to involve themselves with no more than a single god; I, a former Kenoss Life Seeker, had to be idiot enough to become involved with two. I shook my head as I made sure the street around me was empty for the moment, then took myself into the place where I would wait for the time to strike.

Chapter 6

I stood in the shadows beside the inner wall surrounding the Guest Pavilion, listening to the night sounds that told me what I needed to know. It was only a short time past the first bell of the night watch, but things were already settled back to the careless ease that the guardsmen on duty there might live to regret. When you're set to guarding a place that's what you're supposed to be doing, not using your post as a place to waste time until you're relieved.

It had taken almost no effort to get over the wall, and neither the guardsmen outside the three gates nor the ones inside them had had any idea I was there. I'd paused very briefly before scaling the wall, wondering why there were guardsmen on the inside as well as outside, then had shrugged and gone ahead with what I was there for. Since both sets of guardsmen were equally sloppy, it really made no difference *why* they were there.

The grass under my feet was part of the wide lawn leading up to and surrounding the Guest Pavilion, and I could smell the sweetness of that grass as I stood there tasting the air and listening. The front of the miniature palace had guardsmen of its own, five shapes that shifted more than they should in the soft pink glow of colored lanterns, and I'd already seen the five matching shapes around the Pavilion's back. It was difficult to know if they were there to keep people out or hold them in, but for my purposes it didn't matter. I had to get past them going in, but coming out they would be someone else's concern.

To the right of the three-storied Pavilion was a pretty stand of trees, black and graceful shadows in the darkness of the night. Not a single leaf moved on any of the trees, not with the stifling weight of the night's heat sitting on everything, and that was unfortunate in more ways than one. When I climbed one of those trees to reach the second floor of the Pavilion, I'd have to do it slowly and carefully enough to *keep* the leaves unmoving. I'd also have to do it in that heat, which made me feel more like lying down than indulging in exercise.

I straightened up where I stood and took in a deep, silent breath of air, banishing all awareness of weariness from my mind. Whether I was in peak condition or not I had a job to do, and if that job didn't get done right Diin-tha would see to it that I never reached peak condition again.

Excuses were unacceptable, an outlook the Inadni shared with the gods, which made it an outlook I was well familiar with. It doesn't matter whether you want to; just go and do it.

I circled around the wall until I was opposite the stand of trees, then went and did it. Keeping

low and blending with the night took me unseen across the dark expanse of that lawn, and then it was just a matter of getting high enough in my chosen tree. Bark scraped my hands and the bottoms of my feet, gently at times, not so gently at others, but it was all accepted the same. I used a higher branch that wasn't too concerned about my weight to swing down to the second floor windows level, then shifted to the narrow stone ledge and decorative carvings provided by the building.

A pretty little balcony stood out from the side of the Pavilion, and since that was almost certainly the balcony I'd been told to look for I made my way over to it. During the day the balcony would be partially shaded by one of the trees, but none of the branches providing the shade could be used for climbing even if they could be reached. The balcony should have been considered secure, so there was every chance the doors leading onto it would be unlocked. And the doors *were* unlocked. I opened one of them a crack and listened, then slipped inside and closed the door behind me. In front of my nose was a pretty silk hanging which covered the balcony doors, muting the light coming from the room beyond the hanging. Why the doors were closed and the hanging drawn on a night like this I couldn't imagine, but it certainly did make that part of my job easier. The room on the other side of the silk was not only lit it was inhabited, and as I moved silently to my left away from the doors I began to listen to what was being said.

"... find this situation intolerable," a young female voice was announcing stiffly, as though to a large audience. "Go back and tell him that we will *not* accept having slaves to serve us only while the sun rides the sky, and that we *will* begin to have parties as often as we wish them. If he finds that unacceptable, we intend to make immediate arrangements to return to our father."

"I can understand, Your Highness, how you and your lady sister must be suffering from this heat," a sleek male voice answered, all oil and no substance. "I, myself, have been behaving most unreasonably, as has nearly everyone in the city. Once the gods see fit to allow us a change in the weather I'm sure you'll both be a good deal happier. Until that time comes, though, you really should draw your drapes and open your windows."

"Drawing drapes and opening windows are chores for slaves, not us," another female voice said very haughtily, a voice very much like the first one. "There's no reason for *us* to lower ourselves, not when this city boasts the number of slaves that it does. We want *our* slaves back and we want them now, or we're returning to our father and telling him how you've been treating us."

"Your Highness, this has certainly all been explained to you and your lady sister," the man answered, the faintest edge of impatience coloring his tone. "The time of darkness is when we must be most alert, and having slaves running all about will interfere with our security precautions. You two are most precious to us, after all, and we mean to see that nothing happens to you. Once the time of the prophecy has passed - "

"You stupid people and your stupid prophecy!" the first female flared, accompanied by a small sound like a foot stamping. "It's not us you're worrying about it's your vile city, and what are we supposed to care about *that*? You're keeping us locked up here for *your* sake, not ours, and we demand to be allowed to return home at once!"

"Your Highness, you'd best realize that it was your father who sent you to us to begin with," the man returned, only just able to keep his voice even. "Since your fate is bound up with ours in some way, until the time of the prophecy is passed you will remain our ... guests. If it disturbs you so greatly to have no slaves attend you after dark, I'm sure the Chief Administrator will be pleased to give you his permission to retire early. As for parties, they are completely out of the question. I bid you both a pleasant evening."

By now I was in a position to see through a fold in the hanging, so I was able to see the man's bow to the two girls before he turned and left. I recognized him vaguely as one of the city's silk-ax men, one of those who took care of trouble without running a squad of guardsmen over

the troublemakers, and it was fairly clear that he was in the Pavilion doing his job. The two girls he'd worked on, though, were furious rather than soothed, and I wondered if he usually handled his job in just that way.

"Don't you dare walk out of here before being dismissed!" the second girl shrielled with fists closed tight. "You miserable city-peasant, you commoner! Don't you dare!"

"He's gone!" the first girl cleverly observed, as furious as the other. "Pia, he left without asking our permission! This city is filled with barbarians, stinking, filthy barbarians!"

"Well, come tomorrow this city won't be filled by *us*," the second girl announced in a coldly refined way, tossing her head. "While we breakfast the slaves will pack our things, and then we'll take our guardsmen and leave. We'll teach them to treat us like commoners."

"Didn't our guardsmen return to Father?" the first girl asked, turning to look at her sister. "I thought I heard someone say they went back the morning after they brought us here."

"If they did, then we'll just make these barbarians replace them with city guardsmen," the second girl answered, waving one graceful hand in dismissal. "Really, Lia, you worry about the most unimportant things. Much more to the point is *where* are we going to find room for our new gowns? We may have to send a slave to buy another trunk or two, and that's certain to delay us."

"Not if we see the slave well-beaten before we send him," the first replied, tapping her lips with one finger. "Yes, that will guarantee he doesn't waste any time, so we won't be delayed. Now where did those stupid fools leave the pitcher of iced juice? I don't believe I'm going to have to pour a cup of it for myself."

The girl looked around vaguely for a tick, then seemed to remember that the pitcher she was searching for was in another room. She swept out with evident purpose, about to attempt something startlingly new, and her sister cast one last venomous look at the door the man had used before following her out. Possibly the second one was gathering her courage, and would make her own attempt if and when her sister was successful.

"By all the perfection of the twenty-sixth level," I breathed, wondering if I'd found the wrong apartment. Considering those two sisters I was certainly hoping it was the wrong apartment, but considering the way the rest of the day had gone it probably wasn't. Two pretty little girls, not above thirty seasons in age, both with golden curls and lovely green eyes and yellow gowns and too many jewels. And the same face. Twin girl children so spoiled they would sweat rather than open a hanging and a window themselves, and these were the ones the god had sent me to protect?

I made a very soft sound of ridicule and disgust, then decided I had enough time to look around and be sure. I was remembering what the Administrator had said about their fate being entwined with the city's, but I really did have to be certain. If there were other women in the Pavilion I might be able to forget about the girls, but somehow I had the feeling...

A feeling which, unfortunately, turned out to be right. The Guest Pavilion was a fairly large building, but all of the apartments for guests were on the second floor. There wasn't another area being used by anyone at all, male *or* female, and the stairway meant to lead to the third floor servants' quarters was closed off with a heavy door that was barred and locked. I stood in the dimness of the hall and stared at that door, then heaved a sigh. The only thing I'd gotten from the sounds coming from the first floor was complete emptiness...

"A pox and taxes," I muttered in disgust, the harshest curse those of the city spat at one another. Those girls were the ones I had to protect all right, but I couldn't for the life of me understand *why*. Of what use could they possibly be? I kept asking myself the question as I padded silently back to their apartment, but Diin-tha, if he was watching me, showed no inclination to visit me with enlightenment. I'd get my answer at the next gathering - if I kept the girls alive.

I didn't quite sigh again as I slipped back into their rooms, but my skill at being silent was wasted with those two. I probably could have hummed a tune as I checked each of the rooms to

be certain they were empty except for the girls, and the sisters never would have noticed. They were busy matching slippers to the gowns they would wear on their trip home the next day, and couldn't be bothered with paying attention to what went on around them.

Once I'd gone through the entire apartment, I locked the balcony doors I'd used to get in, then went to the small, almost bare anteroom that fronted the apartment. Callers were meant to wait in that small room rather than hang around the marble hallway, and anyone intending to enter the way people usually did had to come through the anteroom. With all the lamps darkened it was the best possible position for me to take, and not only because there was no other way in. It also put a door between me and the sisters, which would save having to explain to them why I was there.

I knelt in the heavy darkness right in front of the door I'd been set to guard, slid free the dagger from the sheathe I'd strapped to my right thigh, then settled back on my heels as I lay the dagger on the floor beside me. I could feel ... *something* in the air as I curled my toes under my feet, but after a moment I was forced to admit it wasn't the tingle of magic. It was less than magic and also more, a feeling I hated and yet also anticipated with racing heart. I would need everything I had to hold that door against those who came, and that meant - The Learning. My eyes closed as I knelt there in the dark, feeling it all around me and slowly becoming a part of it. Most people feared the dark, feared what might be in it, a lesson they had learned from countless ghastly deaths and mutilations committed during the lightless time. One part of the Learning was born of the dark, drew strength and nourishment from it, formed itself from the formlessness it sprang from. It was difficult for a human to come to terms with, painful in the extreme to learn, but once learned...

Once learned it could never be forgotten, never denied. The muscles in my shoulders and thighs relaxed, all tension soothed out of them, the peace of complete readiness settling down and taking over. It wasn't possible to perform properly while tense and nervous, so the Learning disallowed those feelings. It readied one for what was soon to come, made one eager for the time when the rest of the Learning would be used - and made one forget what it had been like afterward, when the Learning had been used before. The loathing and horror, the silent demands to know what I'd been made into, what I'd become - In the grip of the Learning I no longer doubted my right to do what I'd done to living, breathing people.

I simply became someone who *could* do that, and also would. The feeling of enormous strength and uncounterable skill, of undeniable power over those about me... The feeling flowed through my body like a drug of superiority and victory, a drug I both wanted and needed. Nothing would get past me, nothing and no one, and regrets for what would be done had simply ceased to exist...

Time has no meaning for one in that state, for all thought ceased as though the changeling were a beast who knelt waiting ... waiting ... anticipating nothing, prepared against all. The taste of the darkness was salty with heat, the smell of it empty, the sound of it ringing with distant heartbeats. The flesh beneath the unmoving hands of the beast was cool, as cool as the marble it knelt on. And then it was -

Eyes opened quickly, eyes that glowed red without the need for outer light to cause the glow. The edges of the darkness had been shattered some small distance away, and those came who would give their blood in sacrifice to Bellid. The god would laugh and drink deeply of their terror before their lives fled, and afterward -

The beast felt the deep disturbance rocking the darkness elsewhere than in that place. Many of those who had stood about that dwelling were taking themselves elsewhere at great speed, fear in their hearts over what occurred in the distance, but those who came -

Four followed with grim purpose, one led with an agony of fear gripping his bowels. "I pray the gods it won't be too late," his voice whispered again and again. "I pray the gods it won't be too late. We should have slit their throats as soon as they arrived here, not tempted the prophecy out of politically motivated respect for their father. I pray - "

The heavy thud of boots rang on the marble of the hall just outside, and then the outer door was thrown open. Lamps were carried by two of those who came, but lamplight had not the ability to pierce the darkness where the beast knelt. Only her eyes of glowing red were they able to see, and the sight halted them with gasps and twitchings.

"What - what in the name of blessed Arakon is *that*?" one of them hissed, peering forward and yet fearing what would be seen. "Did you set a guard-animal at their door, sir?"

"No, you fool, where would I get a guard-animal?" the one addressed answered in a matching hiss, fluttering his hands. "Get it away from there, and then go in and do your duty."

"None may pass," the beast breathed as the first of the five grasped his weapon and prepared to step forward. The words, soft as darkness, reached for the men and wrapped them in their sound and meaning, and all five shuddered from the touch of a corner of frigid chaos.

"No - no, we *must* get past it!" the leader spoke again, for the most part attempting to deny his terror. "If those girls live our city is lost! All together, everyone at the same time!"

Brave men, they were, those other four, but the Learning was not to be denied. Even as the beast flowed to her feet, the dagger held easily in her right hand, the lamps the men held flickered and died. Shouts came, filled with fear and desperation, and then the beast was among them, unseen and nearly unfelt. Two went down quickly with their throats slit, a third screamed when his flailing sword failed to protect him from beneath, and the fourth had not repaired the weak place in his leather where it covered his side. He screamed like the one before him, but also carried the dagger down, well-lodged in his ribs.

So quickly had so much death been committed, that the fifth, the one who led the others, had only just begun a whimpering run for his life. He had stumbled back and was attempting to turn and find the door when the beast reached him. No longer had the beast the use of her dagger, but with this one, soft and unencased in leather, she had no need of it. One kick took the feet out from under him and then she was down and upon him, tearing at his soft, helpless flesh with the only weapon remaining to her. His were the last of the screams to be heard, and when they had ceased the beast rose to her feet, visited the other bodies for a time before going to free her blade from the unmoving form which held it, then she returned to her place at the door. Uncounted time passed once again, and then the beast felt others entering the dwelling. The disturbances of the distance had come closer and closer, much of it flowing nearly to the dwelling, but as the disturbance had not entered it had not concerned the beast. Now there were those who *had* entered, and should they attempt to pass they would join those who littered the floor.

Lamplight bounced as those who carried it hurried up the marble hall, breath hissing in the throats of the hurrying ones as they pressed on in haste. One of their number muttered as he went, but the words seemed more curse than prayer.

"It wasn't our fault!" one of the others whispered as they neared the room of the beast, apparently speaking in answer to he who muttered. "We couldn't avoid that fight with those city guardsmen, so it isn't our fault that we were delayed getting here. Once most of our troops were in the city - "

"Save it to tell to Garam and Fearin if anything happened to those females they want." The words from the one who had muttered were now clear, but no happier than they had been. "We were supposed to be here to help that girl slave, but we didn't make it. If anyone got to the females - "

His words broke off as his hurrying pace faltered, all of them slowing to a stop as the lamplight fell on what lay inside the doorway they had just entered. They took another step or two, looking down rather than up, and then one of their number drew in his breath sharply. He had seen the red eyes of the beast, and then all of them saw the same.

"Is - *that* - " the first one to speak began, but the following words refused to come. He swallowed instead, the spittle going down hard, and the second shook his head.

"I don't know," the second whispered, his voice trembling unnoticed. "But we really should

look inside - "

"None may pass," the beast breathed, smiling into the darkness at the thought of more blood to be spilled, and these men, like the first, shuddered at the sound.

"Two of you find Fearin," the second man ordered, decision hard in his voice as he backed one of the steps he had taken. "I don't care what it takes to do it, just find him and bring him back. As fast as the gods allow."

"Or faster," one of the others muttered as two from the back left running, they having seized the opportunity before any others could. "Do you think Garam - "

"No," the second said flatly, ending the suggestion, and then there was no other thing save waiting.

Time ... time ... and then the beast felt newcomers approach, two hesitant, one anxious, all hurrying. Those who remained were not aware of the newcomers' presence until the three had nearly reached the room, and then relief flowed out of them as the cold fear had done.

"High Master, thank the gods you're here," the second man began, nearly sobbing in his joy.

"We can't even see what's over there, but just look what it did - "

"That's enough," the anxious one's voice lashed out, a raggedness there for those who could hear it. "Take your men and wait in the hall."

"With the greatest of pleasure," the man said at once, and very quickly the anxious one was left with the beast and the dead. The outer door was closed behind the last to depart, and then the newcomer stirred where he stood.

"Aelana, it's Fearin," he said to the beast, the trembling of his voice clearer now. "The city is ours so you don't need to guard that door any longer. You can come away - "

"None may pass," the beast breathed for the third time, a heartbeat away from rising, and the man immediately halted the slow advance he had not been truly aware of. The light of the single lamp left for him showed a haggardness in his bearded face, and then he shook his head.

"By the Power and the Will, I wouldn't have believed it beyond me," he muttered, and then he raised his arms and called softly, "Diin-tha, hear your servant. I cannot reach through to the girl and I must. I beseech your aid, Lord, in severing the tie binding her in that - that - "

The words failed him then, but they were unnecessary. The red eyes gazing at him flickered and then faded, and then I was out of the peace imposed on me by the Learning, blinking at the lamplight and taking the first deep breath I had in hours. I raised my hands to my face to rub at my eyes, and as I did I heard Fearin moving forward.

"Aelana, can you understand me now?" he asked, bending to put a hand to my shoulder. "Are you all right? Is any of that blood yours?"

"Of course I can understand you," I began to answer in annoyance, wondering why he sounded so strange, and then I took my hands from my eyes and was able to look down at myself in the lamplight that now reached me.

Blood. Covering me almost everywhere, from the bodies of those I'd killed. Those I'd *enjoyed* killing. Especially the last ... his throat torn out ... with my teeth -

I looked up at Fearin's shadowy face, remembering it all, then pulled away from his hand, ran to a corner of the room, and threw up everything inside me.

Chapter 7

It wasn't far from noon the next day, but you couldn't tell it by looking at the skies. Rain poured down in a solid sheet, cooling the air and everything it touched, but also soaking the world. I sat on the wide ledge of the open porch-room of the Chief Administrator's palace, my arms around my knees, my back against a pillar, my eyes on the rain, remembering the rest of the night before even though I didn't want to. I'd had a number of hours of sleep, but that wasn't helping me with any of the memories.

"This has certainly been a night of surprises," Fearin had said once my heaving had stopped, crouching down next to me where I sat with my back against a wall. "Here, rinse your mouth out with this water, and then we'll use the rest of it to clean you up a little."

He'd pressed a cup into my shaking hands, and I hadn't even been able to ask him where he'd gotten the cup and water. The water was cold enough to wash the horrible taste out of my mouth and soothe my burning throat, and all I'd been able to consider was being grateful that the cup and water were here to be used.

"I think I'm beginning to understand more of what being Shadowborn means," Fearin had commented after taking the cup back, his eyes narrowed as he looked down at me. "And I'm learning that you're not quite the strutting, boasting, dangerous Kenoss you want people to think you are. You're dangerous, all right, but there's a good deal more to you than that."

"Yes, I also do finger tricks with lamp shadows on walls," I'd answered tiredly, closing my eyes as I put my head back again. "Now that my secret is out, I'll be in demand for parties all over the city."

"This ... whatever it was has to be what you wanted me to warn the others about," he'd said, ignoring my comment completely. "Can you tell me what happened? Four of them were guardsmen and the fifth... He must have died last. They were all larger than you, four of them *much* larger and armed as well as armored ... All you had was that dagger... Aelana, how were you able to kill them all?"

"The Learning makes it easy," I'd said, keeping my eyes closed. "But what difference does it make? Our Guardian wanted something done and it was done. He knew I'd have to use the Learning, I'm not far enough back to decent physical condition to handle fighting without it, but that's why he chose me. Because I *can* use the Learning. And it could have been a lot worse."

"I'll see myself in the widest circle of chaos before I ask *how* it could be worse," he'd muttered, sounding as though he'd never seen dead bodies before. Well, maybe he'd never seen dead bodies in the condition of the ones *I'd* created. Taking the fifth without a separate weapon had triggered the rest of the reaction, the one I couldn't let myself think about, the one I was never conscious of doing at the time. It had left them all ... more than simply dead... And had gotten all that blood on me -

"No, no, just calm down," Fearin had said quickly, putting a hand to my forehead as I fought to keep from being sick again. "It's all over and done with now, and as soon as the rest of the city is secured we'll go to the palace and find you a place to sleep. I intend to use the palace as my headquarters until we march again, so we'll all have a chance to rest up. And as soon as we bring Lokkel and the rest into the city I'll have him mix up something to ease your insides."

"Unless it was poison you had in mind, don't bother," I'd said, pushing his hand away from my head as I'd started to get myself together again. "I'll get over this alone just the way I always have, and you can just mark the reaction up to female squeamishness."

"Squeamishness?" he'd repeated in outrage, glaring at me with quite a bit of heat. "I have men out in that hall who just went through the fighting to take a city, and I happen to know they had to hack their way through crowds to get here. Would you like to know how many of them emptied their insides even worse than you did, and all from looking at those bodies and thinking about having to get past the door you were guarding? What it's like to remember *doing* all that - "

His face worked briefly as he tried to find more words, then he simply shook his head.

"I've also discovered *I'm* not as hard and unreachable as I thought. Hold still and let me take care of this, and then we can both get out of here."

"This" was trying to rub my face off with a wet piece of cloth he'd produced, and I hadn't been able to force him away from me until he was satisfied with the job he'd done. I'd been furious that he would treat me like a grimy little child, but the man of Power couldn't have cared less. He'd hauled me to my feet and pulled me out into the hall, and once he'd seen about assigning guards for my former post we'd gone down to the lower floor of the Pavilion. I'd been aching too

much outside and in to give him the argument I should have, and had even fallen asleep in a corner until we'd been able to go to the Chief Administrator's palace...

"Well, good morning," a pleasant voice came, sounding as though the words were really meant. "We're almost out of morning, I know, but despite the rain it's been too good a morning not to acknowledge it. I hear your part of the attack went just as smoothly as ours."

The fighter Talasin walked to the other end of the railing ledge I sat on and leaned against the pillar there, his green eyes looking at me with a smile in them. He wore leather armor over his tunic and muddy boots on his feet, and the heavy sword at his side said he'd probably been out with his troops. The fact that he wasn't soaked through said he'd probably worn a cloak and a helmet, and the chicken leg in his hand said he'd been too busy to stop for a meal. All those deductions made me feel positively brilliant, but didn't do a thing to lighten my mood.

"I saw Fearin very briefly earlier, and he mentioned you held your position without any trouble at all," Talasin went on, in between bites of his chicken. "Since yours was the critical position in all this, I'm very glad I was the one who pulled you out of the stream. Now I can say our complete success was due to me."

His grin was wide and teasing, part of the expansive good humor he was trying to share, but he was really wasting his time. I was already deep into the humor of pouring, drenching rain, and wasn't likely to be pulled out of it.

"You know, if that's the best anyone could do with finding you something to wear, I don't blame you for feeling depressed," he said after another handful of heartbeats, now frowning at the tunic I had on. "You look like you're swimming in that thing, and the color... Faded violet is the closest I can come. The least you've earned is a decent tunic and a pair of sandals, and as soon as Fearin gets here I'll let him know it. Meanwhile, why don't you have something to eat with me?"

"Thanks anyway, but I'm not hungry," I said, deciding to see if answering him would get him to leave me alone again. It was nice of him to be so concerned, but the tunic I wore was something *I'd* found, and it suited my mood better than what Fearin had provided. The night before I'd all but scrubbed myself with a brush to get the blood off, but it still clung red and splashed all over my memory. I'd spilled blood before and I would again, but *that* particular way... Talasin obviously didn't know, but once he did his concern would be long gone.

"None of that food on the table over there was touched before I came in," he said now, still studying me with those green eyes. "If you've already eaten, what was it and where did you eat? Fearin said you had a hard time last night, and would probably need looking after today. My guess would be that he's right as usual."

"Fearin's worse than an old woman!" I snapped, unfolding from the ledge before sliding off it to the floor. "I didn't have a hard time last night I had an easy time, just as easy as it's always been. And since that's what I'm here for, he'd better get used to it. When is this meeting that's been called supposed to happen? I'm tired of sitting around here doing nothing."

"The meeting will happen when everyone gets here," Talasin answered from behind me, his tone overly neutral. "Since it's still early, they probably aren't hurrying. I know Fearin provided that food because it's still fresh and either hot or cold, whichever it's supposed to be. Why don't we -"

I made a sound of annoyance and stalked across the porch away from him, struggling to keep my temper from flying apart. The porch was really a very large outer room at the back of the palace, open to the air on three sides and furnished with expensive floor weavings and well-padded furniture. Its roof kept the sun off anyone using it, and overhangs kept the rain from spraying in and ruining its comfort. About fifty feet below the wall I stood in front of was a small, private courtyard, and if I concentrated on the room and the courtyard I just might be able to stay out of a fight.

"Why do you have to be so disagreeable all the time?" Talasin demanded from the other side of the porch, annoyance now strong in his voice. "You act as if you don't *want* anyone treating

you decently, as if someone bothering themselves about you is offensive. Why can't you be reasonable for once - "

"Because she's female, and females are never reasonable," another voice interrupted, one that was as satisfied as Talasin's had been earlier. Garam had obviously arrived, and wasn't *that* nice.

"Some females are reasonable," Talasin countered, still sounding sour. "I know because I've met them. How did it go for you and your group yesterday, Garam?"

"These fools were so easy it was almost a shame to take advantage of them," the other fighter answered happily, clattering things on the food table. "They were fat and sassy from never having lost a fight, but the panic set in real fast when they couldn't bring the rest of their forces past the barriers Fearin set up at those cardinal points. By the time they got their fighters to the wall you were already inside, and the other half of their force was captured or dead. All in all I only lost two of my men once the attack started. Almost losing the girl there earlier in the day doesn't count at all."

"You almost lost Aelana?" Talasin demanded, too busy watching Garam helping himself at the food table to notice that I'd turned to look at the two of them. "How in the name of chaos did *that* happen?"

"Some fool of a barbarian thought I was being too hard on her and tried to buy her from me," Garam answered, turning away from the table with a filled plate and a grin. "If I could have thought of a way to convince our Guardian that refusing a silver piece is a sin, I would have let the fool have her."

"But you couldn't so you didn't," Talasin summed up, pointedly not sharing Garam's amusement. "Not to mention the fact that the fool was wrong and you *weren't* being too hard on her. Or were you?"

"As a matter of fact - I was," Garam said without the grin, looking at me rather than at Talasin. I was so shocked I almost fell over dead, and seeing that brought a faint smile back to the fighter. "Not that I really understood that at the time. It's been my experience that women have no business mixing in men's affairs, that if you're silly enough to give them responsibility and depend on them to do a job, all you'll get for your trouble is a hole in your lines and excuses about why it's there. And females who were also slaves... All *they* can do is whine and wheedle."

"But you seem to have changed your mind," Talasin said, tossing away the chicken bone he'd stripped. "Does that mean you heard what Aelana accomplished last night?"

"It means a little more than that," Garam answered, still not avoiding my eyes. "I made it as hard on her as I could yesterday, waiting for her to start complaining or crying about how unfair I was, but it didn't happen. She took it all just the way I would expect one of my men to take it, and then I really hurt her. It was an accident, we both knew that, but it doesn't change the fact that I really hurt her. Not only didn't she fold, she didn't even waste time blaming me. And after that she did exactly what she was supposed to. It seems I owe our Guardian an apology."

"I like the way you put that," Talasin said with a snort of amusement, passing Garam to get closer to the table. "You ride the girl from the first tick she joins us, and it's our Guardian you owe an apology? I'll have to tell that one to Fearin. When I saw him this morning he looked like he could use a good laugh."

"I noticed that myself," Garam said, finally looking away from me. I used the opportunity to walk to a chair and sit in it, refusing to think about what Garam had said. If he'd made any sense at all I'd figure it out some other time.

"He may be worried about this rain delaying us," Talasin said, busy with filling a plate of his own. "The only thing it's really doing is keeping the city from going up in flames while our men finish the intaking. Another couple of days and we'll be ready to move on."

"With our two special prizes," Garam said, and suddenly he was sitting down in a chair not far from me, his dark eyes inspecting me again. "I hear there were five men trying to keep us from

total victory, but they didn't live long enough to make it. I also heard that Fearin had to be called before *our* people could get through, but our prizes were completely safe. Just the way they were supposed to be."

"There were five?" Talasin said, coming over with his plate. "I hadn't heard the exact number, and that's what Fearin must have meant about her not having it easy. He thinks she'll need looking after today, but she isn't having any. That's what we were arguing about when you came in."

"No soldier likes to be coddled like a baby," Garam said around a mouthful of food, his eyes still on me in that very strange way. "If she doesn't want what you're trying to push at her, she probably doesn't need it."

"If Fearin thinks she needs it, then her opinion doesn't count," Talasin said, sounding annoyed even through the food in his mouth. "She insists he's being an old woman, but that's not a description of the Fearin *I* know. If we let it go and something happens to her, our Guardian won't be too happy with us."

"No, he won't," Garam said with a frown, and suddenly I could see that he'd switched sides. "It might be a good idea having Lokkel look at her. If there's something wrong with her besides that bruise on her face, he ought to be able to take care of it with a spell."

"There's a limit to what even *my* spells can do, Prince Garam," another voice came, and then Lokkel himself was coming over to join us. "Fearin had me do a Seeking while she slept this morning, and there's nothing wrong with her that magic can cure."

"Then there's nothing to worry about," Garam said with renewed satisfaction, happily switching back. "Leave her alone and she'll be just fine."

"How can she be fine if she starves to death?" Talasin demanded, interrupting Lokkel without knowing it. "Has she been back from slavery for seasons and seasons that she can afford to stop eating any time she likes? Missing a couple of meals would mean nothing to you and me, but for her it's way too soon. And I'll bet she didn't even eat much yesterday, when *you* were in charge of her."

Talasin's last comment kept Garam from immediately laughing off everything the other fighter had said; Garam knew he hadn't fed me *anything* the day before, and had no idea what I'd eaten before or afterwards. I brought my feet up to the left in the chair I sat in and put both hands to my eyes and rubbed, trying to decide whether to laugh or scream. In all my life I'd never been in so unbelievable a position and then, of course, things grew even more complicated.

"Ah, good, everyone's already here," Fearin's voice came, and then he was striding out onto the porch to join us. The night before he'd been wearing all leather and a sword, but now he was back to cloth trousers, a shirt, and a blue robe. The robe flared out behind him as he walked, as though trying to keep up with a man in too much of a hurry.

"Ranander is bringing in the girls, so you'd better brace yourselves," Fearin went on. "I want all of you to see them, otherwise I would have spared you the experience. You'll find that taking the city was easier. Prince Talasin, you'll have to speak to your men. Let them know that the girls are strictly off-limits, even if they should happen to be invited. If any of them do try something I'll know about it, and then *I'll* take care of the matter. Any questions?"

"Does that go for us as well?" Garam asked with a grin, speaking more slowly than Fearin had. "My men tell me those two are something to see, and since they *are* prizes of war... "

"Prince Garam, they're more than prizes of war," Fearin said with a sigh, forcing himself to slow down as he reached for a pitcher of fruit juice. They're the key to a door now standing closed in our path to ultimate victory. If the key becomes warped the door won't open, and that will be the end of our campaign. Are you willing to accept that for a short while of pleasure?"

"Not likely," Garam answered with a snort, leaning back in his chair. "Not even if they should beg."

"I don't think you're likely to find them begging," Fearin began, cup of juice on its way to his

lips, but that was as far as he got. There was a sudden babble of voices from inside the palace, and then Ranander was half-backing toward us with two very angry young females following/chasing after him. The girls were the twins with golden hair and green eyes, and this time they wore gowns of green. They seemed to be enjoying all the screeching they were doing, but Ranander was obviously not feeling the same.

"Fearin, I've brought them," he said hastily when he saw the man of Power. "Now you can talk to them."

I had to admire the way Ranander slid out of the line of fire, leaving Fearin as the prime target. While the girls started in on their new victim their former guide came to our chair grouping and sat, trying very hard to turn invisible. He'd been completely out of his depth with the two pretty little girls, but his replacement was another story.

"That's enough!" Fearin shouted at them, the roar shocking them into silence. "If you're both too young or too stupid to understand you're not in charge here, allow me to spell it out for you. You will *not* complain, you will *not* give orders, and you will *not* throw tantrums. You'll behave yourselves and do as you're told, or you'll find yourselves housed in a dungeon cell rather than that suite you were given. Do you understand me?"

"Boors always manage to make themselves perfectly clear," one of the girls answered haughtily with a sniff. "Our father won't let you get away with harming us, you know, so you'd better release us immediately. We planned to go home today, and despite the rain there's no reason for us to change those plans."

"Unless, of course, you really *want* to be defeated by our father's forces and delivered into his hands," the second girl added, a cold, nasty smile on her face. "*We'd* certainly enjoy that, since we'd then have a say in what was done to you. If you have any intelligence at all you'll-"

"Listen to me," Fearin interrupted very slowly and deliberately, looking back and forth between the girls. "Your father the prince is out of this and won't be getting back in. When he let the Chief Administrator of this city force him into turning you two over to the city, he washed his hands of you completely. He has a rich principality but a very *small* one, and his forces couldn't even resist the numbers sent from *here*. I have an army that's already taken this city; it would roll right over you father's forces without even noticing them."

"You don't seem to understand how important we are," the first girl said in a simplified way that showed she knew she was speaking to an idiot. "We've always been deferred to and taken care of properly because we've been important since the day we were born. *Everyone* has been concerned about us, including our father, so he would hardly ignore us now. He -"

"You were given all that attention because of the prophecy," Fearin plowed on, trying to keep from losing his temper. "It was said on the day you were born that you could well be the cause of the downfall of this city in this season of your lives. Since there was a 'maybe' in the prophecy the leaders of this city argued for years over whether or not to have you killed. Your father knew he couldn't keep you alive if it was decided you should be killed, so he mistakenly had you pampered in all ways against that very dreadful time. Your father is a keen businessman and an excellent administrator, but hasn't a trace of backbone even when it comes to his own family."

Both girls start to squawk indignantly over that, but Fearin overrode the interruption with greater volume.

"The new Chief Administrator of this city decided he didn't care for taking any chances and had you brought here," he went on. "If it looked like the prophecy was about to come true he would avoid his city's fate by having you immediately killed. If the time of the prophecy passed without anything happening, he would simply return you to your father. With you here under his thumb he obviously thought he couldn't lose."

"But he *did* lose," the first girl pointed out with continuing indignation. "And you've just proven how untrue your story is. If it was anything but lies they would have tried to kill us, and they didn't. Until your ruffians broke into our apartment no one bothered us at all."

"That's because I set a guard on your apartment before we attacked," Fearin countered, more annoyed than insulted. "They tried to get through to kill you, but the guard didn't allow it. Both of you girls owe your lives to that young woman over there."

He nodded in my direction, undoubtedly thinking he was giving me the credit I deserved, but he certainly must have forgotten who he was talking to.

"Her?" the second girl asked with a ladylike snort of derision, her eyes moving over me with distaste. "If you ask *me*, she looks like a slave."

"And since she's a slave, it's her *place* to do things for her betters," the first girl said in agreement. "That means we don't owe *her* anything, even if you *aren't* all lying about what happened. And right now I want some food, so slave, you come and fetch it for me."

"And me," the second girl chimed in with enthusiasm while Fearin lowered his head and rubbed at both eyes with the fingers of his free hand. Ranander had gone all indignant, Talasin was furious, Garam was disgusted, and even Lokkel wore a frown of disapproval. The only one who felt the least amount of amusement was me, and it wasn't a very nice amusement.

"Among the Kenoss, parents who try to spoil their children have those children taken away," I remarked. "A Life Seeker must understand very early that the world won't give in to his or her whims, and expecting it to happen could cost the young Seeker's life. Your father ruined you two as a salve for his conscience, and because of that you have my pity."

"You're a slave and we're princesses, and *you* pity *us*?" the first girl came back with a laugh. "Just imagine, Lia. The *slave* pities us."

"That's enough," Talasin said coldly over the tinkle of their joined laughter, putting his plate aside before standing. "This woman over here isn't a slave, and my family, at least, would never shame itself by letting brats like you use the title of princess. A princess is supposed to be better than other women, not so obviously less. You-"

"Please, Prince Talasin," Fearin interrupted, and the girls looked startled again. They'd been dismissing everything Talasin had said - until they heard he was a prince. "I know how you feel, but we can't waste the entire day on these two."

"Even if we *could* spend the time, it would still be a waste," Garam said, looking at the girls with dismissiveness in his lazy, insolent stare. "They wouldn't know quality if it marched over them, not being as useless as they are. Don't spend your breath telling them the why of things, Fearin. Just give them their orders and send them back to their dolls."

"Not quite yet, Prince Garam," Fearin said, and this time I saw that he was using titles deliberately. The two girls couldn't quite decide how they should be feeling, but with a second prince speaking against them they certainly weren't happy. "I want these young ladies to understand thoroughly that they aren't privileged guests. They're captives of war who will serve a purpose for us, but their purpose isn't all that important. If they give me any trouble at all I'll have them stripped and collared and sold as slaves, and then go looking for others to serve in their place. Do you understand me *now*, little girls? No one will be coming to your rescue, or even to avenge you. Behave yourselves or face the consequences. Ranander, take them back to their suite."

The two girls were indignant over having been spoken to like that, but all they did was whisper to each other as Ranander hurried to guide them out again. Fearin had lied about their importance, but they didn't know that and the lie had been necessary. It might be enough to keep the girls from making trouble for a while, but I wouldn't have bet on it.

"At one time I would have sworn that only healing produced relief like this," Lokkel said, sending a last disapproving glance toward the door the girls had left by. "Are you able to tell us yet what we're meant to do with them, Fearin? Or at least how soon we'll be rid of them?"

"No to your first question, Lokkel," Fearin said with his own sigh of relief. "I can't tell you what their purpose is, but I *can* tell you they'll be traveling with us for a while. We'll have to watch them carefully, but we shouldn't have to associate with them."

"I wonder if the city's Chief Administrator knows yet that he guaranteed defeat for his city by

bringing those two here," Garam said with a laugh. "If he'd left them with their father it would have been *his* city we'd have needed to take. Maybe I ought to go down to the cell he's in and explain that to him."

"He's probably already figured it out," Fearin answered, turning to the table and reaching for a plate. "The prophecy had that 'maybe' in it because there was a chance the girls would either be killed or left where they were. As soon as he made his decision to bring them here the city's fate was sealed. He ... "

Fearin's voice went on, but since I was no longer in the room I could no longer hear the words. I'd slipped out without any of them noticing, needing to find a place of peace and quiet to cope with what I was feeling. Things were getting worse instead of better, and wasn't *that* a surprise. I hurried through the palace corridors looking for a set of stairs, and once I found one I used it to get to the ground floor. From there I was able to rediscover the corridor I'd found that morning, one that led outside to the palace grounds near a moderately large gazebo. The thing had a roof but was open to the air all around the circle of it, and no one was likely to be using it in all this rain.

I made a dash through the downpour, but still ended up soaked to the skin before the gazebo roof was over me. The thing was far enough from the palace to insure the privacy of whoever used it, so I didn't really mind having gotten wet in reaching it. Privacy was what I wanted and needed, and as I sat cross-legged in the center of the floor it was also what I'd gotten.

Privacy to calm the twisting of my thoughts. As I brushed back wet hair with both hands, my eyes closed with the inner pain I felt. The way I was being treated by Talasin and Garam and Fearin and even Lokkel... How was I supposed to stand their kindness and support when I knew what would happen as soon as they found out what I was? Kindness would change to disgust, concern to fear -

"Why are you doing this to me, Diin-tha?" I whispered, really wanting to know. "Why haven't you told them yet? Is my agony part of the deal you made with Bellid? Is he watching and chuckling, waiting until I get comfortable before stopping it cold? I did what you wanted me to and paid the price for doing it. Can't you just tell them now and get it over with?"

If I expected the god to be listening I was kidding myself. Or maybe he *was* listening and just didn't care to answer. I couldn't tell which, and then an interruption came that chased all those thoughts away. A big body vaulted over one low side of the gazebo, and startlement sent me to my feet before I remembered I had no weapon to draw. The new arrival was the barbarian who'd wanted to buy me when he thought I was a slave!

Chapter 8

"Just be calm, girl, I'm not here to hurt you," the barbarian said, glancing over his shoulder as though checking for pursuit. "I'm here to help you get away."

I blinked at the man as he straightened and shook wet blond air out of his eyes, and then I felt the urge to sigh.

"I think you'd better understand that you're making a mistake," I began, intending to set him straight as fast as possible, but he shook his head and gestured with one hand.

"Don't let the thought of that lowlife who owns you bother you," he said, disdain clear in his voice. "I'll leave two pieces of silver here in your place, and that will have to satisfy him. If it doesn't, he can always come looking for me with a sword. I won't be that hard to find, at least not for him."

"You're not hearing me," I told the man, starting to feel annoyed. "I said you're making a mistake and you *are*. You can't steal me for the same reason you couldn't buy me. I'm not - "

"I'm *not* stealing you!" he insisted, highly indignant. "If I were stealing you I wouldn't be leaving two silver pieces. What I'm trying to do is fulfill a prophecy, and you're the one the

prophecy speaks about. Look, let's argue about it later. Right now we need to get out of here before those guardsmen I lost find me again."

"There can't possibly be another prophecy involved in this," I stated flatly, beginning to believe I'd been wrong about Diin-tha not paying attention. The god was watching all right, and undoubtedly laughing his head off. "Listen to me, and understand what I'm saying. I'm not a slave, I'm not interested in any prophecies, and I'm not going *anywhere* with you."

"You think you're not a slave because he took your collar off?" the barbarian asked, trying to be gentle as he wiped the water from his face. "I'm sure he knows as well as I do that you can't escape from here, at least not alone. That's why I'm here to help you, and together we'll do it. It's possible to get over the wall if you know where to climb, the wall around the palace *and* the wall around the city. We'll - "

"Diin-tha, get him away from me or I refuse to be responsible," I muttered, closing my eyes as my hands went to fists at my sides. "I'm not in the mood to be the butt of a joke right now, and if you let this go on I promise more trouble than fun."

"What's bothering you, girl?" the barbarian said, suddenly a lot closer than he had been. "Are you *afraid* to go with me, afraid I'm lying or won't be able to protect you? I give you my word that I'm not lying, and as for protection - "

"I can protect myself!" I interrupted harshly, pulling my arm back away from the sudden touch of his hand. "And the only thing I'm afraid of is that you'll find that out a little too late. Now get out of here before those guardsmen show up."

"You believe I'd leave you?" he asked with a snort, looking down at me with very blue eyes. "I don't know what you think I am, but I'm not in the habit of saving myself at the expense of a woman's freedom. I - "

"What I think you are is someone looking to fulfill a prophecy," I told him, holding that light blue gaze. "The only reason you're so concerned about me is that you think I'm *part* of the prophecy, otherwise you'd be somewhere else rather than here. If you want the truth I'll give it to you: I wouldn't go with you even if I *was* a slave who needed freeing. Does that make it clear enough?"

"Clear isn't really the word I'd use," he answered, his expression having gone strange. "I think you're misunderstanding something I said, but this still isn't the place for a discussion. Come with me now, and - "

"There he is!" a shout came, and we both looked around to see a squad of guardsmen not seven strides away and closing as fast as the wet grass let them. The barbarian was in front of me so fast with his sword in his fist that the guardsmen faltered in their jogging advance. I could see there would be a fight if something wasn't done, and the only one available to do that something was me.

"Stop right there," I called to the guardsmen, moving out from behind the barbarian even though he tried to stop me. "Do any of you know me?"

"You expect *us* to remember one like *you*?" one of the guardsmen began with a laugh, but that was as far as he got. The man next to him gave him a hilt-filled backfist in the mouth, and even through the pouring rain I could see how the second man had paled.

"You damned fool, don't you know who she is?" the second man hissed, loud enough for all to hear. "She's the one Fearin set in the Guest Pavilion, the one he had to call off personally! You say another word out of line and I'll kill you myself!"

"Gods, is that *her*?" one of them muttered, and "Dargol save me, I saw the bodies," came from another, and in an instant they all looked like they were ready to run.

"This man isn't to be bothered," I said before they could decide to take off, making sure I didn't move toward them. "Pass his description around and see to it that no one tries to stop him when he's ready to leave."

"Yes, ma'am," and "As you say, lady," came at me in various voices and words, and then they were on their way back to wherever they'd come from. I didn't like the reputation using the

Learning gave me, but I wasn't above taking advantage from it when I had to.

"Well," the barbarian said as he watched the squad leave, his sword almost forgotten in his hand. "I thought you were lying to yourself about not being a slave, but obviously I was wrong. Now I really *don't* understand."

"Garam and I are part of the invading force, and we were playing a little game yesterday," I said, wondering why I was explaining anything at all to him. "What you saw was an accident, not a deliberate attempt to hurt me, so you can forget about how mistreated I am. And you can also leave with a clear conscience."

I walked past him to go back to the middle of the gazebo, looking forward to being alone again, but I should have known better. When the gods decide to have their fun with you, nothing you say or do can stop them.

"But you *were* a slave, and not too long ago either," he said, not sounding the least unsure.

"You may be free now, but you used to be a slave in this city."

"All right, I used to be a slave in this city," I granted, turning with a sigh to look at him. "If I hadn't managed to escape earlier on my own I would have needed you to help me. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

"Not exactly," he denied as he resheathed his sword, surprisingly with a grin. "I was fairly sure you were the right one, and now I'm convinced. I thought it was pure luck that I saw you being brought here last night, but now I know I was meant to see it. How soon will you be able to leave here with me? As soon as the entire city is secure?"

"You really need to do something about your hearing problem," I said, no longer feeling the least amount of patience. "I'm *not* leaving here with you even if I *am* the one involved in that prophecy of yours, which I seriously doubt. I have other things to do, and none of them include you."

"You want people to think you're really hard, don't you?" he said, those light eyes inspecting me from stringy hair to muddy feet. "A woman alone in a place like this needs to do that, I suppose, but I'm not like these others. You don't have to pretend with me, not about anything. Do you believe that?"

I was just about to tell him what I believed, in gutter slave lingo tailored especially for him, when my intentions were interrupted. Ranander came racing into the gazebo, just as wet as he would have been if he'd walked, his stare going from me to the barbarian and back again.

"Aelana, Fearin wants to start the meeting now," he said, both looking and sounding distracted. "Everyone thought you'd only stepped out for a breath or two, that's why I didn't come sooner. Who's this?"

"Ranander, meet a barbarian," I said, the words not *quite* a growl. "Barbarian, meet Ranander. I hope you two get to be really close."

With that I marched back out into the rain, heading for the palace and that meeting Fearin was waiting to hold. It wasn't Ranander's fault that he could follow me by *knowing* which way I'd gone and which I hadn't, but I wasn't feeling too kindly right now toward the man who had shown me I was wasting my time. Privacy wasn't something I would be allowed, not as long as Diin-tha's purpose remained unaccomplished.

That short walk through the downpour turned me wringing wet, but over the seasons I'd learned to ignore worse things than dripping with every step. When I reached the porch and stepped out on it, four pairs of eyes turned to study me.

"Where did you disappear to?" Fearin asked with annoyance. "I was ready to start and you weren't here, so I sent Ranander after you."

"I stepped out for a breath of air," I answered shortly, heading back to the chair I'd earlier abandoned. "I didn't mean to keep everyone waiting. Go ahead with whatever it was you wanted to say."

"Now we have to wait for Ranander to get back," the man of Power said, even more annoyed.

"How did you manage to miss him?"

"I didn't miss him," I said as I sat and pushed my soaking hair back. "I left him with what delayed *me*, an acquaintance who paid me an unexpected visit. Ranander should be along in another tick or two."

"Someone you knew in the city got onto the palace grounds?" Fearin demanded, moving away from the table he'd been standing near. "And the guard did nothing to stop them? Prince Talasin, Prince Garam, I think you'd better look into that. I didn't want to bother setting up my own watch, but - "

"Don't get so excited, it wasn't just anybody," I interrupted with a sigh. "And the guard *did* track him down, but I sent them on their way. The man thought he was doing me a favor, but now he knows better so he ought to be ready to leave. If he isn't, you can do whatever you like to get rid of him."

"What do you mean, he isn't just anybody?" Talasin asked from his chair to my left. "And the guard obeyed you without giving you any trouble?"

"One of them remembered me from last night," I said without looking at him - or anyone. "And as for who the man is - "

I hesitated, feeling both annoyed and foolish, and Garam made the sort of intuitive leap I hadn't thought he was capable of.

"Don't tell me," the fighter said with a big grin from his chair opposite mine, leaning forward just a little. "I'll bet it was that yokel with the two swords, back with a better offer. Didn't you tell him I'd take it?"

"What are you talking about?" Fearin demanded as I simply glared at Garam. "What yokel with two swords, and what's this about a better offer?"

"She and I had an accident yesterday while we were placing men around the city," Garam answered, my glare adding to his amusement. "A visiting barbarian from somewhere or other decided I was being too hard on her and tried to buy her from me. I had to tell him *something* to get rid of him, so I said his offer of a silver piece was too low. But I also told him to come back when he decided to raise his offer, and it looks like he has. How much higher is he willing to go, girl?"

"I offered two silver pieces, but this time *she* turned me down," another voice butted in, and then Ranander and the barbarian were adding their own dripping to the porch. "You sophisticated city people must have a way to make silver grow on trees."

"Of course we do," Garam told him, arrogance in the way he looked at - and down on - the stranger. "We also happen to be choosy about who we do business with, especially when one of our own is involved. She still isn't for sale, so why don't you just forget about her?"

The barbarian seemed to be trying to control his temper to keep from starting a fight, but all the rest of us, Lokkel and Ranander included, were staring in shock or surprise at Garam. Not a dozen ticks earlier he'd been telling me he was ready to accept the barbarian's offer, but now, in front of everybody, he was flatly refusing even to joke about the matter. I was one of them, he'd said in so many words, and wasn't for sale any more than any of the others. Garam...!

"I'm sure Aelana appreciates your concern, but as you can see it isn't necessary," Fearin finally said after pulling his stare away from an unnoticing Garam. "And since you're our guest for the moment, why don't you introduce yourself to us."

This time it was Fearin I stared at, hearing something in his voice I didn't like, and looking at him seemed to confirm my original suspicion. He was studying the barbarian in a way that was *too* casual, too easygoing for his earlier annoyance.

"I'm Ijarin of the Far Mountains," the barbarian answered, speaking directly to Fearin. "My father is Ralak, King of the Silent Desert. When the day comes for my father to journey to the next of his lives, I'll be king of the Silent Desert and the first of what sons I'll have will be Prince of the Far Mountains. It's the way we barbarians do things."

His last words were on the dry side, as was his glance in my direction. He hadn't enjoyed my calling him a barbarian, and was trying to make me feel ashamed.

"Oh, good, another prince," I remarked, wanting him to see how much good his attempt at shaming had done. "Just what we needed around here."

"Prince Ijarin isn't just another prince," Fearin corrected mildly while the barbarian looked at me with no amusement whatsoever. "He's a Crown Prince, and if I'm not mistaken also a follower of the goddess Istiel. I've heard that those dedicated to Istiel are invisible to other gods and goddesses. Do you know if that's true, Prince Ijarin?"

"It's what I've been told," the barbarian said with a shrug. "Since I've never spoken to any other gods or goddesses I can't confirm or deny it. And yes, I *am* dedicated to Istiel."

"Well, then let me present you to the others of our group," Fearin said with a very suspicious heartiness. "After that you'll have to excuse us while we confer about the conquest we just made, but you'll be welcome to join us for dinner tonight. If you don't need to leave immediately, that is."

"No, I have no immediate plans," he answered with a bland smile that wasn't quite sent in my direction. "Dinner tonight with all of you will be fine."

"Good," Fearin said, then he took a moment to direct a drying spell toward Ranander and me as well as our new guest before beginning the introductions with Lokkel. The Healing Master sat in a chair between Talasin and Garam, who were introduced together to avoid any damaged feelings. Ranander came after those two and then Fearin himself. I, who of all of them should have been left out of it, was dragged in last. The barbarian had been very cool and formal with Garam, but didn't seem interested in treating me the same.

"So you're a Kenoss," he said with brows raised, but no sense of surprise in those very blue eyes. "That explains a lot of things. Looking at you, I wouldn't have guessed."

"There are a lot of things about me it isn't possible to guess by looking," I said, drawing my now-dry and mudless feet up to the left in my chair. "A wise man would understand he would be wasting his time trying."

"I'm told that wisdom comes with age," he returned, giving me a polite smile. "I guess I'll just have to wait. And speaking of waiting, Master Fearin, do you have some place for me to wait while you and the others confer?"

"I'll have some of the guards take you to an empty apartment," Fearin responded at once, gesturing toward the door his guest had come in by. "If you need anything, just let one of them know."

The barbarian nodded to the rest of us before going along with Fearin, and we didn't have to wait long before the man of Power was back. He returned with a deep thoughtfulness to his expression and stride, and finally looked up to find us all staring at him.

"You seem to have proved he can't be one of us," Garam said for the entire group, working to sound moderately polite. "If you're keeping him around because you want a pet, I've always found dogs to be superior to barbarians."

"He has a tie here that could very well make him extremely useful to us," Fearin said with faint distraction. "I'll have to find out if my feelings are in line with what's wanted, but I don't expect to be disagreed with. If he joins us for reasons of his own, his being invisible in the sight of all gods but his own could be worked to our definite advantage."

"But only if that tie encourages him to stay, something she won't be doing," I said, annoyed enough to make the statement in front of everyone. "I don't like him and I don't want him anywhere near me."

"If someone else disagrees with you, you'll have to *learn* to like him," Fearin said, all distraction gone from the blue eyes that held to me. "And there's something more to this, something you aren't mentioning. Why is he being so persistent? Does he imagine himself in love with you?"

"Hardly," I said to the accompaniment of Garam's snort of ridiculing laughter. "I'm not the sort to inspire men to feelings like that. Other feelings, yes; that sort, no."

"Then why did he tell me you're looking too gaunt to be really healthy?" Fearin countered.

"He said he'd take it as a personal favor if I was able to fatten you up a little."

"The answer's perfectly obvious," I said, keeping my expression straight. "He has a weakness for fat women, and hopes that once you make me one he'll *then* fall in love with me. Barbarians are like that, I understand."

"That's very amusing," Fearin said, showing nothing of amusement himself while ignoring the chuckling from most of the others. "You're saying you don't know why he's here, and have no interest or intention of finding out. I'll be checking that point later on as well, and if someone else *wants* you to find out I think you will."

Having threatened me with Diin-tha I thought Fearin was finally ready to get on with our reason for being together, but I was wrong.

"And since we're on the subject, I'm told that Prince Ijarin isn't the only one to notice how badly you're doing with eating," Fearin continued. "I want to see you fill up a plate and start eating, and I want to see you do it now."

"Do you," I said, beginning to get really angry, but then a thought occurred to me. A want for a want ought to work, and then the waiting would be over. "Well, I'm prepared to do just as you asked - if I first have your word that at the end of this meeting everyone will be told exactly what happened last night in the Guest Pavilion. Do we have a deal?"

He hesitated as he studied me, thoughts chasing each other around behind his eyes, and then he nodded.

"All right, it's a deal," he agreed. "You have my word, so the next thing you'll have is a meal. Do it now, so we can get on with this meeting."

He actually waited until I got up, filled a plate with the still-fresh food, and then returned to my chair. The others were watching us both with interest, curiosity, and lack of understanding, but no one said or asked anything. They seemed to feel they could wait, and didn't yet know how right they were.

As soon as I was seated again Fearin began to talk about what had already been done in the city, and then he got to what still needed doing. In two days half our troops would be started off early toward our next objective, and later on the rest of us would follow. The city and its people had to be a settled issue by then, no excuses and no mistakes.

I let the talk swirl around me without really listening, giving most of my attention to the food I was actually almost enjoying. In a very short while everyone would know the truth about me, and then all the friendliness and concern would be over. I would be back to the position I was destined to be in for the rest of my life, and that would be that.

"... have Ranander examine them first thing tomorrow," Fearin was saying to Talasin as I put my emptied plate aside. "As soon as he tells you a group of men are being truthful about their willingness to be loyal to us, have them moved out of confinement and merged into our army. They'll march with the first group, and no more than three of them will be assigned together." Talasin nodded without looking up, his hands and eyes busy with the notes he made on a rough piece of paper with a cloth-covered bit of charcoal. Garam also had notes which he was already studying, but Ranander and Lokkel had none. When Fearin had said something to Lokkel about healing those of the city we needed for a specific purpose, Lokkel had simply nodded.

"All right, that should cover it for now," Fearin said, turning away from Talasin. All the rest of us were sitting but the High Master had stayed on his feet. "Tomorrow I'll need *your* services, Aelana, or sooner if the rain should stop. One of the Chief Administrator's people escaped our net, and has to be hiding in the city. I need that man, so you'll have to find him."

I took my own turn at nodding, realizing that Fearin had done some research into my abilities as he'd said he would. Once the rain stopped I should be able to find his fugitive, and that no matter *where* the man was hiding.

"Wouldn't it be more effective if I assigned men to quarter the city in a regular search pattern?" Garam asked, back to frowning at me. "As a former slave she may know most of the bolt holes there are, but we have no guarantee the man is *in* one of them. After all, he *wasn't* a

slave."

"That has nothing to do with why Aelana will be the one leading the search," Fearin answered, finally going to an empty chair to Garam's left and my right and dropping into it. Ranander now sat between us, and was suddenly paying even more attention than he had been. "It has to do with Aelana's abilities, which it now seems time to discuss. I'll want some of your men going with her, Prince Garam, but *she'll* be in charge."

Garam nodded automatically, his frown still with him, his eyes, like everyone else's, directly on me. It was finally time, and I suddenly wished Fearin would hurry up and get it over with.

"I'm sure you heard it mentioned at our last gathering that Aelana is Shadowborn," Fearin said, apparently more than ready to grant my wish. "Even I didn't know precisely what that meant, but ever since I've been finding out. A little here, a little there... "

He let the words trail off very briefly, making me think he'd changed his mind, but he was apparently only taking some care in choosing his next words.

"I still don't know anything like all of it, but here's what I've gotten so far," he went on after the short pause. "There are a people called the Inadni, who centuries ago began to associate themselves with the Kenossi. All Kenossi young are called Life Seekers, and they're trained from infancy to compete against one another for the privilege of life. They're tested every year at a different level, and those who haven't learned their lessons well enough don't survive the testing. At puberty the children take the hardest test of all, and if they survive they're accepted as adult Kenossi and allowed to reproduce themselves."

Talasin and Lokkel looked at me as though needing verification of what had been said, but I didn't understand why. Fearin had been accurate enough in his summation, even though he hadn't told it all.

"At the puberty rites is where the Inadni come in," Fearin went on. "Once a year they choose three Kenoss youths and take them away to be trained as Shadowborn. What happens to the chosen ones after their training isn't known, but the three are always from among the best of the winners. In her own year of winning, Aelana was chosen."

"I thought I heard somewhere that only men are chosen," Garam said, frowning in an effort to recapture the memory. "No one seems to know more about it than that - except for all sorts of unbelievable rumors - but that part was certain even though where the men came from wasn't."

"I understand that Aelana is the only exception to that," Fearin said with a nod. "She tells me no one knows why she was chosen, and the Inadni didn't bother to enlighten anyone. She stayed with it until she'd reached the twenty-fourth level, and then she turned her back and walked away. The Inadni apparently couldn't stop her, but the god Bellid wasn't pleased. That's why she ended up as a slave and had so much trouble escaping."

"You're still not telling them about last night," I said, ignoring the knowing looks I was getting from the others. They all understood what it meant to have a god angry with you - or thought they did.

"I'm *getting* to last night," Fearin said with forced patience, barely glancing at me. "They have to hear the background first, to understand why you were assigned to the protection of the girls. I could have put men at that door, but it wouldn't have been the same."

"I still don't understand why not," Garam said, questioning rather than arguing. "A dozen men should have guaranteed success a lot more thoroughly than a single girl."

"A single *Shadowborn* who, legend has it, is worth more than a dozen men," Fearin corrected.

"Shadowborn are given the Learning, which lets them change from what they are into whatever they must be. Some of you may have heard that five men tried to get past Aelana last night, four of them armored, all of them armed. I have no doubt that they really did try, but none of them lived long enough to do it. Their bodies were still there when our own men reached the Pavilion to relieve Aelana."

"There's been some whispering among the men about that," Talasin said, curiosity in the comment. "No one would tell me the details involved, and I decided not to upset them more by

pressing. Is that the reason the guard obeyed you earlier, Aelana?"

"That's the reason," Fearin said, answering for me. "They had to call *me* to get Aelana away from the door, and even I had to ask for help from our Guardian. At that point she was no longer Aelana, only a Shadowborn, and if we'd tried to go past her she would have done to us what she'd previously done to the enemy."

"Which was what?" Garam asked, the words very neutral. "All she had in the way of weapons was a dagger. How hard is it to get past one fighter with a dagger?"

"*Aelana* had the dagger," Fearin said with a sigh. "The Shadowborn used her dagger, then went to teeth and claws when the dagger was temporarily lost. When I got there there was a deep darkness surrounding the Shadowborn, and nothing could be seen of her but two red, glowing eyes. The bodies of her first kills were scattered on the floor in front of her, torn and bloody sacrifices to the skill of a Shadowborn. I doubt if even our Guardian could have made any of our men try that skill a second time."

"Which doesn't mean they're cowards," Garam said, understanding Fearin had included *himself* in on that statement. "It means they're smart enough not to go up against something they haven't a prayer of besting. You know, I wish I'd been told about this sooner. Special tactics designed around a Shadowborn can be the prettiest set of plans you'd want to see. And I knew she wasn't just another female. Didn't I tell you that, Talasin?"

"You certainly did, Garam," Talasin answered, rubbing his lips to hide a smile. Garam was now looking at me with the strangest expression, a mixture of pride and extreme satisfaction and possessiveness and - almost attraction. "But let's not forget I was the one who pulled her from the stream. That has to be at least as important, if not more so."

"But I made friends with her first," Ranander chimed in, not even glancing at the frown I could feel myself wearing. "And she even likes me, even though she won't admit it."

"What is the *matter* with all of you?" I burst out, looking from one to the other of those three idiots. "Don't you understand what Fearin is telling you? Having a Shadowborn in your midst means *no* one is safe, not even him! You all sound as though you think this is a game of some kind!"

"We don't play games during a campaign, and I have no worries about my safety," Fearin himself answered, sounding just as casual as the other three had. "The Shadowborn is only one part of you, and not the part we associate with on a regular basis. That means there's nothing for *any* of us to worry about."

"No, that means you still don't understand what Shadowborn is about," I came back, looking at him with all the exasperation I was filled with. "It isn't just a single part of me, it colors everything I see and do. I hate it more than I've hated anything in my entire life, but there are times when I can't resist the draw of it, the *need* to merge with the Learning and use it. People die horribly when I do that, but I still can't stop myself."

"You seem to think that makes you totally different from the rest of us," Talasin put in, drawing my attention from Fearin. By that time I noticed I was on my feet, glaring around at that bunch of fools. "If you believe this company is made up of the sweetly innocent, *you're* the one who doesn't understand. Do you have any idea how many men died last night, simply because I led the attack against this city?"

"And how many more went because *I* gave the word?" Garam added in agreement, his dark eyes unmoving from my face. "I was busy last night removing certain key military commanders, the ones who knew what they were doing and could therefore have given us trouble. The ones I missed last night I took care of this morning, just to be certain they don't start trouble among the prisoners."

"And something of the same can be said for the rest of us as well," Fearin contributed to close the circle. "Ranander went through the civilian population and culled any man or woman he *knew* would make trouble for us. We put them together and sold them as slaves. Master Lokkel cast a protective health spell around all of us, designed to bounce back any sickness or

withering spell onto the one who cast it. How many lesser Healing Masters were caught by that, Lokkel?"

"More than half a dozen, I'm told," the Healing Master answered, looking very pleased.

"They had no idea *I* was guarding our well-being, otherwise they probably wouldn't have tried that way of saving the city."

"I'm sure of it," Fearin said very neutrally, his gaze once again returned to me. "And if anyone understands the lure of your Learning, it has to be me. Have you any idea how much Power I have at my command, and how tempting is the thought of using that Power for my own satisfaction? If I decided to disapprove of something, no one around me would be able to do that something. If I thought something was a really good idea, everyone would *have* to do it. Power of any sort is a temptation to the one who has it; maintaining moderation is the only indication of true strength."

"But what if your strength isn't up to it?" I countered, even more upset than I had been. "What if you fight with everything you've got, and it isn't enough? I worked hard to acquire the Learning and the skills that go with it, experienced satisfaction with each successfully completed level. There's a part of me that *enjoys* the thought of using what I've learned... A part that shows itself when I least expect it... What if I lose the fight at the wrong time and one or more of *you* dies?"

Even as I said the words I could feel the black tide lapping at my mind, hear the siren song calling me to submerge in the blood-warm waters. A Shadowborn never worried about not having enough strength; endless strength and power were there, and satisfaction, that ultimate, unmatched satisfaction...

"Aelana, no!" Fearin said sharply, his hands suddenly on my arms. "You don't *have* to give into it, and you don't *want* to! Remember that, you don't *want* to!"

I took a very deep, very ragged breath as I realized he'd pulled me out of it, and then there were other hands on me, all guiding me backward to my chair. Voices fought with one another, trying to demand if I was all right, and then Ranander was there with a cup of steaming broth, meant to chase away the bone-deep cold.

"I've never seen anything like that," Garam's voice came through, as excited as a child at the fair. "It was starting to get *dark* around her, black instead of the blue of magic... "

"And she was fading *into* that black," Talasin said, the words thoughtful and interested. "I wonder if it was really happening or if we just *saw* it like that... "

"That's right, get some of that broth into you," Fearin said, his hand gently brushing back my hair. "And that should prove whether or not you have the strength to hold it off. It went so far your eyes were starting to glow red, but you pushed it away and didn't let it happen."

"But I didn't do it alone," I told him shakily, looking up to see those blue eyes directly on me.

"What you said helped me pull out of it, otherwise I would have been taken. What about the next time, or the one after that...?"

"I'll still be here," he interrupted, refusing to look away. "Any time you need my help, it's yours for the asking. You can handle it yourself most of the time, but any time you can't - "

"You just ask *him*," Ranander put in from my right with all the confidence in the world. "Fearin is there for all of us, and since you're one of us he'll be there for you too. Isn't that right, High Master?"

"Yes. Of course. Absolutely right." Fearin was agreeing with Ranander, but for some reason he was also giving the other man something of a dirty look. "I appreciate your confidence and your support of me, Ranander, but I *can* speak for myself. And I wanted to add-"

"I wonder if *I* could help," Talasin said, interrupting without realizing it. "If a time comes when Fearin isn't around, Aelana, look for me instead and we'll give it a try. You shouldn't have to fight like that all alone, so-"

"So she can also try *me*," Garam stated, interrupting in his turn, but not only Talasin. Fearin had opened his mouth again, but not soon enough. "When it comes to fighting, I'm the one with

the most experience. Not to mention the fact that she and I understand each other -"

"There may well be a healing spell that would be of assistance," Lokkel put in with a finger to his lips, his gaze distracted. "I'll certainly need to consult my books, and then -"

"And don't forget friendship," Ranander said very firmly. "Friendship is one of the strongest forces there is, so if anyone can be of help I certainly -"

"All right, enough!" Fearin shouted, ending the babble that was making me dizzy. "I know you're all offering to help, but you're driving the girl into a corner with your suggestions. Are you all right, Aelana?"

Since I had no idea I shook my head vaguely at him, put aside the half-finished broth, then simply got out of there.

Chapter 9

I went back to the apartment I'd been given, chased away the servants who showed up wanting to do things for me, then sat down to watch the rain. One corner of the second outer room was like the porch room I'd come from, two windows at the angle that were totally open with only an overhang keeping the rain out. The rest of the apartment was stuffy even with the drapes pulled back, and I couldn't seem to breathe well...

I took a deep breath of the rain-laden, cooler air coming from the windows, and for the tenth time tried to understand what had happened. Fearin had told them all what I was, they had almost seen it happen in front of their eyes, and they still refused to react the way everyone else had. Even the people who had *never* seen...

"They have to be crazy," I muttered for the twentieth time, shifting on the wide lounge seat I had chosen to stretch out on. The thing was covered in silk rather than with leather, which made it both comfortable and uncomfortable to lie on. Silk is fine when you hang it on walls where it can't be torn or dirtied; sitting on it, though...

"They *have* to be crazy." I said it again because the statement was so obviously true, but I still couldn't understand. *Why* were they so crazy that they seemed willing to accept me, and when would it stop? How many times would the light appear and disappear before they suddenly came to their senses?

"Well, I'm glad to see you were given a very pleasant apartment," a voice suddenly said, and I didn't have to turn to know it was Fearin. "It's bright and elegant even in the dimness of a rainy day, and this chamber seems made for comfortable conversations. Are you feeling any better now?"

"No," I answered, still staring out at the rain. "As a matter of fact I'm feeling worse."

"I think everyone understands now why you just ran out like that," he said, coming around to where I could see him. "You were expecting fear and hatred from us, and when it didn't come you were caught off balance. Do you understand yet *why* the fear and hatred didn't come?"

"Of course," I said with a shrug. "The bunch of you are crazy. No one but crazy people would offer welcome and fellowship to a - a -"

"Shadowborn," he finished when I couldn't find quite the appropriate word, those blue eyes looking down at me soberly. "But that's where you're making your mistake. The one who was offered welcome and fellowship was Aelana, someone who doesn't make excuses or complain about how hard it is for her. All she does is accept whatever task is assigned her, and then she goes ahead and does it. Prince Garam was the one most impressed by that."

"He seems to have forgotten I didn't volunteer to be one of you," I said, sliding down a little on the silk as I looked away from him. "If complaining or making excuses could get me loose, I'd complain and make excuses."

"I doubt that," Fearin said with a small sound of ridicule. "But you might remember that others don't keep from complaining simply because it does no good. They indulge anyway, in the

process driving everyone crazy. We appreciate having your silent assistance and wanted you to know it."

"What you mean is you *think* you appreciate it," I corrected, still looking at the rain rather than at him. "That should last until something happens to turn all your stomachs, or I still lose it in *spite* of all the help I've been offered. If you don't mind, I'd rather not wait for one of those things to happen. Thank the rest of them for their good intentions, but tell them I pass."

"You'd rather have them ignoring or abusing you than being friendly," he interpreted, a flatness to the statement. "Knowing how close the Kenossi are as a people, you can't have gotten the attitude from them. It must have come from the Inadni, then, an obvious effort to separate you from the rest of humanity. I thought you'd decided not to listen to them any longer."

"I'm *not* 'listening' to them," I protested, turning my head soon enough to see him sitting down next to me. "That particular lesson was one I learned on my own - and if you need to sit down that badly, find an unoccupied chair. This one is taken."

"What are you afraid of?" he asked very mildly, one hand having pushed the side of his blue robe out of the way. "Didn't you say you could best me even *without* the Learning? And I'm not threatening you in any way, all I'm doing is sitting here. Is that anything to be afraid of?"

"I didn't say I was afraid of you," I answered in what was almost a mutter, forced to look away again from those very blue eyes. "I - don't like having anyone - this close to me. It - goes against all the training I've had, and - I *told* you how my senses have been heightened, made sharper-"

"I believe that means you can tell I didn't come here just to talk," he said, a gentle amusement in his voice as his right hand crossed me to lean on the lounge to my left. "Your senses must be *very* sharp, but there's still nothing for you to be afraid of."

"Not wanting something doesn't mean you're afraid of it," I said, the words coming out fainter than I liked. "If I'm the best you can do, High Master, then your strength must be a lot less than you claim. This city has to be filled with women who would fight for your attention, so why don't you - "

"By all the gods," he exclaimed softly, and his hand came to my face to turn it more fully toward him. "I couldn't quite see it happening, but somehow you're uglier now than you were five heartbeats ago. Nothing about your face has really changed, but - Were you able to do this while you were a slave?"

I made no effort to answer him, damning the fact that his ability had helped him to notice, but he nodded just as though I'd spoken.

"Yes, of course you were able to do it," he said, absolutely certain. "You're not the kind of woman who could have been forced to constantly serve guardsmen and still have stayed sane. You made the ugliness so intense they never came near you - but something about that bothers you."

Those blue eyes were so sharp they seemed to be boring straight through my head. He was searching for the answer to his not-quite question, and it wasn't long before he found it.

"Now I understand," he said, his hand leaving my face to stroke my hair. "You were able to keep *yourself* untouched, but couldn't do anything to help the women around you. It must have felt as though you were buying your own safety at their expense."

"That's exactly what I did do," I confirmed his guess, this time making no effort to look away.

"My ... participation would have eased the burden on them, but I couldn't make myself do it. And at one time I actually boasted about how brave I was."

"You must have been a child," he said, the hand on my hair gentle. "Only children think strictly in black and white, with no shades of gray. The bravest fighter I ever knew had one point of fear he couldn't handle, and that no matter how hard he tried. He was terrified at the thought of being stung by an insect, and would break and run at the first sight of a bee or wasp. If you put a dagger to his throat he would laugh at you, but one small bee..."

"Is that supposed to be the same?" I demanded. "How many people suffered because he ran from an insect? And even if he hadn't run, would that have guaranteed *his* being stung rather than someone else? It didn't - "

"Stop enjoying all that guilt," he interrupted sternly, much of the air of understanding patience gone. "You saved yourself without being able to do the same for others, but that makes you fortunate, not guilty. You didn't sacrifice the others, not when your being brutalized wouldn't have kept the same thing from happening to them. The ones you took unfair advantage of were the guardsmen, but if *that* bothers you you're beyond all hope. And besides, it was their own fault for being concerned with nothing but appearances."

"Is that supposed to mean you're better than they are because you're not?" I asked, letting the subject be changed from a situation he didn't understand as clearly as he thought he did.

"You're far superior to those guardsmen because you can see the beauty of my heart and personality?"

"Beauty isn't exactly the word I would have chosen," he said with a grin, showing nothing of the insult I'd been hoping for. "Just because I know you're being abrasive on purpose doesn't mean I can keep myself from reacting to that abrasiveness. No, the attraction I feel has nothing to do with beauty, and I can't really tell you what it *does* have to do with."

"I can," I said with as much of a shrug as it's possible to perform when half lying down. "I said the bunch of you were crazy, and that obviously goes double for *you*. Please move out of the way so I can get up."

"Women always think men are crazy," he said with a soft laugh, deliberately leaning closer rather than moving away as I'd asked. "You don't understand us any more than we understand you, but that doesn't mean we're crazy. There's something about you that draws me the way my summons draws Power, Aelana, and I want to show you that I'm serious about this. You say I can have the most beautiful women in the city if I want them? Well, I say - maybe some other time."

His right hand moved under my back to pull me closer, his left hand tangled in my hair, and then he was kissing me. I'd been braced against the hard press of an intrusive mouth against mine and was all ready to fight, but his kiss was enough of a shock to keep me from reacting immediately. Rather than hurting me in any way he was being exquisitely gentle, his lips soft, his hold no more than firm, even his beard silky against my face. His mouth tasted mine and shared the taste of his own, more of a giving than a taking.

"I'd appreciate it if you would kiss me back," he murmured, now touching his lips to my cheek.

"This sort of thing works out best when it's a joint effort."

And then his lips were covering mine again, giving me no chance to say anything even if I'd been able to think of something. I could smell his desire clearly, and it was making me feel strange in a way I'd never experienced before. What he was doing wasn't right, but I was too confused to figure out in which direction the wrong lay.

"Come on now, won't you give it even a small try?" he said again, his smile very definitely amused. "I've always heard it said that a Kenoss Life Seeker never gives up, but you haven't even gotten started."

His words were like the clang of an alarm bell in the dead of night, waking me into instant action. I *was* a Kenoss and no Kenossi woman ever just sat there and let herself be taken over. I stiffened my right hand and sent the edge toward his face even as I began to bring up my legs to use them for kicking, but none of it worked out right. Instead of being taken by surprise Fearin seemed to have been expecting my reaction, and his response was even more immediate than my attack.

The arm that had been around me was abruptly blocking my first blow, and then all of him was in motion. His body shifted to hold mine down, his forearm deflecting another strike, and then his hands were wrapped around my wrists, forcing my arms above my head. I struggled with every ounce of strength I had, cursing the awkward position I'd started from, finding it

impossible not to spit a single word in the language of the Strong and Victorious.

"Now, now, none of that," he warned, not understanding the word but apparently getting the general idea. "I told you I had some experience with hand-to-hand fighting, I just didn't mention that I'm considered fairly good. Now *you* tell *me*: is this an Earning?"

"You tricked me!" I spat, still unable to break the hold of those big hands of his. "First you provoked the fight, not caring that you'd forced me into an impossible position, and then - " "Never mind the frills and dressing," he interrupted, the words implacable. "A Kenossi man can't simply claim a woman, he has to Earn her by showing he's a better fighter. But once he does that he's entitled to her full cooperation, which she's bound to give. Am I right?"

"You're not a Kenoss," I pointed out flatly, beginning to feel even more trapped. "You can't - " "But you *are* a Kenoss," he interrupted again. "You're bound to honor an Earning under all circumstances, not just with Kenoss men. The binding doesn't mention who you have to honor it with, just that you have to do it."

"I've never heard of a man who *wasn't* a Kenoss accomplishing an Earning," I muttered, trying to find a way out, but there wasn't any. He stared down at me, waiting for me to understand that, knowing I simply didn't *want* to understand. My people had twice sent me away from them, but I couldn't forget or ignore what they'd taught.

"Say it out loud," Fearin directed, obviously reading my expression. "If I've won, I want to hear you say so."

"You've won," I conceded flatly, hating the need to say the words. It didn't really matter that he'd caught me off-balance. I shouldn't have *been* off-balance, but since I was I deserved whatever I got.

"Your hearty congratulations are modestly accepted," he said with a grin, finally letting me go.

"Now we can both get comfortable and do this the right way."

He stood up to take off his robe, then began to open his shirt. His chest was covered with fine blond hair, lighter than his beard, and the muscles in his arms were deeply creased. It was unexpected to find a man of Power in such good physical shape, unexpected and hardly pleasing. If he'd been even a shade slower...

"All you've done so far is sit up," he pointed out as he did his own sitting in a nearby chair, the better to pull off his boots. "Get rid of that tunic and by then I ought to be with you."

Hearing that left me less than delighted, but it wasn't possible to argue. He'd achieved an Earning, and I was the one he'd Earned. I lifted up to get the bottom of the tunic out from under me, pulled it off and tossed it away, then lay down flat and just waited.

Fearin hadn't been rushing madly to get out of his clothes, but he also hadn't been dawdling. All too soon he was lying down to my right on the lounge that was no longer as wide as it had been, and his right arm came to cross my body again.

"You've regained some of the roundness girls are supposed to have, but you're still too thin," he said, examining me with his eyes. "Lokkel's healing spell did most of the work so far, but now you have to help it. I don't want to catch you refusing any more meals."

He paused as though waiting for me to say something, but I had nothing to say. He might have managed to corner me, but the rest of what I did was none of his business.

"Even so, you really are looking a lot better than when we first found you," he finally went on, his tone softened as his hand slid beneath my back. "Are you this reluctant because it will be the first time for you?"

"No," I answered, staring at the rain past the line of his arm. I just wished he would stop all the talking and simply get it over with.

"It's not the first time, but you're still reluctant," he summed up, his stare something I could feel. "And not just reluctant, but almost clenching your teeth. Are you afraid I'll hurt you?" I could feel a faint, humorless smile curving my lips, but there were no words to go with it. Afraid? Not the way *he* meant it.

"All right, so you're the great big Kenoss Shadowborn who isn't afraid of anything," he said

with some irritation, once again reading my expression. "You'll kill anyone who hurts you, and you have the skill to do it. But there's still something bothering you, and I'd like to know what it is."

"What is or isn't bothering me is none of your business," I said, impatience beginning to touch me. "You're supposed to have Earned your pleasure, not a conversation. Either get it done *now* or get out of here and leave me alone."

"Ah, so you think it's my pleasure alone that I've Earned," he said, sounding as though he'd suddenly learned something important. "I believe that tells me what's bothering you, but I won't simply say you're wrong. This is something you have to be shown, so do just as I tell you. You won't be sorry."

I hadn't the faintest idea of what he was talking about, but I wasn't given the chance to ask questions. The first thing I was ordered to do was kiss him, and it suddenly gave me the strangest feeling.

Back when I was still young and not yet chosen by the Inadni, when the other girls my age and I had first noticed that boys weren't simply there to be competed against... We'd taken several opportunities to see how well they kissed, knowing those of us who survived would one day be Earned by one of the survivors of *their* number...

Those first kisses had been very much like the ones Fearin was insisting on, short and experimental, a testing as to whether or not we really liked it. It was clear he *did* like it, but he seemed to be giving me the chance to make up my own mind. I was fairly sure I *didn't* like the kissing, but back when I'd been younger it hadn't been terrible at all...

After a little while Fearin made me put my hands on him, and then his own hands began to caress my body. He didn't stop the kissing, just added the touching, and it was all making me very uncomfortable. None of that was like what I'd been expecting, and I simply didn't understand...

And then I discovered I no longer cared about understanding. His body was hard and strong under my hands, the stroking of his own hands was making my breath come fast, and the scent of his desire - ! It all made my head swim so badly that I found myself tasting his lips and mouth with my tongue, wanting at the same time to taste even more...

When his fingers slid between my thighs I gasped, but not with upset or pain. I *wanted* him to touch me there, wanted more than a touch, but his lips and tongue were too busy with my right nipple for him to notice. My hips moved to the rhythm of his stroking fingers, and my left hand found the arrow of his desire and squeezed with strength. He groaned low in his throat at that, but refused to abandon his licking and kissing.

But it wasn't long before he *had* to abandon what he was doing. His need was quickly growing beyond his control, and there was no turning back. When he put himself between my knees I felt a brief touch of the loathing I'd live with for so long, but then he had entered me and the feeling was gone. What he was doing was something we both wanted, and although I hadn't expected to feel this way there was no doubt that I did.

After that there was nothing but pleasure, a sharing pleasure I hadn't known was possible. Fearin continued to guide me even as he stroked deep and kissed me almost as deeply, and all of his suggestions made it even better. The pleasure went on for eternity before it ended sublimely for us both, and afterward we lay side by side, facing one another.

"For someone who wanted it over with as fast as possible, you didn't seem to mind working to keep it going," he said after a short while, gentle amusement in his voice as his hand brushed back my sweat-soaked hair. "I give you my thanks for that, as well as for all the rest of it."

"Why would you thank me for something we both enjoyed?" I asked, raising my eyes to his face while my fingers continued to toy with his chest hair. "And why do I find touching you so pleasant even now, when I don't feel that same desire any longer?"

"I'm delighted that you find touching me pleasant," he said with a soft laugh. "It proves that you really did find the experience as enjoyable as I did. As far as thanking you goes, I was

taught that a gentleman should always thank the lady who favors him. Haven't you ever been thanked before?"

His question immediately brought back the memories his actions had temporarily buried, so I moved out of his gentle hold to sit alone. Using both hands got *all* the damp hair out of my eyes, and then I was able to look at the pouring rain again.

"Obviously that was an extremely stupid question," he said from behind me, and then his hand came to my bare back. "If you'd like to talk about it, I'd be glad to listen."

I didn't even need to think about it before shaking my head, not when there were details that couldn't be discussed. I'd enjoyed what Fearin had brought to me, but there were still things about me he didn't know.

"Well, if you don't want to talk, at least come back here and let me hold you," he said then. "I have to be getting back to the work waiting for me, but I'd first like to spend a little more time with you."

"I really don't understand why you took the time to come here in the first place," I said, letting his hand on my arm coax me back to lying flat. "We haven't exactly been getting along beautifully since we met, so why did you do this?"

"When you ask questions like that, those big blue eyes of yours always watch carefully for the part of the answer that doesn't come in words," he said with a smile, doing nothing to avoid those eyes he'd mentioned. "No, we haven't been getting along beautifully since we met, but that's the precise reason I'm here. You're not the only one who expects people to react to them in one, unvarying way and I know exactly how hard that is to take after a while."

I frowned at his answer for a moment, but then the obvious explanation came clear. Fearin was a High Master, a man in control of an incredible amount of Power. Most people would tremble at the mere thought of disagreeing with him, not to mention getting him angry. It was true I hadn't done much in the way of bowing and scraping, but not because I'd been trying to impress him...

"I know that that's simply the way you are," he said with a laugh, once again reading my expression. "I started out being furious with that way, but it quickly became too attractive to make me angry. You don't have to be afraid I'll ask something of you that you aren't prepared to give; we'll let that part of it take its time, and see what, if anything, develops for the both of us. But I *am* going to ask a favor of you."

"What kind of favor?" I said, finding it impossible not to narrow my eyes at him. If he thought I'd jump to do as he wanted just because -

"Stop being so suspicious," he scolded with another laugh. "I've already taken full advantage of you, so what's left to worry about? The favor I'm going to ask is this: don't spend your time wondering why our group accepts you or when it's going to end. Just enjoy the acceptance while you have it, and if it ends, well, then it will be over and you can go back to the way things were. Until then, why waste the pleasure of the association by refusing to participate?"

His expression had grown sober again, and his arms around me were part of the acceptance he'd mentioned. I still didn't feel right about any of that, but his idea was really tempting.

"Store the memories against a time I'll have to do without the real thing," I summed up, tasting the sweetness of the concept with my mind. "But how much more will it hurt to lose something you've let yourself enjoy?"

"If you stop to think about it, nothing lasts forever but the gods," he answered, leaning down to kiss my brow. "Normal people lose things they enjoy or even love all the time, but most of them have learned to accept what they have while they have it. Fortunately or unfortunately we're not the same as they, but it's a lesson we could make use of. Will you at least *try* to grant me my favor?"

"Suppose I *think* about trying?" I offered, certain there had to be something wrong with so attractive an idea. "I'll think about it and then I'll let you know."

"Well, I did say I found your way of doing things attractive, didn't I," he said with a small

headshake and sigh. "If you have to think about it first go ahead, but don't spend too long in thought. Remember the frog who got trampled by a herd of rabbits when it couldn't decide which way to jump."

"Frog?" I echoed as he sat up to get off the lounge. "*Herd of rabbits?*"

"Certainly," he agreed while reaching for the first of his clothing. "Haven't you ever heard that old story?"

I know I was seriously considering that something had happened to his mind, but then I saw the twinkle in his eyes behind that very neutral expression and understood he was teasing me. That was another thing that hadn't happened since I was very young, and it made me feel even stranger than the kissing.

"I have work waiting for me, but you don't," he said when he'd settled his robe around him again. "At least you don't have work right now, so take advantage of that. Relax and enjoy the peace and quiet, and I'll see you later at dinner."

He leaned down to kiss me full on the lips, letting the kiss linger for a moment, and then he was striding out to see to his work. He'd said I had nothing to do, but he was wrong. I had thinking to do, about strange, painful, attractive subjects, but I was in no hurry at all to get to that thinking. I lay on the wide lounge with the cool, rain-laden air caressing me, and didn't let a single thought spoil the pleasure.

Chapter 10

The dimness of a rainy day had changed to the dark of a rainy evening, and servants had earlier come in to light the lamps. The two girls had been startled to find me sitting naked in the dark, but I'd distracted them by telling them to fill a bath for me. I'd finally gotten to the thinking I'd had to do, and I'd needed hot water to soak the knots from my muscles.

Now I stood in front of the long mirror in the bed chamber, studying my reflection and trying to wipe the frown from my face. After the bath I'd grudgingly put on the clothes Fearin had provided that morning, and they were trying to bring back unpleasant memories. The trousers and tunic were a ribbed, tight-fitting cloth, the trousers in pale gray, the short tunic in bright yellow. The dark gray, mid-calf boots were a very soft leather, so soft it was the next best thing to going barefoot.

And all of it was disturbingly like the practice clothing we wore while studying with the Inadni... Except for the colors. I forced myself to concentrate on the colors, and also on the silver belt Fearin had included. In training Shadowborn wore color only on their headbands, and never would have allowed the presence of a metal belt, even a tight-cinching one. Those things made all the difference, and I would have to remember that and concentrate on something else.

Like my face. I was finally able to smile faintly as I examined my features, turning my head back and forth. My hair was looking better after having been thoroughly washed, but Garam's original declarations about my ugliness wouldn't have changed. It was -

"Aelana, are you ready?" Fearin's voice called from the inner sitting room. "If you are, we're here to pick you up."

I was curious about who the "we" might be, and got the answer to that as soon as I joined them. Talasin and Garam stood with Fearin, and they all looked me over as I approached.

"Ah, you're wearing them," Fearin said, obviously referring to the clothes. "There's a faint chill in the air tonight, so I'm glad you are. We'll go on to the dinner in a moment, but first I need to tell you three something Lokkel and Ranander have already been told."

That got him our attention, just as I'm sure he knew it would.

"I had a brief conversation with our Guardian," Fearin continued, his voice lower than it had been. "He's occupied with something now so we won't be having a gathering for a while, but he's very pleased with our efforts. There's only one major change he wants, and it's the one I

told you to expect: he feels that Prince Ijarin will be invaluable to us, so he wants us to do whatever's necessary to keep him with us."

Garam shook his head in resignation while Talasin simply nodded, and then it was time for *my* reaction. Fearin already had his eyes on me, waiting for it, knowing in advance how pleased I'd be.

"I agreed to use my skills as a Kenoss and a Shadowborn for this campaign," I said with a shrug. "If either of those things will keep the barbarian with us, you can count on me to supply them."

"Maybe that's what attracts him to her," Garam said with a deep chuckle while Fearin scowled. "He likes having women beat up on him, and knows how good a job she'll do. Let her try it, Fearin, and then we'll know for certain."

"Misplaced humor, Prince Garam, is in certain cases worse than no humor at all," Fearin responded, his displeasure still aimed in my direction. "Are you overlooking the fact that this is an order, and not one from me? Would you like to be the one held responsible for failing to obey that order?"

The question wasn't really aimed at Garam, but it still made his amusement disappear. All it did for me was produce frustration, that and resentful anger.

"Let's just relax and see how things go," Talasin said soothingly, and a glance showed he was talking to Fearin as well as to me. "If our Guardian wants it we'll have to give it to him, but maybe it will be easier than we expect. If we all work together it certainly should be, so let's not worry about it now. What I'd *like* to worry about is dinner, to keep me from starving where I stand."

"Starving!" Garam said to him with a ridiculing laugh. "You? You must have eaten four or five times today already, and I still don't understand where you put it. Or why you don't outweigh your horse."

"Those of us who work hard need food to keep us going," Talasin countered with a grin for Garam. "If you ever get to be one of us, you'll find that out. I wonder what they plan to serve." By that time we were started on our way out of my apartment, Fearin and I caught up by their nonsense and carried along. He and I both knew the argument wasn't over, but for the moment we'd let it lie.

The dinner turned out to be an almost formal affair, something I should have guessed from the semi-dress clothes Fearin and the others had been wearing. The room we walked into had a large table and an even larger number of servants, all there to help serve the feast. Ranander and Lokkel had arrived before us, but so had the barbarian Ijarin - *and* the twin princesses. The two girls had the big barbarian backed into a corner while they talked at him, leaving Ranander and Lokkel free to come over and greet us.

"Really, Fearin, you must have a word with Ranander," Lokkel said as they reached us, but surprisingly the Healing Master seemed on the verge of laughter. "He threw that poor man to the wolves without the slightest hesitation."

"They were going to start listing all their complaints and demands again as soon as they were through trying to force a beauty spell out of Master Lokkel," Ranander explained, looking totally unashamed. "I *knew* that, so I asked myself if they'd like to know that Ijarin is a crown prince. You can see what the answer was."

"I didn't think you were capable of that much cruelty even in self defense," Fearin told him, working to keep from laughing aloud. "Under other circumstances I would applaud your ingenuity, but you must remember what our Guardian said. If Prince Ijarin is talked to death we'll all be in trouble, so I'm afraid I'll have to ask Prince Talasin and Prince Garam to go to his rescue."

Fearin's two victims flinched at the order they'd just been given, but there was no way out of it for them. Fearin was trading two princes for one, obviously hoping the increase in numbers would offset the fact that they weren't *crown* princes. I hadn't thought I was in the mood to find

anything funny, but somehow that trade did it for me.

"I *hate* smirking females," Garam muttered, and I looked over at his glare to see that he meant *me*. "If I'm in too many pieces to help with the manhunt tomorrow, you'll find a lot less to smirk about."

With that he stomped off after a foot-dragging Talasin, which was a very lucky thing. If he hated smirking females, I didn't want to think how he'd react to grinning ones.

"I'll take just a moment to check everything, and then we can start the meal," Fearin said to the rest of us before he moved toward a door in the right-hand wall. I wondered where he was going and what sort of checking he would do, but wasn't left to wonder long.

"He's going to use the Power to make sure we won't be poisoned or attacked," Ranander supplied helpfully with a smile. "We can't really trust these people, you know, not after we conquered their city, but Fearin won't make things worse by checking where they can see him do it. There's a small retiring room behind that door, and he'll cast his spell there."

"And then it will finally be safe to indulge," Lokkel added, back to his usual impatience. "I've been waiting to sample that wine ever since I first heard about the Chief Administrator's cellars."

"Then it isn't possible to cast a healing spell that would 'heal' any poison there might be?" I asked, suddenly curious. "The poison would have to start to work before you could do anything about it?"

"Even if 'healing' the poison were possible, it wouldn't be possible with wine," Lokkel explained, unexpectedly patient and interested in answering. "Alcohol is in itself a poison, although one we're able to tolerate in moderation. If I attempted to 'heal' the wine, there would be no wine left when I was done. You see... "

He took my arm and guided me slowly toward the table as he spoke, giving all the details about healing and wine that I could possibly have wanted. We left Ranander behind us, a Ranander who hadn't looked very pleased. I'd gotten the distinct impression *he'd* wanted to talk to me, but Lokkel had taken over and walked me away. Very briefly I wondered what he'd wanted to say, then forgot about it. Ranander being Ranander, he'd certainly get around to telling me at another time.

It took longer than the moment Fearin had said it would, but after a while he was back and we were able to take our places at the table. His was at the head of the table to my left, and on his left he placed Talasin, one of the girls, Ranander, the second girl, and Garam. All three of the men looked as though they'd lost their appetites, but this time they weren't alone.

"Your place is here to my right, Prince Ijarin," Fearin said with an easy smile, hidden satisfaction behind it. "To your right will be Aelana, and to hers Master Lokkel. Let's all be seated."

There was a considerable amount of foot-shuffling while those on the other side of the table moved themselves to their places, but our side needed only a few steps to do the same. I could feel the barbarian's eyes on me again, as they'd been almost from the moment I walked in, but I continued to ignore him. Since Lokkel had been talking to me, Ijarin hadn't tried to come over; as I sat, I decided I'd see if it was possible to continue using the Healing Master in the same way for the rest of the meal.

"That food looks delicious," came from my left, a clear testing of my decision. "Which of the wines would you like to try first?"

"I won't be drinking," I answered without turning my head, then looked at Lokkel on my right.

"Was the wait worth it, Master Lokkel? Are the cellars living up to their reputation?"

"I'll need to taste the other vintages before knowing for certain," he answered, staring critically at the pretty pink wine in the glass goblet he held. "This one is definitely above average, but I haven't yet decided if it ranks as superior. The decision requires a bit more testing, I think."

He drained the goblet in a single gulp before holding it out to the nearest servant for refilling,

and that was when I knew my plans weren't going to work. You don't taste win by swallowing it whole; all you accomplish that way is eventual unconsciousness. The sinking feeling inside me was *not* on my face, I'm sure, but the same wasn't true for the grin I glimpsed on the face of Ijarin.

"Dinners like this can be very dull without someone to talk to," he said, a casual comment casually made. "You look better than you did earlier today, more rested and happier. Aren't you glad now that I turned up?"

I made a sound of ridicule to show what I thought of that comment, then reached for a piece of cheese. I was beginning to feel hungry, but didn't like the idea of eating while being stared at. "Did you know that I've been invited to join your inner group?" he asked after a brief pause. "Master Fearin believes I can be of help to all of you, and I'm considering whether or not to accept. I'd probably enjoy the experience and come away with a respectable amount of plunder, but I have enough wealth in the Far Mountains to make the idea of plunder only a minor consideration. What I find more important is how I'm treated by the people around me. It's unreasonable, I know, but I usually refuse to stay where I'm not wanted - by everyone." He said his piece and then leaned back to let a servant begin to fill his plate, showing with a gesture that he wanted a little of everything. Another servant came to my right to do the same for me, but I left her to her own devices while I seethed in frustrated anger. It was almost as though that miserable barbarian *knew* how important his staying was considered, and that I didn't dare test the temper of a god by being the one responsible for his leaving. He was trying to trap me, most likely because of that prophecy he'd mentioned.

The servants took their time filling our plates, a languid air demanded by the customs of upper class society in that city, but I didn't mind. It had come to me that only under very special circumstances can you win a battle simply by defending. Attack and counterattack are the usual keys to getting the job done, and I had the time to think along those lines for a while before the servants finally faded back to let me see an Ijarin who was paying more attention to me than to his food.

"Living all alone must be very hard for you," I commented with only a glance in his direction while reaching for another small wedge of cheese. "Mountain retreats may provide scenery, but they don't do much in the area of companionship. That must be why you're trying so hard here."

"What are you talking about?" he asked in bewilderment, his food now forgotten entirely. "I don't live all alone, and I don't understand what would make you think I did."

"Why, it's obvious," I said, turning on my own version of surprise. "Didn't you just tell me that you refuse to stay places where you're not wanted by everyone? Since it would be impossible for *anyone* to find a place where every single person around wanted them there, the only alternative would be to live alone. And what will happen if even one of our guardsmen decides he dislikes having you around? Won't you have to leave right away, even if the rest of us don't want you to?"

By now I was looking at him with what I hoped was convincing innocence, but he didn't seem to notice. He was too annoyed to notice much of anything, the annoyance due, undoubtedly, to the fact that he couldn't think of what to say in answer. His attention shifted from me back to his food and stayed there, and I was finally able to turn to my own meal.

Most of the dishes weren't bad at all, and my servant had given me some of everything but the more exotic offerings. Pickled bat tongues, for instance, was an acquired taste, and those who haven't acquired it usually don't want any of the dish near them. With an appetite that was improving by the day I was able to do justice to the meal, but when I sat back with the goblet of water I'd asked for I had the definite feeling I'd soon be working off - or regretting - what I'd swallowed. I was being stared at again, and the stare looked like it had no intentions of being distracted elsewhere.

"Why are you so eager to be rid of me?" Ijarin demanded softly after a moment, his light blue

gaze unmoving. "Did I offend you by trying to rescue you? Does something about me, personally, offend you? What have I done?"

"You decided to use me without first finding out if I wanted to be used," I answered, caring nothing about the faint hurt that came along with his words. "You searched me out for a reason - *your* reason that had nothing to do with my needs and wants - and simply assumed I'd go along. I didn't like it when the Inadni did that to me as a child, and I dislike it even more now. Especially since you're not the Inadni. If you happen to like being taken advantage of, that's your business. For myself, I don't."

"I see," he said slowly, an odd expression having taken over his previous one. "These Inadni used you badly, and you believe I want to do the same."

"Well, don't you?" I said after sipping at my water. "If rescuing me was all that concerned you, you would have left as soon as you found out I didn't need rescuing. Instead you insisted I come along with you - again for your own reasons - and when I refused to do *that* you decided to stay. Now Fearin has asked you to join us, so you think you can use his decision to push me around. I don't know what good you expect it to do you, but if you want me to say I join the others in welcoming you, I'll be glad to. I join the others in welcoming you."

"You're glad to say it, but that doesn't mean you mean it," he interpreted, showing that he did indeed understand. "If I want you to mean it, I first have to prove I don't intend to use you badly. All right, that sounds fair enough."

"What do you mean, that sounds fair enough?" I demanded, seeing his nod as he turned toward the helping of sweets he'd been given for dessert. "What do you think you're going to do?"

"I'm going to join the group just as I've been invited to do," he answered, giving his whole attention to the chocolate-covered fruit. "Beyond that... Well, who knows? Things do happen, even things people don't expect. We'll both just have to wait and see."

He smiled at the spoonful of dessert before eating it, but that wasn't strange at all when compared to what he'd said. I still didn't really *know* what he'd said, and I wasn't at all sure he did either. I was just about to challenge him on the point when Fearin decided to join the conversation. He'd spoken to Ijarin a few times during the meal, but I hadn't paid attention to what they'd discussed.

"Did I hear you say you've decided to join us?" he asked the barbarian, sounding really delighted. "I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but I somehow got the feeling Aelana wasn't being as friendly as it's possible to be. She tends to be stiff with strangers, but just give her a little time. As soon as she gets to know you I'm sure she'll relax and let you see how she really feels."

"I don't know if I've trained hard enough to face *that*," the barbarian replied with a bland glance for Fearin. "Being allowed to see how she really feels, I mean. I'll admit I thought at first that she was stretching the truth or lying to herself, pretending to be a full member of this group when she really wasn't. After this afternoon and tonight, though, I can see there's no wishful thinking about it."

"No, no wishful thinking," Fearin agreed, *his* glance sent in my direction. "Her skills and talents make her just as important to this group as any of the rest of us. The only thing *I* wish, though, is that her capacity for eating would increase a bit more quickly. That dessert, for instance - "

"Doesn't stand a chance of getting away untouched," I interrupted, at the same time pulling the bowl closer to me. "I happen to have a weakness for this particular dessert, so your wish has been granted. Now you can stop bothering me."

"I think I'd enjoy meeting whoever it was who taught her to be that gracious and tactful," the barbarian commented while I took the first delicious taste of the chocolate-covered fruit.

"There are a couple of things I'd enjoy teaching *them*."

"Funny how I've had that same thought," Fearin agreed with a chuckle. "Along with another thought, of course."

I could feel both sets of eyes on me and thought Ijarin was about to ask about Fearin's second thought, but he wasn't given the chance. Just at that moment a guardsman burst into the room, looking downright pale as he hurried over to Fearin.

"High Master, there's trouble," he got out, as if we couldn't already tell. "The duty officer was inspecting the guard posts, and found one unmanned. He thought they'd gone off after something suspicious, but to leave their post entirely unmanned... He sent for a squad, had them search... They found the men in a dark corridor, all of them dead... The duty officer's certain that means there are assassins in the palace."

Fearin was on his feet by now, the Power glowing faintly around him, his gaze unfocused and distant. He was searching the palace for intruders, I thought, being a lot more thorough than an army of guardsmen could be. He stood silent and intense for a long string of ticks, almost straining without moving a muscle, and then he was suddenly back with us.

"If they're here, they're protected against my searching them out," he growled, the sweat of effort suddenly on his brow. "And they'd also be able to get through the traps I set. There's only one other thing we can do - if it's possible. Aelana?"

His eyes were the first to come to me, but everyone else's followed quickly enough. I felt a strong flash of disappointment that I was being interrupted before I'd finished my dessert, but there was really no help for it.

"It might work," I grudged, putting my spoon down and standing. "Obviously I'll have to try." I thought briefly about using the room Fearin had used earlier when he'd checked the food for poison, but that would have added an unnecessary wall. What I needed was fewer barriers, so I moved toward the corridor. I could hear footsteps beginning to follow me, so I held up a hand without turning.

"Everyone stay where they are," I directed, hoping I sounded officious rather than evasive. "Don't move any more than you have to, and try to keep those girls quiet. This is going to be a stretch even for me."

The twin chatterboxes had been taking turns squeaking in alarm and demanding to know what was happening, but as I left the room their noise suddenly cut off. They'd either been gagged or threatened, and it didn't matter which as long as they were quiet.

Once out in the corridor, I saw I had to give up the hope of having no one there to watch me. Two guardsmen stood to either side of the door, and their expressions said they'd die rather than leave their post. Ah well, word would have gotten around anyway...

I crossed to what shadows there were on the opposite side of the corridor, between two candles. Even as I stopped I could feel my body drawing the dark, bringing it closer so that it might be used. The shadow deepened, sharpening my senses and strengthening them, sending them out to search for those who would attempt harm. The beast wasn't far from taking me over, but somehow I was able to hold it back while I used its abilities.

The chill of the night clarified and became more intense, but that was a nothing meant to be ignored. I heard the sound of running footsteps many places in the distance, booted feet running in a familiar cadence. Guardsmen, then, hurrying in their search to find the intruders. Others shuffled out of their way to stand trembling, which made them servants and slaves watching nervously.

The sharp smell of fear distracted me for a moment, but that, also, was nothing. Those who stood not far from me, staring wide-eyed into the darkness I'd gathered... Terror was in their sweat and trembling. When I looked at them they shrank back, their cringing posture begging me to know they meant no harm...

And that was when I heard it, the sound I'd been trying to separate from all the others. A large number of calmly determined footsteps, stealthy in their hurry, one set among them stumbling rather than walking. Soft-soled shoes and one set of boots, the intruders and an unwilling guide...

Nearly did I merge completely with the beast then, the better to move through the darkness

and meet them on their way. Their blood would have tasted sweet in my mouth - And that was what let me pull out of it, the memory of the taste of enemy blood. I couldn't do that again, *refused* to do it again, especially when it was unnecessary. The shudder I felt stayed on the inside, where even the terrified guardsmen couldn't see it, and then I was striding past them and back into the room.

"Well?" Fearin demanded as soon as he saw me. "Did it work?"

"Almost too well," I said, then shook my head to dismiss the unnecessary comment. "There are about a dozen of them, they have a prisoner who's guiding them, and they're only about two corridors away. They should be here in no time at all."

"Sergeant, you and your men take the princesses into that room," Fearin ordered the guardsman who'd brought the news, pointing to the room I'd decided against using. "I want the three of you to stay in there with them, and if anyone tries to come in after you without knocking, you're to cut them down. And if it isn't one of us knocking, do the same. Move!" The guardsman pounded his shoulder to acknowledge the orders, then ran to collect the two men Fearin had undoubtedly spotted during his own search. The two had to be bellowed at before they would come in and get started with their chore, and the girls had to be pulled to the room by Garam and Talasin. The amount of confusion involved in that simple a doing was incredible, and when the door was closed on the last of it we all felt relieved.

"All right, we can't have much time left," Fearin said then, reaching across to loosen his blade in its scabbard. "I've sent a mind message to the officer of the guard to come here with as many men as he can, but I don't know if he understood the message. Even if he did it will take them time to reach us, so we'll have to hold off the intruders until help arrives. Lokkel, you and Ranander and Aelana get into that far corner, and keep an eye on the fight. If - "

"Wait a minute," I interrupted even as Lokkel nodded fuzzily and staggered off to do as he'd been told. "Master Lokkel and Ranander may be out of it, but the same doesn't go for me. With only four of you to stand against a good dozen, it will be over so fast there won't be anything to watch. I can at least - "

"Do what?" Fearin demanded, interrupting in turn. "Conjure a weapon that will be useless against men who are protected? Or have you decided you really want to turn the Shadowborn loose again? It didn't look that way when you were out in the corridor, but maybe I misinterpreted your reaction. If I did just say so, and the rest of us will stand back while you handle it alone."

"If you four go down, I'll have to do it anyway," I said, trying to ignore the way I felt sick to my stomach. "There's no sense in letting you die just to protect my tender feelings, so we might as well do it like that. You'll all have to stay back, of course, and make sure our own guardsmen don't - "

"Excuse me," the barbarian said, taking his turn at interrupting as he stepped forward to stand beside Fearin. "I don't know anything about this Shadowborn you're talking about, but there's something *you* don't know about. Aelana, I haven't seen you wearing any weapons. Am I wrong in thinking that doesn't mean you can't use them?"

"Of course I can use them," I said, wondering what he was supposed to be getting at. "There isn't a Life Seeker alive - and I mean that literally - who *can't* use every weapon at least a little. What has that got to do with - "

"It has everything to do with the problem," he said, reaching to one of the swordbelts strapped around him. "Before I left the Far Mountains, one of my seers brought this sword to me and told me to wear it with my own. I'd know what to do with it when the time came, she said, and it looks like she was right. Ranander, just how strong a man are you?"

"Me?" Ranander asked with surprise as the barbarian handed me his second sword, scabbard, belt, and all. "I don't understand what you're asking, Ijarin."

"I'm asking if you're strong enough to help us against more than twice our number of attackers," the barbarian said, speaking slowly and gently. "The only weapon I have left to

offer you is my dagger, so you won't be able to face the enemy the way we do. Are you strong enough to stand aside while the rest of us engage them, then help us out by taking them in the back? For myself I don't think I could do it, so don't hesitate if you have to refuse."

"So that's what you were talking about," Ranander said with a grin that wasn't quite as innocent as others he'd shown. "You thought I'd consider it dishonorable to stab them in the back. Well, under other circumstances I might, but not now. They think they're sneaking up on us with greater numbers, and I'm sure they're hoping we'll all be unarmed. Because of that they deserve whatever they get, including being stabbed in the back. I'd be honored to borrow your dagger for that purpose."

Ijarin returned Ranander's grin as he handed over the weapon, and Fearin nodded with distracted approval. Our numbers had now been raised to six, and that might make all the difference. There was something no one had mentioned, though, and it did have to be said.

"Ranander, check first to see if they're wearing armor," I told him, settling the swordbelt I'd been given around my hips. Ijarin had had to wear the belt on its last notch, but it fit me as though it had been made for me. "Even if you only suspect they're armored, aim for a neck or throat rather than a back. We wouldn't want your efforts to be wasted."

"I'll certainly do that, Aelana," he answered, transferring his grin to me while he stroked the hilt of his borrowed dagger. "I won't let any of them hurt you, you have my word on it."

"Just don't let any of them hurt *you*," I answered, drawing the blade to test its balance. "With a sword as sweet as this one I can take care of myself."

And I wasn't lying just to make him feel better. The sword hilt fit my hand as snugly as any weapon I'd ever held, the balance of the blade so true I knew I could accomplish wonders with it. I'd have to ask the barbarian where it came from, but not right now, not when the intruders had finally arrived...

Chapter 11

The intruders entered the room fast with their blades in their fists, some of which were already streaked with red. The remaining servants had run as soon as the guardsman had appeared with his news, but it looked like some, at least, had run the wrong way. Whoever their guide had been was also not with them, and had undoubtedly been given his reward for bringing them where they'd wanted to go.

Nice people... They wore dark green, tight tunics and trousers, short boots, and were dark-haired and dark-eyed. None of that meant anything to me until I heard someone behind me mutter, "Kenoss!" and then I was furious.

"They're not Kenoss," I announced in a loud enough voice to reach everyone, sending a look of disdain toward the newcomers who were forming up in preparation for attack. "They're sneaking cowards who are trying to make you fear them by pretending to be what they're not." "And how would *you* know, girl?" the one who seemed to be their leader spat, his face twisted with feelings of insult.

"A Kenossi raiding party is never all male," I answered with a grin of satisfaction. "They don't wear boots, they don't form up before attacking, and they never *ever* answer insults thrown at them. What they do is attack with a war cry - like this!"

I let the old, wild yell rip from my throat as I jumped forward, and sure as rain will fall from the skies the intruders were shocked into standing and staring or giving ground in fright. I reached the one who'd spoken to me and cut him down, took the one to his right on the backswing, then

retreated before the rest could react to my being there. They screamed in fury, then, having lost two of their number in the blink of an eye, but more importantly they'd lost the possibility of being thought Kenoss. And then they began to wonder about *me*...

But wonder or not, frightened or not, the fight was on. The men I stood with were hardly the prudent sort, preferring to stand there and wait to see what would happen. They were the kind to *make* things happen, and using a sword was a special kind of joy to them. In an instant they were all around me, and when the intruders came forward to do as they'd been commanded, they met a wall of sharpened steel that had no intentions of crumbling.

The only thing that kept the fight from being over immediately was the fact that we were outnumbered. As fighters our attackers were fairly good, but we were better than that and we were fighting for our lives. I caught a glimpse of Garam grinning at the two facing him as he forced them both back, of Talasin holding his second opponent off with side parries while concentrating on his first victim. Ijarin had one down and was pressing the other two hard, while Fearin had also bested one, wounded a second, and was now trying for a third.

More than a dozen then, I thought as I tried to get the two in front of me to do something other than simply defend. Their expressions were grim and they weren't about to run, but they hated the idea of facing me. You don't pretend to be something to impress people unless you, yourself, are impressed by that something, and it bothered them that I'd known they weren't Kenoss. I'd known it too fast, too surely, too thoroughly... And the way I'd taken out two of their number without a single counterstroke trying to stop me...

I knew when each of them decided for himself that I *had* to be Kenoss, and I cursed under my breath. They were no longer fighting to get *at* me but away from me, which meant they were dead men. When one of them came in fast and hard in an effort to drive me back, the second broke and turned to run. Once I gave ground the first was supposed to follow the second, but none of it worked out for them. Rather than backing I blocked the attack with my blade, then countered before the man was ready. My point went in through the middle of his chest, causing him to stiffen as he coughed blood, and then he was falling.

I pulled my sword loose before the corpse took it down to the floor with him, intending to follow the second and finish him, but following turned out to be unnecessary. Apparently Ranander had materialized right in the fleeing man's path, and the dagger he held had not found armor to stop it. The body was just crumpling to the floor at Ranander's feet when I looked up, and we exchanged smiles before turning to the rest of the fight.

But there wasn't much left of that fight. Garam was still playing with the last of his, the man cut in a score of places and stumbling rather than backing. Fearin was also down to one, but he wasn't playing. He used his elegant fighting style to outstrip his opponent's excellent defensive moves, then slid his point into the man's throat. Just as that happened Garam finished off the poor soul he'd been toying with, his apparent aim to end just when Fearin did. Garam looked around with a grin to see if anyone had noticed, but Fearin, at least, was more concerned with other things.

"Is that it?" Fearin demanded as he looked around, his sword still poised and ready. "They're all accounted for? All right, then it's time to take care of our wounded."

He looked around again and so did the rest of us, but there didn't seem to be anything to find. We were all spattered with blood, but none of it was our own. We'd not only survived the attack, not one of us had gotten wounded. It was something to be glad about, but it was also rather strange.

"Why should any of us be wounded?" Garam asked with a laugh when it was clear none of us was. "The rabble was counting on us thinking we were fighting Kenossi, but the girl erased that edge from the outset. Beyond that they were nothing, which we had no trouble proving."

"I suppose that could be true," Fearin gruded as he looked around again, then bent to wipe his sword on the clothing of his final opponent. "It's too bad none of us thought to save one of them for questioning, but it probably would have been a wasted effort. If they were protected

from my Seeking, they would have undoubtedly died before telling us anything."

That left the question of who they'd been and who had sent them, but before we could discuss the point a large number of guardsmen came rushing in. The swords in their fists said they were ready for a fight, and they wilted a little when they saw that the action was already over. The next instant orders were being shouted, and swords were sheathed to free hands for body removal. It was very nearly a mob scene, and I hurried to clean my sword on an intruder tunic before both the tunic and the body wearing it were snatched away.

In the middle of all that Fearin got the twin girls and their protectors out of the small room, then sent the girls back to their apartment with a strong escort. Their shrill demands were still ringing in everyone's ears as they disappeared up the corridor, and I raised the goblet of fresh water I'd poured and drank from it. The dessert I'd been forced to leave unfinished was a ruined mess, too melted and warm to look or taste the way it had. It had been seasons and seasons since I'd last tasted that particular dessert, and I'd really been looking forward to eating all of it...

"Let me take a look at you," Fearin said as he came up on my left. "I want to make certain you're not hurt in any way."

"Why would I be hurt?" I asked his narrow-eyed stare, uncomfortable with the way he was inspecting me. "I only faced two of them, and they were mostly interested in getting away from me. I was afraid that would happen and it did."

"Afraid," he echoed, now looking at me strangely. "Would you like to explain that? Not that I expect to enjoy your answer."

"What has enjoyment got to do with it?" I asked, suddenly feeling very confused. "One of the ways I knew they weren't Kenoss was the way they all but shouted they *were*. Most people go terrified at the thought of facing Kenossi, and they might as well be unarmed for all the good their weapons do them. No real fighter wants to face someone who won't or can't fight back, so we usually try very hard not to let them know who they're facing. My two got the idea anyway, which ended the fight for them faster than it should have."

"So that's why you didn't tell them *you* were Kenoss," he said, shaking his head with what looked like faint exasperation. "We were outnumbered more than two to one, and *you* stood on a point of honor. I suppose if not knowing had let them kill you, you would have been happier still."

"If not knowing had let them kill me, I wouldn't have been a true Kenoss so none of it would have applied," I came back with a small laugh. "*Anyone* can hold to a point of honor when the going is easy. Doing the same when the odds are against you is the tricky part, but if you survive you know you've done something *more* than simply survive. No Kenoss will just settle for life; it has to be a quality life or there's no point to it."

He was frowning again and looked like he was about to say something, but he never got the chance. The barbarian Ijarin chose that moment to join us, and his words got said first."

"Aelana, I was worried, but I didn't have to be," he enthused, stopping to grin at me. "You handle a blade as well as I do. Nice work." Then he turned to the man of Power. "Master Fearin, you may have a problem with those guardsmen. If they're that upset from just *seeing* a few bodies, how will they react when it comes time to make some of their own?"

Fearin didn't understand what Ijarin was talking about, and neither did I. We both turned to look at the guardsmen, and saw that most of the bodies had been removed. Because of that a number of the guardsmen were free to stand around waiting for their next orders, but that wasn't all they were doing. They were also whispering to one another, and most of them looked pale and shaken. At first I had no idea what was happening - and then I understood only too well.

Fearin began to say something about how impossible it was for those particular guardsmen to be upset at the sight of bodies, but the rest of his protest was lost behind distance when I left the room behind. I made sure not to look at anyone I passed on the way to my apartment, and

once there I went straight to the second sitting room.

The room was dim with the light of only a single candle, which meant it was still much too bright. Even so I walked to the corner where the porch-like windows gaped open onto the dark, unwinking black. Not a single torch on the inner walls of the grounds was still burning, not in that unending downpour...

I felt like an absolute fool, and I hated myself for having behaved so stupidly. I'd actually been *laughing*, for pity's sake, as though I were just another human being, forgetting I could be almost anything but that. Enjoy it while it lasts, Fearin had said, and like an idiot I'd thought he knew what he was talking about.

"What happened?" Fearin himself demanded as he abruptly strode into the room. "Why did you disappear like that?"

"I felt like going back to my apartment," I answered without looking at him, suddenly more aware of the chill in the night air. It made me want to shiver, but I refused to allow that.

"You could have said something instead of simply taking off," he complained, coming forward to stand to my left. "First you were there, and then you were gone. And why are you sitting in all but pitch darkness? Why don't you light more of the candles?"

The dark is where I belong, I wanted to say, *away from where people can see me and start to believe I'm just like them. I'm not like them, not since I was reborn into the shadows of the dark, and I'll never be like normal people again.* I wanted to say that, but it hurt enough already.

"It has something to do with the way the guard was behaving," Fearin stated after a moment of silence, suddenly sounding absolutely certain. "When I told Prince Ijarin that that group was from what our men call the Butcher Squad even though they number a lot more than an ordinary squad, he had trouble believing it. The group was as skittish as shy young girls under the eyes of men, and they looked as though they'd had a bad scare. That was when I realized that two of them had been in the corridor when you went out to search for the intruders."

And they saw me as I truly am, I thought, feeling the hard wood of the window brace behind my head. *Now they look at me and drown in fear, just the way so many of my own people did.* I'd never seen raw fear on the face of a Kenoss until I, myself, caused the emotion to be there. I hated myself for that more than anything else, just the way *they* hated me.

"You know, I really thought you were more intelligent than that," Fearin said then, and surprisingly he sounded annoyed. "If I'd known I was dealing with nothing more than another silly little girl I would have sent you to bed with those other two. From now on I just may do that."

"Who do you think you're talking to?" I demanded, forced by sudden outrage to turn my head to look at him. He stood in the dimness like a broad-shouldered shadow, arms folded and head up. "The day you find yourself able to send me *anywhere*, that will be the day the gods come down with shovels to clear the streets after a parade. You can just-"

"Enough!" he interrupted, overriding my abrupt anger with volume. "If you don't want to be treated like a silly little girl then stop acting like one! You're one of us in this venture because of the Shadowborn inside you, not because of your pretty blue eyes. Did you think you could turn the beast loose without anyone ever seeing it? Have you forgotten it's already been seen? Those guardsmen are mostly low-class peasants in their outlooks and beliefs; did you expect them to see anything but a demon when they peered into the shadows?"

"Leave me alone," I muttered, turning my head from him again. A demon was exactly what they saw in the shadows, hideous and inhuman, as willing to drink their blood as that of the enemy.

"I won't leave you alone," Fearin denied, and then there was a broad hand at my face, turning it back to him. A ghostly blue glow now surrounded him, which probably meant he could also see me clearly. "Only a silly child would waste time sitting in the dark, feeling sorry for herself over something that can't be changed. I can't use a silly child as part of my command group, so

I refuse to let her stay like that. And if you think I *can't* send you to bed early for a few nights to teach you the error of your ways, you forget who the leader of this effort is. And who *appointed* him leader."

The outrage flared in me again, and this time I was so furious I couldn't get any words out. That he would dare to even *think* of doing that to me, to take advantage of his position and Diin-tha's backing to - to -

"Yes, that's exactly right," he said, and I could see the grin he wore. "I would not hesitate to ask for any help I might need, and then you would do exactly as you were told. You don't like seeing people fear you; would you prefer to have them laugh at you?"

"No," I breathed through gritted teeth, unable to free my face from his Power-enhanced grip. I'd never be able to stand being laughed at and he knew it.

"Would you mind repeating that, and at slightly greater length?" he said lightly, paying no attention to the way nothing but his Power kept the beast in me from breaking loose. "Take a deep breath, reestablish control, and then tell me precisely which you want."

The struggle to control myself was brief, but it was one of the hardest things I'd ever done. I forced the red-edged fury back down to where it was supposed to stay, took a shakier deep breath than I'd intended, then moved my gaze to him again.

"No, I *don't* want to be laughed at," I said, the sour taste of almost having lost control strong in my mouth. "You win, High Master, and I lose. You insist on no brooding, so I'll certainly stop immediately. Now go away and leave me alone."

"You seem to have trouble remembering who gives the orders around here," he said, the observation mild and faintly amused. "If you're not going to be brooding any longer you don't need to be alone, but it *is* getting late. Since there are a lot of things waiting to be done tomorrow, we'll both go to bed."

His hand left my face to close around my wrist, and then I was being pulled off the ledge and across the room after him. I tried to pull free, even tried to trip him with a kick, but his Power wasn't letting it happen. I was hauled behind him into the apartment's bedchamber, and half the candles in the room flared alight at the flick of his finger.

"Comfortable," he commented as he looked around, nodding at the lace and silk in various gentle, blending colors. "A little too frilly to be perfect, but definitely comfortable. Stop here a moment."

"Here" was a round table half way to the large, canopied bed, and he didn't wait for me to do the stopping. He pulled me over to the table, reached down to unstrap the swordbelt I still wore, then took it and put it on the table.

"Don't worry, the weapon will be safe here with mine," he said, now in the midst of removing his own swordbelt. "You go ahead and turn the covers down, and then I'll be there to help you with your clothes."

"What are you talking about?" I demanded, hating how confused I felt. "Why would I need help undressing? If you intend to humiliate me after all - "

"No, girl, you're missing the point," he interrupted with a faint grin. "I'm not *putting* you to bed, I'm taking you there. I have nothing in my own bedchamber that can't be left alone, so I'm spending the night here. And you *don't* need help getting undressed, but you'll be getting it anyway."

"Oh," I said, feeling very foolish, especially with the way his grin had widened. "You must be thinking I meant it literally when I said you won and I lost. I was referring to our argument, which isn't the same as a physical fight. You can't take that as an Earning."

"Are you trying to suggest I *need* another Earning?" he asked, hard blue eyes suddenly pinning me where I stood. "As I understood it, a man Earns a woman for a full moon. At the end of that time he either releases her or makes the mating permanent, but he doesn't have to Earn her again and again. Are you telling me I'm mistaken?"

I would have enjoyed cursing silently under my breath, but with the way he was looking at me

he would certainly have noticed. I hadn't realized he'd found out quite that much about my people, and that changed things.

"I don't know why you're staring at me like that," I protested, trying not to show how uncomfortable I felt. "I wasn't saying you needed another Earning, I was just pointing out that you hadn't gotten one. And considering that you're using your Power, you wouldn't have gotten one even if you'd needed it."

"Why not?" he countered, immediately back to looking amused. "A man is entitled to use any natural ability he has, and for me the Power is natural. If I'd never learned to use a sword, would that make another man's using one unfair?"

"If he tried to use it against *you*, yes," I answered, turning away to be certain my expression didn't show how disturbed I felt. I would have preferred to be alone, but that obviously wasn't going to happen. "And now that you mention it, why *do* you know how to use a sword? Most men of Power are like Lokkel, out of shape and uninterested in changing. What made you do it differently?"

"Walk a little faster," he directed from behind me. "I'd like those covers turned down before dawn. You want to know why I developed my physical prowess even as I learned to summon and use the Power? If you think about it, the answer should be obvious. As you pass through life, there are situations that will require the use of your mind and others that require a physical response. If you choose one area and neglect the others, the day will come when, no matter how good you've gotten with your choice, you'll be facing defeat because your choice is temporarily useless. The Kenoss are great fighters. Do they rely on fighting skills alone and ignore the use of the mind?"

"How can you be an effective fighter without using your mind?" I asked, turning again to send him a frown. "The body and mind have to work together, one deciding what needs to be done, the other seeing to it. If you don't learn to coordinate the two, you end up losing both."

"Exactly," he said, pulling his tunic off and putting it on the table with his robe and sword. "If you don't let the mindless scream of a berserker frighten you, you find it unbelievably easy to cut him down. Once, when I was very young, I saw a High Master almost killed by a woman with a dagger. She was protected from his Power by a rival High Master, and even though he had the time to stop her physically he didn't do it. He was paralyzed through having failed to stop her with his mind, and so just stood there and let her put a dagger in him."

"And she still didn't manage to kill him?" I said, frowning up at him where he'd come to stand near me. "Was she blind, or just badly crippled?"

"Neither," he answered with a sudden grin. "She just didn't know how to use a dagger. She stabbed down at him, probably aiming for his throat, and managed to strike his collarbone instead. The collarbone did break, but first it deflected the blow enough to save his life. You have to remember that there *are* people in this world who haven't been taught to use weapons as soon as they learned to walk."

"That means she was crippled," I said, finding his grin irritating. "When you aren't able to do something you should be able to, you're crippled. Not being able to because you're physically hurt isn't the same. It's damned unfair, but you're not crippled."

"You know, I like the way you look at things," he said, his grin softening as his hand came to my face. "I've never known a woman whose opinions so nearly matched mine - but who, at the same time, was incapable of turning down a bed. Are you trying to say you'd rather sleep on top of the covers?"

I came close to growling at him at that, especially since I could feel the points of warmth in my cheeks. It was clear I'd forgotten about turning down those stupid covers because that would have been too much like inviting him, something I certainly had no interest in doing. I might have had to let him use me, but I didn't want him mistakenly believing it was my choice.

"I know," he said when I didn't comment, his arms coming up to circle me. "With all that Shadowborn and Kenoss training, you never had the chance to learn how to turn down beds. I'll

be glad to show you how to do it - as soon as we get rid of these clothes you're wearing." He leaned down to kiss me then, at the same time putting his hands to my belt. It was one of the most awkward situations I'd ever encountered, and I couldn't keep from pulling back from both his hands and lips. He blinked at me in surprise, but didn't get angry the way I'd more than half expected him to.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Why did you pull away?"

"I pulled away because I don't enjoy feeling stupid," I answered, also feeling the warmth in my cheeks again. "Do you expect me to just stand here like a carving, wondering what to do with my hands and feet? I'll get out of my own clothes, and then you can - "

"No, no, no," he interrupted, stopping me from reaching to my belt, and then suddenly he scooped me off the floor into his arms. Two heartbeats later I was down on the bed, with him leaning over me.

"I apologize for making you feel stupid," he murmured, one finger trailing up my cheek. "I think you'll find it easier this way, at least for a while. And if you don't have what to do with your hands, you can always put them on *me*."

Then he began to kiss me again, lightly but in a lingering way, his hands flat to the bed on either side of me. After a short while I thought he'd forgotten about my clothes, but he hadn't. He whispered to me to kick off my boots, and once I had he took care of my belt.

If I expected him to be just as fast with my tunic and trousers, that just showed how little I understood him. He spent half of forever lifting the tunic away, kissing what he uncovered before uncovering any more. My entire body tingled before he was done, and I couldn't quite control the rate of my breathing. When he began on my trousers I discovered that my hands were touching him, and had been doing so for quite some time. The muscle in his shoulders and arms was so deliciously hard, the flesh so firm and warm... I *wanted* to touch him, but he was moving out of my reach. I tried to follow but he refused to allow that, instead making me lie flat to accept what he gave.

And what he gave were sensations I'd never experienced before. The bedcover beneath me was lace and I clung to it with eyes shut tight, moaning at the touch of his lips and tongue. If I'd had to defend myself right now I would surely have died, and seriously thought I might anyway.

"Do you like this?" he asked suddenly in a murmur, the stroke of his tongue leaving no doubt as to what "this" might be. "I'm certainly enjoying doing it."

"I'm going to die," I whispered back, the flames in my blood burning so high they should have ignited the lace. "Please, I'm going to die."

"Nonsense, you're only just beginning to squirm properly," he said with a chuckle. "We'll do this for a little while longer, and then we'll turn down the covers. You should be ready by then."

Ready to pass out, he must have meant, and I certainly was. My breath was coming in squeaking gasps by the time he stopped, and at first I didn't know he *had* stopped. My first inkling came when he pulled the covers out from under me, covered me again, then slid in under the covers with me.

"Now comes the part we've both been waiting for," he whispered, moving between my knees. "Are you ready?"

I didn't know that was what I was ready for, but when he thrust his great desire into mine I certainly found it out. I received him like sand receives water, drinking him in with ecstasy and immediately demanding more. I held to him as he gave me more, all that I wanted to the end of time, and when the world exploded in searing flames I exploded with it.

Chapter 12

n't quite the first one out onto the porch the next morning for breakfast, but that was hardly surprising. After Fearin had gone back to his own apartment, I'd had to find some clear water

to wash in before I put on the clean clothing he'd left. Tight but flexible cloth trousers in dark green, a silver tunic of the same material, the soft, dark gray boots now a dark green... I had the feeling Fearin had been trying to say something about me admitting to be Kenoss, but I couldn't understand what. It was only during a fight that it wouldn't have been fair to mention what I was, and the presence of my new sword strapped around my hips should do well in cutting down on fights.

"Good morning, Aelana," Lokkel said when he saw me, a faint smile appearing on his face around his chewing. "The food is fresh and very tasty, so do help yourself."

"I fully intend to do just that," I said with an answering smile before turning away from him. I'd also looked at him rather closely, but there wasn't a single sign of the drinking he'd been doing the night before, not even the shadow of a hangover. It came to me that there must be a definite benefit in being a Healing Master if you were the sort who liked to drink; a small spell before or after, and the next morning no regrets.

I filled a plate with the food Fearin had created some time this morning wondering, as I reclaimed the chair I'd had the day before, where he'd gotten the strength. When he'd finished with me the previous night I'd fallen immediately asleep, and hadn't awakened until I'd felt his hand stroking my bottom. It was somewhere around dawn, I'd noticed, and then I hadn't been able to notice anything but what he'd begun to do to me...

I didn't quite sigh as I took a bite of the salted egg in my hand, followed by a cautious sip of the hot tea from the cup I'd poured. I had no real interest in the sort of thing Fearin was doing to me, not that it wasn't pleasant, of course, it was certainly that. A pleasant diversion that wasn't meant to be taken seriously, especially not by someone like me, but I felt very confused. I still didn't understand *why* he was doing it, or at least why he was doing it with *me*. He couldn't be seriously interested, not someone like him with an ugly ex-slave -

"Well, that's certainly an improvement," a voice came, and I blinked back to where I was to see Talasin sitting down in the chair grouping with a plate of his own. "Yesterday you refused to look at the food, but today you're definitely looking at it. Possibly by tomorrow you'll progress from staring to eating."

"It so happens I *am* eating," I answered, raising the bitten-into egg to prove the point. "Just because I don't swallow things whole the way you do doesn't mean I'm not eating."

"It must be all that light and warmth out there that's improved both your appetite and your mood," he came back, gesturing with a grin toward the new day. "Or maybe it was that bit of exercise we had after dinner. I happened to see your swordwork, and if there was any doubt about your being Kenoss the doubt is now gone. You weren't joking about your women being just as good as your men."

"Why would anyone joke about something like that?" I asked, shaking my head at him. "When you say you can fight, there's usually someone around who decides to make you prove it. Especially when you don't have bulging muscles and room-width shoulders."

"Oh, there's no doubt about *you* being able to fight, Aelana," another voice chimed in, and then Ranander was sitting down with us. "They were so afraid of you that the one who didn't run fought like a madman. For a moment I was afraid you'd need my help, but you did just fine without it."

"We all did just fine," Garam put in as Ranander grinned, settling himself with a plate. "At first I thought Fearin was crazy, wasting three blades to protect those females when we were so badly outnumbered, but it worked out just fine. None of us had any trouble."

"Those girls must be even more important than we've been told," Talasin said, chewing his food thoughtfully. "I know Fearin knows how good with a blade we all are, but he *was* cutting down our chances by cutting down our numbers. And speaking about those girls, Ranander, why aren't they here for breakfast, giving everyone a hard time? You haven't done anything foolish, have you?"

"If I'd had to go near them again I'd definitely have been tempted," Ranander answered with a

laugh, his face open and friendly. "Luckily for me, though, the High Master decided they'd be better off staying in their apartment until we have some idea about who sent those attackers. He also said something about not wanting to risk *our* lives again to protect theirs."

"That's definitely why he did it, then," Garam said with a nod, his brow furrowed. "Those females are important enough for him to risk our lives, and his own as well. I don't think we need to ask who put that kind of a value on the girls, but there's another question needing an answer. Who could possibly have sent those attackers?"

"Couldn't it have been some element in the city, trying to rid themselves of conquerors?" I asked when no one else offered any sort of suggestion. "I mean, it would stand to reason. Who else would know we're here, and who else would benefit if we were killed?"

"Your guess may sound reasonable, but it just isn't possible," Garam denied with a shake of his head. "There was power and planning behind that attack, but no one is left in this city capable of either. We made sure of them all the night we attacked, both administrators and military leaders, with only a few having escaped us. The rest we took care of yesterday, before they could have had a chance to arrange anything like that attack."

"And don't forget they were protected from Fearin's Power," Lokkel added to what Garam had said. "That would take someone with a good deal of Power of his own, but Fearin checked the city thoroughly before we attacked. There *was* no one here with that kind of Power."

"Is that supposed to mean *no* one sent the attackers?" I countered, looking back and forth between the two leaders of our army. "Those men simply got together because they were bored, and for that same reason decided to try their luck with us? Of course that would mean they *weren't* protected against Fearin's Power, he just thought they were. He made a mistake because he was tired after a long day and they were in a position to take advantage of his weariness. Well, now that *that's* settled we can forget about it."

"You're right, it isn't settled and we can't forget about it," Fearin himself said, coming over to stand near our circle of chairs. "We'll all have to keep our eyes and ears open to see if we can learn anything, but answering the question won't be our first priority. It's more important that we finish up with this city, then continue on our way."

"Things will go faster now that it's stopped raining," Talasin told him. "No matter how willing men are to keep going, they don't get very far slogging through knee-deep mud."

"That's part of the problem *my* men have had," Garam agreed. "There's nothing but stragglers left for us to round up, but the rain made it harder to dig them out. If the girl really can find Brangol, the rest should be in our hands by sundown."

"They have to be," Fearin said, his expression determined. "Since you'll be leaving tomorrow with the advance guard, today is the last chance you'll have. Lokkel, I'll need our talents today, and yours as well, Ranander. Talasin, you'll oversee the rest. Finish your meals, now, and then we'll get to it."

He turned away from us to go to the table of food, and the others began to eat just a little faster. Fearin's energy and hurry always seemed to rub off on those around him, that and some of his other feelings as well. I silently scoffed at myself for thinking of that, then turned my attention to my own food.

We all finished at just about the same time, and Talasin left first. Lokkel went directly over to Fearin, but Ranander paused to tell me he'd see me later before doing the same. Garam looked as though he wanted to comment on that, but he had already shifted too far over to the business at hand to waste time with teasing.

"Okay, where do we start?" Garam asked me, still looking the least bit skeptical. "I have my special squad waiting, so what do you want them to do first?"

"The first thing I need is something our quarry wore recently, preferably unwashed," I said as I walked back to the food table. "Tell whoever you send for it to wrap it in something without touching it. We don't need a lot of different scents confusing the issue."

"You expect to use dogs?" he asked as he watched me. "That wouldn't be a bad idea, except

that we don't *have* trained dogs. And what do you need all that food for? Are you afraid of missing the noon meal?"

"You can't expect to get the answers you want without doing a little bribing," I returned, giving him something of a smile as I wrapped my plunder in a large cloth. "All right, I'm ready to leave now."

"If you expect me to ask who you intend to bribe with food - " he began, then cut off the vocal annoyance with a snap. He *did* want to ask, and didn't care to look like a fool by saying he wouldn't and then doing it anyway. We both turned toward the door to the corridor, Garam stomping along for a few steps in silence, then he decided to try to return the annoyance I'd given him.

"I'll bet you can't wait until later," he said, glancing down at me sideways. "Being in the middle of a war is hard, but I've heard it said that waiting makes it sweeter."

"What are you talking about?" I asked, honestly at a loss. My mind had gone to the best way to start the search, and what he'd said made absolutely no sense.

"I'm talking about the way Ranander said he would see you later," Garam supplied, giving me the same sort of smile I'd given *him*. "The boy is obviously crazy about you, which is something most girls seem to like. That's why I said - "

"Ranander and I are friends," I interrupted his nonsense, finding it impossible not to feel the annoyance he'd wanted me to. "I know the concept of friendship is hard to understand when you've never *had* any friends, so you'll just have to take my word for it."

"Friendship isn't what *he's* feeling," Garam corrected, surprising me by not showing insult.

"He's got it bad for you, girl, and no matter what he says he's not interested in just being friends. He watches every move you make with a grin I never knew he had in him, and if he doesn't have plans already made I've never seen a man who did. If you want him that's up to you, but if you don't you'd better handle it."

Handle it. We'd stopped just past the doorway into the corridor, and I had to keep myself from turning back to look at the man who had joined Fearin. Garam being Garam he could have been trying to give me a hard time, but I couldn't bring myself to believe that. Garam had completely changed his attitude toward me, and I remembered what Ranander had said before the attack, about going to bed with me...

"I don't want to have to hurt him, so maybe I can *talk* him out of it," I muttered half to myself, wondering if that would be possible. "If he's been watching me that closely he ought to know how badly he'd do trying for an Earning."

"What's an Earning?" Garam asked, frowning at the way I shifted the food bundle out of discomfort. "The word seems to mean something I heard about, but I can't remember what."

"It means that any man who wants a Kenoss woman has to Earn her," I answered, still mostly distracted. "He has to be a better fighter than she is, and he has to prove it the only way it *can* be proven. If Ranander ever tried to Earn me... "

"You'd do him for good and always," Garam finished for me with a dirty laugh, the frown completely gone. "I know the camp women like being with him, but that's probably because he's easy to please. You just send him back to them and then everybody will be where they belong."

For some reason Garam's attitude was really rubbing me the wrong way, but before I could say anything to him the situation changed. The private conversation we'd been having abruptly became less private.

"Well, good morning," a voice said, just about the last voice I wanted to hear. "You don't seem to waste much time getting started with a new day."

"Those who like to sleep late don't usually get involved with wars of conquest, Prince Ijarin," Garam answered, visibly shifting ground from something else that he would have preferred to say. Seeing Garam back down that way, certainly at Fearin's orders, added to my annoyance in a way that I didn't have to understand to feel.

"Which means you might try rethinking your decision to stay while you're having breakfast," I said, giving him one of those smiles Garam and I had been exchanging. "If you head for home right now, you can sleep late every day without worrying that you're missing anything."

"Oh, I never eat breakfast when I do as little as I've *been* doing," the barbarian answered with the same kind of smile while Garam choked, Ijarin's light eyes brightening. "That means I can't rethink any decisions, but it also means I'm free to join you two in whatever you're about. That is, if you don't mind, Prince Garam."

"Not at all, Prince Ijarin, not at all," Garam said immediately, obviously to keep me from voicing a different opinion. All those "princes" back and forth were making me queasy, but I doubted if either of them cared. "Fearin said he wanted you involved as soon as possible, so the girl and I are delighted to have you. *Aren't* we."

Garam nudged me with the question, none too gently or subtly, but Ijarin pretended not to notice. All he did was smile pleasantly at me, waiting for the agreement I'd been ordered to give, so I shrugged.

"If he has to, he has to," I gruded with a sigh, briefly meeting the light blue gaze on me before looking away with indifference. "I'll get the job done no matter how much of an audience I have, and he won't be able to hurt anything - "

"We're going that way, Prince Ijarin," Garam said hastily as he gestured up the hall. "Shall we get started?"

I could feel a pair of eyes on me for a moment before the barbarian gave in to Garam's request and started off up the corridor, but I ignored whatever reaction he'd shown to my prodding.

Less easy to ignore was the shove and scowl I got from Garam, a silent dressing down behind Ijarin's back. It wasn't Fearin who wanted the man with us, I was supposed to remember, it was someone a lot more powerful. Did I want to find the sort of trouble none of my skills or talents would be able to get me out of?

The answer to that should have been obvious, but as I followed the two up the corridor, I wondered.

Garam's special squad was waiting for us at the front of the palace, and he sent two of the men ahead to find the article of used clothing I'd requested. The rest of us followed at a more sedate pace, heading for the man Brangol's house and the real start of the search.

The streets of the city were as busy as they'd always been, but the busyness was one no citizen would have recognized. Armed intruders were everywhere, most buildings and houses looked half torn apart, and as far as any citizen went, there didn't seem to be any. The fearful hid in whatever shadows there were, peering out at their conquerors like slaves, and the rest - The rest *were* slaves.

"There's another coffle going out now," Garam said to Ijarin, pointing to a chained line of men being forced toward the city's gate. He'd been telling the barbarian what his forces were doing, and had gotten up to the fate of the people still alive.

"You're selling everyone in the city as slaves?" Ijarin asked, looking as though he was bothered by the idea. "Isn't that on the unusual side?"

"It takes a lot of gold to keep an army moving and happy," Garam answered, too busy looking around at the working guardsmen to notice Ijarin's reaction. "But no, we're not selling *everyone* as slaves. Those who are healthy and strong have been chosen, those with soft lives or formerly good businesses. We first relieve them of whatever gold and silver they have, and then we collect a price for them. I'll bet the girl's not too unhappy about all this, considering what they did to her."

"You really were a slave here, then," the barbarian said, turning to look at me. "I thought I might have been mistaken, that you'd only been pretending - It doesn't bother you that others are having done to them what was forced on you? Just as unwillingly and just as completely?"

"'Bother' is the wrong word to use," I answered with a shrug, watching the stumbling, moaning line of men who were being prodded out of their city and their former lives forever. "I was

made a slave because most of those people allowed it. They liked the idea of slavery because they weren't bright enough to understand that it might be someone else being collared today, but who knows about tomorrow? As long as slavery is possible, tomorrow it could be you wearing the chains. No matter how safe you feel, no matter how convinced you are that it could never happen, as long as it can be done to others it could also happen to you. With some people, it's a lesson that has to be learned the hard way."

"I think they've learned it," Ijarin muttered, also staring at the coffle. "Does it help if you learn a lesson too late for it to do you any good?"

"It helps *us*," Garam put in with a grin. "What else are we supposed to worry about? Let's get moving again, we're almost there."

He headed off to the left and I followed, leaving the barbarian to join us or not as he pleased. Ijarin had sounded really ... bothered by what was happening to the people around him, as though he was used to being able to do something to help. It was nice to want to help people, at least it was nice for those doing the helping. For those *being* helped, it would do more good if they were taught to help themselves. Dignity and satisfaction come from helping yourself, but idealists seem incapable of understanding that.

Another two streets brought us to an area of middling-good houses, most of which no longer had doors. I could feel hidden eyes on me as we walked, adding to the discomfort of the growing heat of the day. The trail would lead me deeper into the heart of the city, something I'd known from the very first. It would be worse there, more eyes and even more fear, especially when I found the man...

"There they are," Garam said, pointing to two guardsmen standing in front of one of the undamaged houses. "Those are my men, and it looks like they found what they were sent for."

"Make sure," I told him, keeping my voice low. "If what they found doesn't belong to our quarry, or was handled by them or others... It could turn out worse than simply wasting our time."

"Why?" he demanded, stopping to turn and look at me. "What do you intend to do that will make it worse? We need the man alive, remember, and able to talk to us. Tell me what you'll be doing."

"I didn't ask why you want the man, so you don't get to ask how I'll find him," I retorted, noticing that the two guardsmen were coming to us rather than waiting. "Make sure they did what you told them to, and then I can get to it."

"If it's that important, then *you* make sure," he said, stepping back a little to give me a better view of the men who had reached us. "If you don't need me to help do the finding, you also shouldn't need me for the questioning."

There was a hard gleam of satisfaction in his eyes, the result of what he'd done to ease his feelings of insult. The men were *his*, and he hadn't told them anything about taking orders from me or answering my questions. When I got nowhere with them then *he* would take over, but not before he made me tell him what he wanted to know. It was a typical Garam strategy, but he hadn't seen what I'd just noticed. Good and bad aren't always two sides of a coin; if you spin the coin fast enough the two sides become the same.

"Come closer," I told the two men very softly, the two who had stopped as far from me as they possibly could. Their faces held no expression, but their eyes said they'd heard things... They glanced at each other when they realized what I'd said, then came slowly, cautiously, just a little, closer.

"Tell me how you know the article of clothing belongs to the man we're after," I said, still speaking softly but looking directly at them. "If you're convinced of it, I want you to convince *me*."

They glanced at each other again, their faces paling just a bit, then one of them cleared his throat.

"We - ah - used the house slave," he offered, forcing himself to return my stare. "The boy

hates his master, and can't wait until we catch him. He did real bad to that boy - When we freed him he couldn't stop thanking us - He swears the tunic belongs to Brangol, and he didn't wash it because he wasn't a slave anymore."

"We have no choice but to assume the boy was telling the truth," I said, not happy about needing to accept the word of a slave. Some of them, especially the younger ones, grew to like what was done to them... "And he also convinced you that no one else had been touching the tunic, not even him?"

"The thing was flung into a corner, by Brangol himself, so the boy said," the guardsman answered with a nod. "He came racing in after the main attack, threw things around looking for what he wanted, then ran out again. The boy hasn't seen him since."

"And you two made sure not to touch it yourselves," I said, needing to hammer home the point. "If you did, all I need is for you to show me where."

"By all the gods, lady, didn't neither of us touch it," the second man said fervently, his voice trembling very faintly. "Not when we knowed it was you who wanted it."

"They never disobey anybody who's good with a sword," Garam put in, his expression neutral and his gaze calmer than I'd expected it to be. "Do you have everything you need now?"

"I hope so," I muttered, putting a hand out for the bundle the second guardsman still clutched. He edged closer to give it to me before backing away again, then flinched when he saw the scowl Garam was sending. It took me a moment to understand that scowl, and when I did I couldn't wait to get away from them all.

"I need to be alone for the first part of this," I said without looking at any of them. "Wait here, and when we're ready to go I'll call you."

It wasn't necessary to wait for any agreements, so I didn't. There was an alley between Brangol's house and the next one to it that I'd already decided on, so I strode toward it without another word. Garam had been angry with his men, but not for the reason I'd expected. He'd known they'd answer me, hadn't been expecting anything else as I'd thought at first, but he'd gotten angry over the fear they'd shown. As though he knew what sight of that fear did to me. His comment about swords, trying to excuse their behavior that way... Garam had been arrogant and insensitive; why couldn't he have stayed that way?

I reached the alley and continued on into it, trying to understand why I had such trouble when people were nice to me. It wasn't easy when they hated and despised me, but somehow it was easier to cope with. If, a few days earlier, someone had told me Garam would end up trying to protect my feelings I would have laughed right in their face...

"All right, let's get on with this," I muttered, stopping amid a scattering of garbage and other refuse. Alleys like this weren't used by the people of the neighborhood very often, so public slaves weren't sent in to clean them up any more often than every now and then. The smell wasn't too bad either, nothing like what it was in the alleys around the market place. I cleared a piece of ground with my booted foot, crouched down and scattered some of the looted food I carried, then straightened up again.

"I bring a gift of food, brothers and sisters," I said softly in the language of rats. "Come and take it, for I would speak with you."

I had to step back just a little before even the scout would show himself, but once I did he came scurrying over with nose and whiskers twitching. He grabbed a mouthful of my offering without taking his eyes from me, his ears swiveling even while he chewed, and then he sounded the all-clear. Half a dozen other rats appeared instantly then, more hanging back in the shadows, and it didn't take long before the food was eaten. Only then did the others come out, to lick up crumbs and droplets of what had been there, while those who had eaten stood looking at me.

"You have more," one of the rats said in the squeaking hiss of their language, a rat larger than the rest. "Give it to me."

"In time," I answered, feeling all the rest of the eyes joining his pair. "I have a trade to offer." "We can take the food," he answered, gathering himself without moving a muscle. "Together

we can take that food and the flesh of your bones as well."

"You know better than that," I replied, letting him see and feel my amusement. "I am not like the others, and none of you would ever eat again."

"No, you speak to us as the others do not," the rat gruded, his whiskers quivering as he realized there was no fear smell on me. "What trade do you offer?"

"I seek one of my own kind," I said, letting myself feel nothing but total assurance. "He nested in this dwelling beside us, but has left it. I will have his current nesting place, and you will have the food I guard. I will trade for no other thing."

"There is much metal buried not far from here," the rat tried, his voice taking on the least coaxing quality. "It is many-times-touched metal, the sort your foolish kind desires even above food. I will show you where it is."

"I seek the one of my kind who nested here," I repeated, pretending I hadn't heard him just the way he'd done with me. "I will have his current nesting place and you will have the food I guard. I will trade for no other thing."

"What if the one you seek has gone to feed those about him?" the rat asked, his tail moving with frustrated swings. "What, then, will you trade for?"

"Nothing," I answered, making the word very flat and final. "I will take the food I guard and return to the others of my kind."

The rat paused to think about that, his black, beady eyes staring while his nose and ears twitched. If I'd given them the choice of doing something easier than searching for one of those they hated and feared, they would have lied and told me Brangol was dead. Now they knew they had to find him in order to get the food I "guarded," and were wondering if they could take the food without needing to trade. I let the least, distant thought of the beast trickle into my mind, and suddenly all of the rats were quivering.

"Indeed are you unlike the others of your kind," the leader said, held in place only by his overwhelming desire for the food I carried. "We will seek the nesting place of the one you would have."

"Good," I said, clearing my mind in order to calm my small allies. "I have a thing belonging to the one I seek, so you can know his scent. Take only the strongest scent, even should there be others."

I opened out the tunic in the cloth it was wrapped in without touching the tunic itself, and put it down where I'd put the food. Once I stepped back again the rats all came to examine it with their noses and tongues, and once they had what they needed their leader sent them off. All but the core group disappeared, and the leader looked up at me again.

"I, too, will seek the one you would have," he said. "We will return when we have found it."

"I may well be on this very spot," I answered, shifting my hold on the sack of food. "If I am not, I will not return."

"We go now," he answered in agitation, and then he and his half dozen scurried away as fast as they could. Time had very little meaning for them, and food was the only thing they hurried for. They now knew that if they didn't hurry they would lose the trade even if they found the man. I stood where I was for a short while, and then I went back to the mouth of the alley to gesture for Garam. If the rats had left a scout to watch me, I didn't want the watcher to believe I'd gone away to never return. Garam strode over with the barbarian right beside him, and the two of them looked at me questioningly.

"I've got the searchers moving, and now we have to wait," I told them. "Hopefully it won't be too long a wait, because I can't leave this alley. As soon as I find out anything I'll call you to join me."

"You've contacted runaway slaves in hiding," Garam guessed, pointing a finger at me. "That's why you took the food, and why you couldn't meet with them in the open. You really think they'll be able to find where Brangol's holed up?"

"If it's possible to find him, my searchers will do it," I assured him, resisting the temptation to

laugh at his guess. "Just remember to keep your men well back when I tell you it's time to follow. My searchers tend to be on the shy side, and they won't appreciate having you and your squad on their heels."

"Then what you need is an intermediary," Ijarin jumped in as Garam nodded. "If you can't leave this alley and Prince Garam isn't supposed to come to you, you need someone to carry messages back and forth. Obviously the job of messenger has to be mine."

"That's a really good idea, Prince Ijarin," Garam said so fast I only had time to part my lips for my own answer. "That way you won't feel as though you're simply wasting time. Men used to action don't enjoy wasting time, and we wouldn't want you to get bored."

Bored enough to leave, was the emphasis put on the words by Garam's eyes, the message reaching me in the hardness of his stare. If you say no and he *does* leave, guess who gets blamed by someone not human and definitely not merciful. A long message for one pointed stare, but it came through without any confusion.

"No, of course we wouldn't want him to get bored," I agreed with no enthusiasm whatsoever.

"Then he might go off looking for someone else to bother, and what a tragedy *that* would be. All right, if you're coming, come on."

I turned away from Garam's near growl and walked back to the place I'd been standing in the middle of the alley. Light footsteps followed me, and the only bright part of the situation was that the barbarian didn't sound like a bull charging through the brush. I looked around casually, knowing it was much too soon to expect the answer I wanted, and suddenly a finger came to tap my shoulder.

"What makes you think I'd want to find someone else to bother when it's so much more rewarding to bother *you*?" the barbarian asked when I turned my head toward him. "I'm beginning to really enjoy forcing my presence on you. Aren't *you* having fun?"

"Oh, absolutely," I agreed solemnly, seeing at once that he was trying to get even for the ... cool way I'd been treating him. "This is the most fun I've had in - oh, at least two full seasons. But at least *you're* learning something important from it."

"And what would that be?" he asked, honestly puzzled. "How to develop an infinite amount of patience?"

"You're learning what your place in life would have been if you hadn't been born a prince," I told him with something of a smile, not surprised that he'd fallen into the trap. "You know, what your current job is."

"A messenger," he all but growled as I went back to looking around in the shadows of the alley. I was really hoping that Ijarin would get so insulted he walked away, but no such luck.

"So you think I couldn't have gotten anywhere in this world if I was anything but high born." I shrugged at the statement, feeling he'd understood me well enough, but that didn't end the discussion.

"Or maybe you think something else," he said, and all traces of insult were gone from his voice. "Maybe you think that if you treat me badly enough I'll go away and you can forget about the prophecy. I've discovered you didn't mention the prophecy to Fearin and the others."

"Most prophecies are hogwash," I stated, letting him hear the disgust in my voice. "They're so vague they could cover anything, and usually end up doing exactly that. For the few that refer to specific events, they only come true when people start to fiddle with them. If everyone ignored them instead we'd never be bothered by 'prophecies coming true' again."

"In a way you're right," he said, and I heard him shift as though he leaned a shoulder against the wall we stood near. "People's actions are *always* tied into prophecies, but not just when they try to do something. Doing nothing is also an action, and comes fully equipped with its own consequences. Wouldn't you at least like to know *something* about the prophecy *you're* involved in?"

"No," I stated, completely certain. "And the only one who thinks I'm involved is you, which hardly makes it an unarguable fact. I considered the source and decided I didn't care to waste

the time."

"You know, I *don't* have all the patience and self control in the world," he said, the growl suddenly back in his voice. "I've been trying to make allowances, but I've just about reached the limit. I'm not going away, so why don't you stop trying to make it happen."

"Now that's funny," I said with a small laugh, delighted that I was finally reaching him. "A barbarian making allowances for *me*. How noble can you get?"

"Have you ever been put over a man's knee and had your backside soundly smacked?" he demanded, his voice not quite as low as it had been. "Somehow I doubt it, or you wouldn't be playing this game with me. Take my word for the fact that you're just about to the point of earning that experience and don't say another word. If you do, you and I will have trouble being friends."

"Friends?" I echoed, finding it necessary to turn and look directly at him. "You listen to me, *friend*, and believe what I say. I was a slave in this stinking city for almost two full seasons, and every heartbeat of that time I was told to keep my mouth shut and watch what I said when I did speak. When I told them what to do with themselves and said whatever I pleased, they strung me up by the wrists and had a guardsman teach me better with a whip. It hurt more than you could possibly imagine, but I still said whatever I pleased. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

"I think so," he agreed with a calm nod, his arms folded across his chest and one shoulder leaning against the wall. "You were treated as less than an animal for an eternally long time, and now you're fighting with the urge to strike back at anyone in reach. You know the people around you aren't responsible for what was done, but urges like that are hard to reason with. It's a fight to keep yourself under control, and if you get pushed too hard you'll lose your grip on that control."

"Leave it to a barbarian to read something like *that* into a simple statement," I told him in disgust, then turned away before he could see how unbelievably close he'd come. I had no idea how he knew, but I didn't care to pursue the question. "What I was trying to get across was the idea that if you don't like hearing what I say you can always leave. If you choose not to leave, don't complain."

"I wasn't complaining," he corrected, and I could almost feel him looking down at me. "I was warning you what to expect if you took that last step across the line. I won't beat you with a whip, and I won't cause you agony. I'll punish you like a little girl for *acting* like a little girl. Frankly, I'm surprised it hasn't already been done."

"By who?" I asked with a snort of ridicule. "Do you think I'm part of this group because of my beauty and sweet disposition? No Kenoss is easily taken, and some are a lot harder than others. You'll find out about that if you hang around long enough, but don't expect to enjoy what you learn."

"Some day I'll tell you what I already know," he said, and there seemed to be a faint smile behind the words. "Right now, though, I'll suggest an answer to your question. Master Fearin strikes me as a man to be reckoned with, and I've seen him get somewhat unhappy with you. If *he* decides to put you over his knee, I don't think you'd be able to argue very effectively."

"He'd need his Power to do it, and I'm sure he has better things to do with his Power," I said, beginning to get bored with the conversation. "If you insist on bending my ear, why don't you tell me where this sword comes from. I'd be curious to know who it was made for."

"It was made for you," he answered, and this time there was definite amusement in his voice. "But we can't go into that because you don't believe in prophecies and also don't want to hear about them. Why don't we talk instead about why you believe none of the men around you really care about you? Including me, of course."

"Where did you come up with *that*?" I demanded, exasperated enough to look at him again. "I never said anything like that, and wouldn't even have been silly enough to think it. I'm not here to be cared about, I'm meant to add my talents and skills to the general effort. If I wanted to be

cared about I'd go somewhere else."

"And where would *that* be?" he returned, those very light eyes looking straight down at me.

"If I asked you to name a place, I don't think you could. And one of the things that gives me that idea is the way you act with Prince Garam. Yesterday he was defending you, today he's feeling protective, and you're already flinching over what tomorrow might bring. I'd say you were happier when he was treating you like a slave."

"I don't like to be bothered," I said slowly and clearly, wanting him to understand what I was saying. "Garam is now bothering me, so of course I was happier when he was pushing me around. He wasn't *bothering* me."

"Is either one of us supposed to believe that?" he asked, one eyebrow raised. "Prince Garam is becoming *concerned* about you, but you don't seem able to believe that. You've probably been wondering what he expects to get out of you, and not being able to come up with an answer is confusing you. Or confusing part of you. Another part knows the answer and is frightened, while another part yet rejects the whole thing. No one will ever be concerned about you, so why bother even thinking about it?"

"How about the part of me that's wondering why no one has locked you up yet?" I asked, folding my arms as I returned his stare. "Do barbarians believe in letting crazy men run around loose if they happen to be a prince?"

"No fair trying to start a different argument," he said with a grin. "We aren't finished with this one yet. Part of you *wants* to be cared about, part of you is uncomfortable being cared about, and part of you doesn't believe it will ever happen. That's why it surprises you when Prince Garam gets angry on your behalf, why you have trouble dealing with it, and why you don't simply tell him to mind his own business. One mind with three different emotions."

"Four," I reminded him. "You're forgetting about the part wondering why you aren't locked up. If you pulled this nonsense on a regular basis back where you come from, they had to have been delighted to see you leave."

"If it's such nonsense, why aren't you coming back at me with details proving how wrong I am?" he countered. "And yes, I did do this sort of thing back home, and not only because I was trained to do it. My father has always had the talent to feel what those around him do, and I got it from him. Our people believe you can't have a really good ruler without the talent."

"That doesn't surprise me," I said with a nod. "Not even a little. Are you finished now, or would you like to go into details about the way I walk?"

"You walk delightfully," he said with a wider grin. "Perfectly balanced at all times like a superb fighter, with a little wiggle thrown in to show you're a girl. Shall I go on?"

"Is it possible to stop you?" I countered. "Short of killing you or hurting you really badly? I'm almost to the point of trying those last resorts, you see, so if you have any other suggestions you'd better make them fast."

"If you're saying *I* ought to be spanked, you're too late," he came back with a laugh. "That was possible when I was a very small boy, but not since then. Do you have a better idea now about how I was feeling just a little while ago? And why you'd better understand I meant what I said? You've been treating me miserably, but since I know why you're doing it I haven't stopped caring about you. If you push me too far I'll keep my promise - even if Prince Garam beats me to it."

"This time I refuse to ask what you're talking about," I said very firmly, closing my eyes to rub at them. "I doubt if even *you* know, and if this goes on much longer I'll probably turn berserk."

"You're driving Prince Garam crazy with the way you're treating me," he said with a chuckle.

"He knows how badly Fearin wants me to stay, and Garam's picturing you drawn and quartered if you chase me off. The longer it goes on the angrier Garam gets, especially since he's not enjoying having to smooth things over every time you open your mouth. After this last episode he's right on the edge, and if you push him over he'll surprise you again."

I really don't enjoy conversations with or about crazy people, but I was saved from having to

simply turn away and ignore Ijarin. I heard a small scurry a short way down the alley, and when I turned to look I saw the scout in the shadows. It should still have been too soon to hear anything, but I didn't care to take the chance - or miss the opportunity...

Chapter 13

"Stand still and don't say a word," I told Ijarin over my shoulder. "No matter what you see, don't even breathe hard unless I say you can." Then I took a couple of short steps forward and spoke to the scout. "Do you return with word for me?"

"He who eats first would have you come to him," the scout answered, still hugging the shadows. "There is another of your kind behind you."

"That other is here with my permission," I said very carefully. "He and more like him will follow me as I follow you, for their task is to capture the one I seek. I will allow none of them to harm you or yours. In what place does the one who eats first wait?"

"The place I will take you to," the scout answered, still ill at ease. "How do you mean to follow me through the low places?"

"I cannot follow you through the low places," I said, suddenly realizing we had a problem. "As you can see, I am far too big to fit. Are you able to find your way across the open, where I can pass with ease?"

"I know the way through the open, yet cannot traverse it till the lower darkness rises to cover the light," the scout said, retreating another whisker into the shadows. "When those of your kind see my kind, those of my kind are often put beyond eating. I do not wish to be put beyond eating."

"I am unable to wait till the lower darkness rises," I said, knowing how much harder it would be for Garam's men at night. "Perhaps there is another way. Would you ride my shoulder and direct me from there? Should any then attempt to do you harm, I would be able to disallow it. Are you able to do such a thing?"

The scout grew very still, as though suddenly cast in stone, and a handful of breaths went by before the motion of life returned.

"There are those who are protected by your kind as though they were cherished," the scout said in a much lower voice. "Many times I have seen this, and many times I have wondered. Why are none of *my* kind ever cherished?"

"I ... have no words to speak of it," I stumbled, wondering if that could really be wistful hurt in the rat's voice. "Your kind and mine... Perhaps your kind is too free to be cherished in such a way."

"Too free," the rat repeated, now sounding sad. "Yes, we are free, and shall likely remain so. It would please me to ride your shoulder and know your protection as I do so. Do you wish to go now?"

"First I must send word to the others of my kind," I answered. "I will be with you after I have done so."

I turned back to Ijarin then, and found him staring at the rat with the strangest expression on his face. Then his stare came to me, and he shook himself as though he had just come in out of a downpour.

"You were talking to that rat," he said, his voice filled with near disbelief. "It spoke to you and you answered. Is that who your searchers are, the city's rats?"

"Some of the city's rats," I corrected, wishing I hadn't let him stay. "They may have found Brangol, so I'm going to let this one lead me to where they think he is. Tell Garam not to follow too closely, but to try not to lose me. And tell the prince, Prince, that if any man tries to kill a rat in this area *I'll* kill the man. Have you got that?"

"Yes, I think I have," he said with a slow nod, and the gods must surely have been smiling because that was all he said. He turned then and made his relatively silent way out of the alley, and I was able to turn back to the scout.

"You will ride here," I said, tapping my left shoulder before crouching down and putting out a hand. "The other shoulder must be free should the need arise to protect you."

"You would let me ride so close to the food you guard?" the scout said, coming slowly nearer. "You must be very sure of your abilities."

"Should the one I seek be truly found, this food I guard will belong to you and your kind," I said, holding my extended hand very still. "Do you believe I would guard *your* food less well than my own?"

"No, I cannot believe such a thing," the scout said, very nearly shaking his head. "You must know, then, that I would not seek to take what is yours to guard. I marvel at how clearly you see my kind."

And I marveled at the feel of tiny clawed feet climbing into my hand, and the sight of bright black eyes looking up at me. This wasn't the first time I'd spoken to rats, but it was the first time I'd touched one that was still living. Not to mention one who so obviously trusted me.

"Perhaps ... perhaps you would care to accompany me when I return to my kind," I said, the words spilling out before I could decide whether or not I should be saying them. "I do not urge you to do such a thing. Merely do I offer the suggestion as one you might care to consider."

"I will be honored to consider your suggestion," he said, whiskers and small body quivering. "The decision will be a difficult one."

I made a sound to show I understood, and I certainly did. Being scout for a pack was a very important position; if the scout lived, he usually became leader when the current leader was no longer able to maintain himself. Scouts tried all food sources first to see if they were poisoned, and if they *were* poisoned only the scout died. If they weren't poisoned then the leader and his females came to eat, but the scout didn't lose out because he had already eaten. That let him grow strong enough to eventually take over - which would never happen if this particular scout came along with me. I didn't know which way he would decide, but there was something about him that hadn't let me hold back on the offer.

But this wasn't the time for smalltalk. I lifted the little gray body slowly and carefully to my left shoulder, waited until he had a good grip on my tunic, then just as slowly straightened up. I expected convulsive grabs and exclamations of fright when I started to walk, but all I got were sounds of delight. My new friend apparently loved being so high off the ground, and was all ready to see the sights.

Which was much better than the sights seeing him. There was still no sign of people in the streets beyond the occasional beggar, who no longer had who to beg from. Before the city was taken I would have had trouble walking the streets in daylight with a rat on my shoulder, but right now the only reaction I got was the beggar licking his lips. Happily my little friend didn't see that, and I didn't point it out to him.

I was directed to turn first in his direction, then toward my empty shoulder, then to go straight, then to turn toward him again. The distance was much shorter when one traveled through the low places, I was assured, and below the level the rats used was a space big enough for someone my size. I'd heard about the catacombs that were supposed to lie beneath the city, but I had no interest in seeing them. The key to finding a safe way through those catacombs had been lost hundreds of seasons earlier, and those who went down to explore were never heard from again.

"He who eats first awaits us in the shadows of the place beyond this next turn toward your

empty shoulder," the scout said, obviously referring to the next alley. "The nesting place of the one you seek will then be right beside me."

"I don't know how any of them were able to pick up his scent in this stink," I muttered, looking around at an area that was sickeningly familiar. It *was* closer to the center of the city, and the streets should have been filled with people coming and going, beggars and thieves plying their trades, shopkeepers selling their wares. It was a place where city slaves had once been kept, only recently having been abandoned because of the stench. Those who came to hire the city's slaves had complained about being sickened, so the slaves had been moved to a smaller but sweeter-smelling place.

And no one had cared that our agony had been added to with the smaller cage size. The customers who came to hire our sweat were happy, and that was all that had mattered.

"Are you ailing?" the little scout asked, sounding concerned. "Were you not able to hear me?"

"I heard and understood and am not ailing," I answered, forcing myself to take a deep breath of that putrid air. "Before we approach the one who eats first, I must speak with the others of my kind. I would not wish to see all our efforts made in vain."

I moved casually back up the street, just a girl and her rat out for a pleasant stroll, and caught sight of Ijarin not far away. When I moved to the side of a boarded-up stall and gestured to Ijarin, he glided over to join me.

"There have to be a score of eyes watching us from every building," he murmured as he looked down at me, and then he smiled. "Let's pretend you're offering to sell me countless delights and I'm listening with interest."

"Listen to this with interest," I countered, trying my best to match his smile. "That big building on the next street, the one with metal closing off all the windows... That's where Brangol is supposed to be. Tell Garam to send some of his men to the next street over, to cover the doors on that side. The only other doors are on this side, so he shouldn't have any trouble."

"Later you'll have to tell me what bothers you about that place," he said, the smile no longer with him. "Your little friend looks perfectly comfortable, and later *I'll* tell *you* what Prince Garam said when he found out who your searchers really were. I don't know if I can get across the way he closed his eyes in pain, but I have to try."

This time it was a little easier to match his smile, and then he was gone to pass on my message. Since he'd been right about all the eyes watching us, I strolled back to the proper alley then slid into it. The leader rat and his followers were there, and they all became excited when they saw me.

"We have found the one you seek, for he nested in a place familiar to most of us," the leader said. "The trade has now been completed, and we will have the food you guard."

"Although we have not yet found the one I seek, the food is yours," I said, taking the scout from my shoulder and placing him gently on the ground. "It may be that the one I seek has left to find yet another nesting place, and if so I shall return with more food to trade. Is this acceptable to you?"

"It is acceptable," the leader said, quivering even harder as I set down and opened the bundle of food I'd been carrying. The scout immediately began to eat, and rather than wait the leader jumped to join him. While the leader ate he scattered tidbits around to the rest of his pack, and they all swallowed it with moans of delight.

"When you have finished with this food, you must leave this area and not return unless I accompany you," I said after a pair of moments. "Others of my kind have noted your presence, and they will know that somehow your kind guided me and mine to this place. If they catch you, you will never eat again."

"We will leave this place and not return," the leader agreed, appearing a bit bloated, but still looking around for more to eat. "The food you guarded was marvelous, and it would delight me if the one you seek has found another nesting place after all."

"If he is here, I may well be able to bring more food in thanks," I said with a smile. "If so, I will

bring it to the place where first we met."

"We will hear your call and come," the rat said, looking up at me. "Now we return to the low place and our own nests."

He and his pack moved slowly off into the shadows, and soon there was no more than a single rat left. It was my little friend the scout, and I smiled while I waited for him to say that he was going back with me.

"My kind has never known one such as you," he began, those black eyes looking directly up at me. "I had not believed it possible to feel such delight while doing something other than eating. There was no fear for me when I rode your shoulder."

"It seems as though you have made your decision," I said, crouching down so I'd be able to offer my hand when the time came.

"I have indeed made my decision," he said, and his voice had turned sad again. "He who eats first has begun to be feeble, and soon I must challenge him for his place. It is my duty toward the others, the price I must pay for having been allowed the privileged place of scout."

"But - as scout you could have died," I protested, then realized he wasn't understanding me.

"As scout you might have been put beyond eating. Is it not enough that you risked all eating for the others? With me, you would eat whenever you wished, with the risk no longer there."

"The taste of the food you guarded told me the same," he said, and now the words seemed gentle. "Were the choice mine I would accompany you to be cherished, yet the choice belongs to duty. Eat well in peace and safety, and rest assured that I will never forget you."

His bright black eyes rested on me a moment longer, and then he turned and disappeared into the shadows. I was alone again, as usual, but this time I didn't know if I could stand it. I hadn't realized how much I'd been looking forward to having someone who trusted me, someone who - I straightened to my feet, pushing the entire incident out of my mind. There would never be someone who trusted me and liked me, not when you stopped to think about who I was.

Expecting anything else was imbecilic, and the scout had made the right choice after all. Now I would never be able to turn on him and betray his trust, not accidentally or on purpose. Alone was the way I was meant to be, and I couldn't afford to let myself forget that.

When I made my way out of the alley, Garam's men were just breaking into the old slave building. Not all of them were in sight, though, which had to mean the rest were at the other doors. When Garam saw me, he gestured me over.

"If we don't all get knocked over by the smell, we should know in a little while if the quarry's here," he said, actually looking slightly green. "It's the perfect hiding place, but I don't know how anyone could stand it. Any guardsmen who came by must have just kept going."

"After a while you get used to the smell," I said, studying the building with present eyes rather than in memory. "No one can avoid the search by getting out the other way?"

"I put Prince Ijarin in charge of the men I sent there," he answered with what seemed to be a faint sigh. "It was the only way to get him to stop asking me all these crazy questions. I have two men with me who know what Brangol looks like - it was their job to find out before we attacked - and one is with each group. If Brangol is here we'll get him, but - Rats! No wonder you refused to tell me what you were doing. How in the most violent hell did you get rats to cooperate?"

"I bribed them with that food," I said, hearing sounds from inside the building. "A lot of the cages were removed when they shifted the slaves, so your men shouldn't have too much trouble searching. There's not much in the way of hiding places in there."

"That's one of the places *you* were held," Garam said, a statement rather than a question.

"That's why you know so much about the place. Damn them... "

His words choked off into a crackling silence, one that seemed to be filled with high energy anger. Garam was starting to take my previous captivity personally, which was understandable enough. I *had* to be accepted as part of the inner group, Diin-tha the god had said so; if I was acceptable now, I had to have been acceptable before now. If I was acceptable before now, the

city people had insulted all of us with what they'd done to me as a slave. Garam was feeling insulted, all right, but completely on his own behalf.

"Someone's coming out," Garam noted, confirming what I'd already seen. "If it's Brangol, you can kiss those rats for me."

Two of his guardsmen were forcing a third man out of the building, a smallish man with a pinched and waspish face. He seemed furious that he'd been captured, as though no one should have been smart enough to figure out where he was.

"This is the one we want," the guardsman on the left told Garam as they neared us. "There are some more in there, and a few of them are the small fish we missed. Karak's stringing them together, and we can look them over someplace where we can breathe."

Garam nodded with satisfaction at that, but the words made me even happier. My chore there was finished, and I could go back to my apartment in the palace. I wanted a little time to myself, and I intended to get it. Garam got busy directing everyone and shouting orders, and never even noticed when I simply walked away.

The walk back to the Chief Administrator's palace disappeared behind distraction, and I reached my apartment to find that I couldn't stay in it very long. There was nothing to do there but think, and I wasn't in the mood for thinking. I needed something to *do*, something physical and hard. I considered the matter for a short while, and then I left the palace and the city. It took some effort to leave the city in full daylight and still have no one see me, but it got me where I wanted to be.

Which was, eventually, in the woods near the city. The surrounding countryside outside the wall was clogged with slaver caravans, mostly of those who had plied their trade *in* the city. A few others had turned up as well, traveling groups that had gotten lucky, or some who had heard the prophecy and had come to await the fall. Most of the people in chains were miserable, but they were also too numb with shock to really understand what had happened. Once all the flutter and confusion died away, they would be *made* to understand.

I spent the rest of the day and the following night running and hunting in the woods, sleeping for a short while and then returning to the city before dawn. Darkness made my return very easy, and my apartment was silent and empty when I walked into it. I intended to find anything at all in the way of clean clothing to change into, and discovered that another outfit had been left for me, this one in pale yellow and light tan. My boots turned the same tan as the trousers when I neared the outfit, and that almost made me smile. Fearin was still making sure I didn't disgrace the group by wearing unacceptable clothing.

I washed briefly before putting on the new clothing, and then went to the dining porch where breakfast would be put. The sky was beginning to lighten enough to notice, but the air still held that pleasant nighttime cool. I leaned on a window ledge and looked out at the newly arriving day, idly wondering how many more of them I'd have to endure before -

"So, you finally decided to rejoin us," a voice said from behind me, a voice with more than a little annoyance in it. "Are you sure we aren't interfering too much with your busy schedule? I wouldn't want our petty involvements to take you away from what's really important."

"If you felt you couldn't finish off this city without me, Fearin, you should have said so," I remarked without turning. "I don't mind giving a hand to the helpless when I've got nothing better to do."

"I ought to give you more than one hand," he growled, coming up behind me. "You disappeared again without a word to anybody, and if I hadn't been able to tell you weren't in the city everyone would have gone out looking for you! We all took turns coming up with pictures of you lying dead or wounded somewhere!"

"Oh, come on," I scoffed, finally turning to look up at him. "You can't tell me you don't know what it would take to leave me dead or wounded. Where did you expect a force like that to come from?"

"From the same place those attacking intruders came, do you think?" he suggested, heavy

anger darkening his entire expression. "Ah, I see you'd forgotten about them. That means, of course, that if you'd remembered you would have told someone you were going off on your own."

"I didn't realize I was too young and inexperienced to be trusted out alone," I said, annoyed over having forgotten about those attackers. "If I *had* realized, I would certainly have told my nursemaid all about it. I'll be sure to keep the point in mind for next time."

"Here's another point to remember along with it," he said, heavy cold coming from the hard blue eyes looking down at me. "When a woman is involved with a man, especially if he first had to Earn her, it isn't right for her not to show up even for bed. That leaves the man sitting there half the night in her apartment, telling himself she's just being insensitive, not stuck in the middle of trouble. He doesn't believe it, of course, but that's what he tells himself."

"Ah, so that's what's *really* bothering you," I said as understanding finally reached me. "You expected to spend the night in my bed, but not alone and not simply to sleep. Just when you were starting to get used to a pleasant new routine, I shamefully made you do without."

His hands came to my upper arms so fast I didn't even see them move, his grip tightening instantly to a point just short of pain. In the space of a heartbeat I was pulled toward him and shaken just a little, and then I was released with a small push. It was the strangest episode I'd ever been a part of, and I had the craziest feeling that he'd let me go because he'd been about to hurt me.

"You - !" He choked on the rest of the words trying to fight their way out of him, his eyes blazing at me with absolute fury. He looked away briefly in an attempt to regain control of himself, the back of one fist to his lips as he fought the anger tearing at him, and then he partially succeeded. He forced the rage down to a point where he could keep it contained, and then he was looking at me again.

"All right," he growled, the faintest blue glow surrounding him in the growing light of day. "I don't have the time now to explain life and its many mysteries to an emotional child, so for the moment we'll do this the easy way. Prince Garam and half our force will be leaving the city mid morning, and we and the rest of the army will be leaving mid afternoon. From now until then you're confined to this palace, specifically to this porch or your apartment. When we camp tonight you're to come to my tent, where you'll have the meal and spend the night. Those are my orders, and you'd damned well better obey them. If you don't, I'll make you regret the disobedience in a way you can't even imagine."

The snarly words ended as he turned to stomp half way across the porch, where he stopped to raise his arms in the direction of the empty food table. Heavy blue swirled around him as his lips moved with the shaping of words, and then a similar blue flared around the table. When he and the blue were done there was food on the table, and as soon as that happened Fearin turned again and went the rest of the way out.

I stood watching the doorway he'd disappeared through, rubbing my left arm where his fingers had closed so hard, trying to understand what he'd been talking about. He couldn't have meant he didn't want to be in my bed, not when he'd ordered me to spend tonight in his tent, so what had he been trying to say? That he had somehow gotten the idea I expected the arrangement to last? That I thought he could be interested in *me* rather than just in using me? Since nothing could be farther from the truth, I'd tell him so tonight. After that, his strangeness would certainly stop.

I began to walk toward the table to see what had been put there for us to eat, but company arrived before I made it. Garam walked in, nodded to me with a neutral expression, then turned his attention to the food. Seeing that I felt distinctly relieved, as I'd been expecting a fuss from him like the one I'd gotten from Fearin. It looked like Garam had gotten tired of playing concerned, just the way I'd always known he would. The change had come none too soon, and let me take a plate and choose my meal in peace.

But that was as far as the peace would stretch. I was turning away from the table when Talasin

arrived, shattering the delightful silence and sending it scurrying for cover.

"So there you are," Talasin announced in tones of outrage, stopping to put his fists to his hips.

"Back for the first meal of the day and acting as though nothing at all had happened! What have you got to say for yourself?"

"Nothing at all happened," I supplied with a shrug, heading for my usual chair. That should have taken care of anything else he had to say, but the gods must have been in a fun-seeking mood again.

"You're very funny," Talasin growled, light eyes boring into me as I sat. "Where were you most of yesterday and last night, and why didn't you tell anyone you'd be gone? You wouldn't have done something like this to your own people, so why did you do it to us?"

"Once a Kenoss child reaches puberty, he or she is no longer considered a child," I said as I gave most of my attention to the food I'd taken. "Adults can go and do exactly as they please, and aside from being responsible for their actions, need account to no one at all. If they don't survive whatever it is they choose to do, it's conceded they might not have been very wise in doing it. If they do survive, no one has the right to say anything at all. My people find it a comfortable, sensible arrangement."

"What it really is is cold and unfeeling," he stated, slowed down a little but hardly stopped.

"I'm beginning to understand why you act the way you do, but it's still no excuse. You're not among your Kenoss now, you're with us. The least you can do is act the way we do."

"Leave her alone, Talasin," Garam said as he took his own chair, also not looking at the man.

"There was no harm done, so leave her alone."

"No harm done?" Talasin echoed, back to being outraged. "What about the way we ate ourselves up, wondering where she could be? What if we'd all gone out looking for her?"

"Then that would have been *your* mistake rather than mine," I snapped, more than tired of his hysterics. "If you've all convinced yourselves I need looking after because you'll all be in trouble with our Guardian if I turn up lost, that's *your* problem. If it had been one of *you* who was missing, no one would have thought about it twice."

"You're wrong," Talasin said flatly, his stare very direct. "We would have worried no matter who the missing one was, but you're wrong in another way too. If it had been one of the rest of us, that one would have told someone what he intended to do. That way we wouldn't have *had* to worry."

"He's right," Garam said without looking up. "We're all free to come and go as we please, and our Guardian would be angry if *any* of us disappeared. But the rest of us would have told someone, because we're all part of something that makes us closer than family. Families don't always care what their members are doing, but we do."

By now his eyes had come to my face, and he wasn't making any attempt to avoid my gaze either. They were both looking at me from under lowered brows, and I could feel the old confusion returning. I would have had trouble thinking of the next thing to say, but Ranander's arrival saved me the effort.

"Aelana, you're back!" he exclaimed, striding onto the porch with a grin. "It took me forever to think of trying to *know* if you'd be all right, but once I did I was convinced of it. The others weren't sure at all, but I was."

"But only after you *knew*," I pointed out, beginning to feel depressed. "I love the confidence everyone has in my ability to take care of myself. I'm out of sight for half a dozen heartbeats and you all start to build a funeral pyre."

That got them all arguing at once, and in the middle of their protests Master Lokkel showed up to add his own demands about whether or not I needed his skill. I gritted my teeth and simply ignored them, but it wasn't easy. I had no idea what they thought they would get out of acting like this, and not knowing made me very uncomfortable.

After a while all the yelling died down, and by then Ranander had filled a plate and brought it over to the chair next to me. He sat carefully, and then moved his gaze to my face.

"I was really worried about you before I *knew* you would be all right, Aelana," he said, keeping his voice moderately low. "I was going to talk to you last night, but since you weren't here I'll have to do it tonight instead. After we set up camp, of course."

"And what did you intend to talk to me about, Ranander?" I asked, suddenly remembering what Garam had said about Ranander's intentions. "Why don't you tell me right now?"

"Really, Aelana, I couldn't do it here," he answered with a laugh. "If you don't believe it would upset everyone, just take my word for it. When we're alone I'll tell you how much I admire you and then I'll show you."

"All this admiration," I said, turning my head to look directly at him. "Does it come before or after the fight?"

"Fight?" he echoed, stopping with the food half way to his mouth. "What fight is that? You don't think I want to *fight* with you, do you, Aelana? What I want to do is take you to bed, not hurt you in any way."

"Ranander, the only way to take a Kenoss woman to bed is to first best her in a fight," I said, putting it as flatly as possible. "Even an ordinary Kenoss woman isn't easy to best, but when it comes to me... If I lose control the beast will escape, and the concept of friendship is totally beyond her. Do you really want to make me responsible for your death?"

"But - but, we're friends!" he protested, looking shaken and almost desolate. "You might have to fight with someone you didn't know, but with a friend you could - "

"Ranander, I'd have to fight you even if I'd known you all my life," I interrupted, doggedly refusing to let him talk himself out of believing me. "It's the way my people do things, the way I was raised to accept as the only way. You'll just have to find someone else to admire."

"But how could I do that?" he asked, heavy disturbance showing in his eyes. "There isn't anyone else *like* you. I've been counting on this for quite some time, but I *didn't* count on Kenoss beliefs. I'll have to think about it."

He got to his feet in the grip of deepening distraction, and left the porch carrying his still-untouched plate. We all watched him gone, me with a curious feeling I couldn't define, and then Garam made a sound of satisfaction.

"It isn't over yet, but at least you side-tracked him with a good excuse," he said, obviously speaking to me. "Ranander's fighting skills have to be minimal at best, considering none of us have ever seen him show any. He may decide he *wants* to face you, girl, but if he does he won't have a chance. Just stick to that story and he may even back down permanently."

"It can't be just a story," Talasin stated, clearly having thought about it. "Don't forget it's Ranander she said it to, and if it wasn't true he would have known immediately. That means she had to be telling the truth, no matter how strange it sounds."

"It's the truth?" Garam said with amusement, his dark eyes searching my face for confirmation. "Well, how about that. I didn't really believe it the first time you told me, but I suppose it makes sense. If a man wants a woman like you he has to work for the privilege. And if he isn't good enough, all he gets for his trouble is some lumps. I like it, I really do. And it makes the man who manages it someone ... special."

The grin he gave me was very wide, but he held it only long enough to make sure I saw it. After that he went back to eating, and the discussion seemed to be over. Talasin kept glancing at me, probably thinking over the "strange" new truth he'd just learned, and Lokkel was completely unbothered. I had the feeling Garam would have teased me more if he'd had the time, but since he had to get ready for the earlier departure he didn't have any time to waste. Later would be another story, but right now...

Right now I suddenly wished it was time for *me* to leave. I'd had enough of this city to last me forever, and I also wanted our group effort to be over and done with. Once it was over we would all go our separate ways, and I would be free of things like criticism for my actions and teasing about my beliefs. I *wanted* to be free of those things, I did ... I did...

Chapter 14

It was the middle of the afternoon rather than late, and the heat of the day was doing its best to squash us all flat. Riding through the heavy glare was easier than walking or marching - or running with arrows flying all around - but I was still feeling impatient. Fearin had gotten everyone ready to move, and then had made us wait.

"He didn't do it on a whim," Ijarin said from beside me, apparently reading my mind. "He had to seal the palace with his Power, to be sure no one finds it possible to take it over. I'd say he had a reason for doing that, even if he didn't care to tell the rest of us."

I looked around at the empty, trampled-down fields where the slaver caravans had been, and past that area to the other untended fields beyond. Those left in the city would have a lot of trouble feeding themselves for quite a while; it would take them time to realize there weren't slaves out tending the crops, and by then there would be few crops left to tend. A lot of them might even decide to desert the dying city...

"That man you found yesterday had been in charge of the city's emergency gold supply," Ijarin said, pretending I was joining in the conversation, or at least paying attention. "He'd intended to wait for us to leave and then would have set himself up as the new city ruler. Or would have taken the gold and found a more prosperous city to spend it in. Whichever, Fearin and Ranander persuaded him to part with the gold, and now it's ours."

The guardsmen from our half of the army were marching along as though the heat didn't bother them, as though they were looking forward to their short time on the road before they made camp. They'd be marching almost until sundown, while our first half would camp early. That way, so Fearin said, we'd have the army back together again with no fuss at all. Why he'd divided it in the first place was something else he hadn't cared to mention, at least not to me. "Ignoring me won't do any more good than insulting me," the barbarian commented, just mentioning the point in passing. "You deserved that scolding I gave you this morning, and you can't say you didn't."

As a matter of fact I didn't say anything at all, especially since he'd reminded me of that morning. His ranting around had made the reaction unanimous, something I hadn't needed after the way the others had acted. Since I couldn't understand what they were all after, I'd decided not to think about any of it.

"I also heard about what you said to Ranander," he went on, the change of subject accompanied by a change of tone. "You'll have to be very gentle with him, considering how attracted to you he is. The others can obviously handle the feelings, but he may not be up to it."

"What the hell are you talking about?" I demanded, then immediately wished I'd bitten my tongue instead. He'd caught me again, and I felt like an idiot.

"You can't mean you don't know how attractive you are to the men around you?" he said in a very bland way, only his light eyes showing a hint of the grin he hid. "Most women develop the ability to judge that at the age of four or five."

"You mean everyone was bowled over at first sight of my unparalleled beauty?" I asked, barely glancing at him. "Well, I knew *that*, of course, but I've learned to overlook it. It gets to be such a bore, having men constantly throwing themselves at your feet."

"You think you're being sarcastic," he said, and the grin that escaped his control was softer than the one I'd expected. "You look in a mirror and the face looking back *isn't* outstandingly beautiful, so you assume that the men around you can't possibly be interested. I'll grant you that beauty of face and figure will attract men the fastest, but that doesn't mean it's *all* we look for. Some men are shallow just the way some women are, but most do want something beyond looks."

"Ah, now I understand," I said with a sober nod. "If a man can't have a woman who's beautiful, he's more than happy to accept one who can kill a dozen attackers instead. He finds the beast inside her *adorable*, and doesn't even think about the fact that she might be better with a sword than he is. He just shrugs it off with a grin, and goes out to pick some flowers for her."

"Hasn't any man ever brought you flowers?" he asked, his tone and smile now very gentle. "If they haven't, I'm sure it's only because flowers aren't something they would normally think of. I've watched you with Prince Talasin, for instance, and if you'd given him the least amount of encouragement he would have buried you in flowers. Prince Garam is another story, of course, but he's the sort to walk over flowers without even seeing them. Master Lokkel would happily share some of the deepest secrets in Healing Lore if you asked about them, and Ranander may well decide to risk life and limb in order to win you. Me, I complain about being insulted or ignored, but you don't see me riding next to someone else, do you?"

"I think we've already established that *you* shouldn't be running around loose," I answered, wondering why I was wasting my time with that nonsense. "And that, of course, doesn't even count the fact that you have another reason for hanging around. Talasin has felt sorry for me right from the beginning, Garam is delighted that he can use my abilities in his tactics, and Lokkel is interested in anything that lets him show off his healing techniques. As far as Ranander goes, he considers me a friend and therefore wants to share sex with me. The camp women must have befriended him before I came along, so his extending the urge to me isn't hard to understand. That about covers it, I think, and in a slightly more reasonable way than you used."

"I hadn't realized that 'reasonable' was a word to be substituted for 'mule-headed blindness,'" he came back, now sounding annoyed. "Do you really believe that if you refuse to acknowledge the truth about something it will stop being true?"

"Only if it's someone's opinionated *version* of the truth," I countered, catching his annoyance. "Do I really look so backward and simple in your eyes that you think you can tell me anything and I'll believe it? Men want *pretty* women, and the stronger the men are, the more they can indulge the preference. If they happen to be involved in something where no pretty women are available, they'll make do as best they can. Not find attraction elsewhere, simply make do. To believe anything else is to believe a child's story."

"A child's story," he echoed, his stare hardening. "By definition that has to be something you can't bring yourself to believe in. You're not attractive to yourself so you can't be attractive to anyone else. Did it never occur to you that not everyone in this world has to see things the way you do? That some might have opinions different from yours and also - "

"Enough!" I pronounced, finally sick of his constant disagreement. "Enough spoken, and enough heard. The next word you speak to me had best be challenge, for in that way do I mean to take it. Not warned, but promised."

I met his eyes squarely before kicking my horse into faster motion, and as I rode away I had the definite feeling he'd understood perfectly. He'd probably never before heard a Silence Challenge, but he'd been able to see I wasn't joking. My people really disliked being bothered, and that included being buried under an avalanche of words. There were a lot of reasons why the Kenoss were both respected and feared, and the fact that we kept our word was just one of them.

I rode alone for the rest of the day, feeling Ijarin's eyes on me but only from a distance. Since I was riding ahead of him, the longer we rode the harder I had to be to see. Marching west into sundown does a good job of accomplishing that, and west was definitely the direction we were going. I spent some time wondering which direction we would take once we turned, then forgot about it. For me, one direction was as good as another; when we turned, I'd have my question answered.

Our front-riders contacted our first half just about when they expected to, and a little while after that we were together again. Ranander and Lokkel and a very heavy escort had

surrounded the coach carrying the twin girls, Talasin had led our half of the force, and Fearin had spent his time going back and forth between Talasin and the coach, the Power occasionally crackling around him. He'd been ready for anything, but the anything had played it smart and not shown up.

The camp spread out a short distance from the Harn river, past the tree line and across the meadowland that lay there. The city had used a portion of the closer meadowland for grazing its herds, but we were beyond that point. For a while the area was a bedlam of shouted orders, guardsmen running to obey, horses being unhitched or unsaddled, tents going up. My tent suddenly appeared with the others, certainly by courtesy of Fearin, and when I rode over to it I found something else. A lower-grade guardsman stood in front of the tent, trying not to look nervous.

"G'day to you, lady," he said as he looked up at me, his body trying to decide whether or not to stand at attention. "The High Master says I'm to tend your horse, and to remind you about supper in his tent. You got just enough time to wash some dust off first."

"How very generous of the High Master to allow me that," I said as I began to dismount.

"Maybe I ought to send you back with the question of which dust I'm to wash off and which to leave."

"Lady?" he queried as he took my reins, having no idea what I was talking about. "You want me to ask him *what*?"

"Never mind," I said with a headshake and a gesture. "I'll tell him myself when I see him. Where will you be picketing my horse?"

"Right over there," he answered, pointing leftward of my tent. "Don't you worry, we'll take good care of him for you."

He gave my horse a pat and me a reassuring smile, then he walked away to do the taking care of he'd promised. It had taken me that long to realize it, but Fearin must have found the one guardsman in the entire army who hadn't heard the stories about me. The man had been nervous at first, but only because I was one of the inner group running that effort.

I spent a short time inside my tent, feeling out of sorts in a way I couldn't understand, but it wasn't possible to stay there and think about it forever. If Fearin hadn't had Diin-tha backing his decisions... But he did have the god behind him, so I had no choice about taking the man's orders. I would be having the meal with him, and that was that.

Walking toward Fearin's tent showed me most of the furor had died down, and I found a surprise when I entered. I'd thought I was the only one who had been ordered to the meal, but the presence of everyone else destroyed that assumption. Lokkel and Talasin already sat on the weaving with cups in their hands, Garam was filling a cup of his own, and Ranander was inspecting the array of food set up not far from the drinks. The only one not immediately to be seen was Fearin, but I was no more than two strides into the tent when he entered behind me. "All right, the girls are finally settled down," he announced, looking and sounding sour. "They think they're holding a grand feasting for the royalty of the entire world, and the heavy guard around them believes they're guarding victims of a terrible disease. If anyone gets into the tent, the disease will spread to the guardsmen as well."

"You were able to do all that?" Talasin asked with a look of surprise while everyone else just stared. "But what happens if one of the girls tries to come out, or some of the other men tell the guard the truth?"

"The girls know if they try to leave that tent they'll become absolutely common," Fearin answered as he walked toward the table holding wine. "And the members of the guard already know the truth. It's everyone else who doesn't know, to be certain that panic doesn't start to spread. Those men have a very important job, and they're proud to do it."

Fearin took his time pouring a cup of wine, and we just sat or stood there considering what he'd said. I knew very little about the use of Power, but I'd never heard of anyone doing the sort of thing *he'd* done. Fearin wasn't simply Powerful, then; he was also creative, which made him

even more than usually dangerous...

"Does anyone know why Prince Ijarin is late?" the man of Power suddenly asked. "Did he somehow miss getting my invitation?"

"He - ah - decided he'd prefer to take the meal with his men," Talasin answered, looking only at Fearin. "I'm sure you know he had twenty men waiting for him outside the city, and they're now riding with the army."

"He also said something about it being better for everyone if he stayed away for a while," Lokkel contributed, frowning with the effort to recall something that wasn't involved with healing. "Surely you remember, Prince Talasin? It had something to do with good health." Talasin smiled faintly without moving his eyes to Lokkel, Garam buried his face in his wine cup, and Ranander abruptly turned back to give all his attention to the food table. I'm sure Fearin saw every one of those reactions, but the only one he looked directly at was me.

"Tell me what you did," he said, and the words weren't really a question. "I want to hear about it *now*, not when I talk to our Guardian."

"I just gave him a ritual Silence Challenge," I answered with a shrug that wasn't as casual as I'd wanted it to be. For some reason that hard blue stare was making me so *uncomfortable*...

"It isn't as though I didn't put up with everything I could be expected to take first. He refused to stop bothering me, so I spoke the ritual."

"Which entails what?" Fearin demanded, obviously annoyed with Garam's badly hidden amusement. Talasin was also amused, and Ranander was looking admiring again.

"It ... declares that the next word he speaks to me will be taken as a challenge no matter what it happens to be," I said, trying not to shift where I stood. "Kenoss don't use it much anymore, but only because most people have learned not to bother us."

"Don't worry, Fearin, our Guardian won't be asking you why he left," Garam said with the laugh he could no longer hold down. "No matter what she says to him, he keeps coming back for more. From the way he watches her move, I'd bet gold he'll *keep* coming back - at least until he gets what he wants. He's obviously staying away to give her a chance to cool down, and then he'll be back at her again. You can't say barbarians give up easily."

"Back at her," Fearin echoed with a frown, and then he was looking at me again. "Just what is it that he wants from you?"

"Judging from his actions, he wants to turn me deaf and berserk," I said, refusing to mention that idiotic prophecy. "He never stops talking, and it's driving me crazy."

"Ten gold to ten copper he'll soon be *suggesting* the best way to keep him silent," Garam said with a grin. "He expects you to be so desperate by then that you'll give him exactly what he wants. I don't think he knows yet what you can give him in place of that."

"Which isn't the usual option offered to a man," Talasin agreed with his own grin. "Ijarin has a lot to learn about our ex-slave."

Everyone chuckled while Fearin continued to frown, and then the man of Power shook his head.

"We can go into this further some other time," he said. "Right now we have a campaign to discuss, so let's fill our plates and get on with it. Tomorrow the men will have to have it explained to them."

That last comment did well with getting everyone's mind off the barbarian. Explain *what* to the army? Garam and Talasin tried to find out immediately, but Fearin refused to change his mind. He waited until all of us had taken plates of food to places on the floor weaving, and then he began the discussion that had undoubtedly decided him against having anyone serve us.

"A number of people, including some of you, have been asking about the direction we'll be turning off in," he began, giving a lot of attention to his food. "Right now we're moving west, but everyone knows we can't continue west much longer. Less than three days ahead of us lies the Valley of Twilight, and no one moves through there even with an army. The army would be lost, along with those who marched it in."

He paused to chew then, acting as though no one was staring at him, and Garam was the first to

put our sudden conviction into words.

"You mean that's the way we *are* going?" our strategist demanded, trying not to show how insane he considered the idea. "I seriously doubt that the men will follow, even if it's Talasin who tells them about it. Not all of the Twilight Runners are human, and there can't be a man in the files who hasn't heard the stories. Human and nonhuman compete to see how many trespasser trophies each can collect, and the trophies aren't something to mention even in unmixed company. If we try to march that way we'll lose every man even before we reach the Valley."

"That's why you'll have to make them understand we'll have safe passage," Fearin said, finally looking up first at Garam and then at Talasin. "Once we're closer I'll be taking a small group ahead to arrange that safe passage. We have something to trade for our safety that King Sallain has been looking for for seasons and seasons. I've been assured he won't refuse, and once we have his word he'll keep it."

"You've been assured," Garam said with obvious relief, then didn't bother adding to the words. We all knew who had given Fearin the assurance, and there was nothing to say. If Diin-tha said it would work, then it would work.

Fearin went on to talk about supplies, and marching formations, and sentry arrangements, and the distribution of more of the gold. A bonus would be paid the guardsmen after they were told about the Valley of Twilight, a large enough amount to be impressive, but not so much that men would be tempted to take the gold and disappear. Fearin wanted the men eager for the next bonus, which would come once they marched out of the Valley again.

Garam tried twice to find out what we had that could be traded for safe passage, but when Fearin ignored the delicate questioning he gave it up. Going through the Valley instead of around it would save us more than a full moon of travel, and would bring us to our destination long before we could reasonably be expected to arrive. No one needed Garam to point out how strategically useful that would be, so even if it cost most of the gold and silver we'd accumulated the edge would be more than worth it.

We worked our way through a lot of food and planning, me doing no more than listening and eating, and finally the talk died down. There would need to be more discussion during the following days, but for right now they'd gone as far as they could.

"So I tell them during the midday stop tomorrow," Talasin said with a final, distracted nod. "If I make the speech short and the groups large, it shouldn't take forever to get to all of them. The ones who have questions will be invited to see me in night camp, when I'll be able to go into more detail."

"With all of them being told at the same time, the rumors will hopefully be at a minimum," Garam fretted, rubbing at his face. "If we can keep them until the next dawn, we won't have to worry about desertions."

"Don't forget to keep mentioning how Powerful I am," Fearin said, sounding as though he were talking about someone else entirely. "Stress the fact that I won't have any trouble arranging our safe passage, hint at what might happen to those in the Valley if they even think about refusing me, and remind the men they won't be going in until the deal is done. What you won't put into words is what I might do to any guardsman who deserts his post to run."

"After what you did with the city, they don't need it put into words," Garam said with a sound of amusement, Talasin smiling and nodding in agreement. "They also know what you did to those five who tried to take the plunder wagons and sneak off. I saw seasoned veterans shudder when they heard, which means the point was well made."

"And if I'm going to be making my own points tomorrow, I'd better get some sleep," Talasin concluded, beginning to rise to his feet. "Men have trouble putting their faith in you when you stand there yawning in their faces."

"Just to be on the safe side I'll get my own men ready for possible trouble," Garam said, also climbing to his feet. "They'll be useless if the entire army panics, but if it's just individuals here

and there they can stop the panic before it spreads."

"We'll all do best with a good night's sleep behind us," Fearin agreed, leaning down to a cushion with his cup of wine rather than rising. "We'll meet again tomorrow in night camp, when we'll know better how things are going."

Lokkel and Ranander also stood, but the Healing Master stopped near Fearin to ask a question. I was able to see that much before my range of vision was blocked - by a pleasantly smiling Ranander.

"I'll walk you back to your tent, Aelana," he said, extending a hand to help me up. "I've been doing some thinking, and I have a couple of suggestions for you to consider. If you don't like them, we can talk about how they need to be changed so you do. I'm willing to be reasonable." His smile widened to a grin, and he didn't seem to mind that I hadn't taken the hand he'd offered. I'd thought I'd done a fairly good job discouraging him, but suddenly he was acting more self-assured than discouraged. That added itself to the rest of the confusion I'd been feeling lately, and I couldn't think of anything to say in answer. Before the situation became awkward, though, Fearin handled it for me.

"Ranander, Aelana won't be going back to her tent just yet," he said, surprising me, at least, by having heard our conversation rather than being in the midst of his own. "She and I still have a Silence Challenge to talk about, not to mention a few other subjects, like a tendency to disappear without a word to anyone. I'm afraid you'll just have to wait your turn."

"You won't be too hard on her, will you, Fearin?" Ranander turned to ask, suddenly concerned.

"Prince Ijarin was bothering her, and he isn't even her friend. And I'm sure she'll be willing to promise not to disappear again. She just didn't understand how worried everyone would be."

"I'll be as hard on her as I would be on any of the rest of you," Fearin answered, standing to face the other man more directly. "You're not suggesting I treat her as anything other than a full member of our group, are you? That would be very unfair, since a full member is exactly what she is."

"Oh, I know that," Ranander agreed immediately. "But she's also special, Fearin, really special, and you should all be telling her how much you admire her. None of you has ever before met someone like her."

"We know," Fearin answered with a quiet smile, coming over to put a hand to the other man's shoulder. "We all *do* admire her, but we're not very used to saying the words. I suppose that means you'll have to say them for us. You don't mind, do you?"

"Of course not," Ranander said with a wide grin. "I have lots of words, and I'll give them to her later. I'll see you later, Aelana."

I was standing by then, so all I did was nod as he marched happily past me and out of the tent. Once he was gone I sighed, and then was surprised to find I wasn't the only one doing it.

"Poor Ranander," Talasin said low. "He really has it bad. I'm afraid you're in for some bother, Aelana."

"She can handle it," Garam said just as low, but with complete assurance. "After a while he'll get the message, and if he doesn't she can always ask *us* to talk to him. Fearin would be better still, but Fearin needs his full cooperation. The rest of us will just have to take care of it."

As they passed, Garam gave my backside a gentle, encouraging smack, and then the two of them were gone. Lokkel paused to pat my shoulder and say, "Patience, child. It will all work out," and then he, too, was gone. I turned around to find Fearin looking at me with faint amusement, and that was almost too much.

"How does it feel to have that ardent an admirer?" he asked, showing the talent most men have that makes a bad situation worse. "If I'd said I was going to punish you, I think Ranander would have volunteered to take the punishment for you."

"I hadn't realized you considered him your type," I answered with a shrug, goaded into the comment by all that amusement. "Now that I know, I'm sure we'll be able to work something out. There's no sense in having my own tent if I'll never get to sleep in it."

At first he didn't understand what I was talking about, but then the confusion left him along with the amusement.

"You're trying to suggest that my lovemaking is punishment," he stated, a dark look in his blue eyes, and then the look lightened a little. "Isn't it strange that I never noticed you suffering. If someone had asked me, I would have sworn you'd enjoyed yourself."

"Don't all men think that?" I asked with another shrug, turning toward the food table to get rid of my empty plate. "Ranander has been telling me I'll enjoy myself with him since the first day we met. Maybe I ought to try him, just to see if he's telling the truth. And, incidentally, to finally get rid of him."

"You'll have to learn there's a difference between opinion and actuality," Fearin returned dryly from behind me. "Ranander was expressing opinion, his own, actually, and your indulging him is no guarantee he would lose his infatuation. Speaking from my own personal experience, he would probably come back for more."

"Because he's bored with the camp women," I said with a nod, beginning to feel depressed.

"As long as I'm the only other available female, I'll be better than them even if I'm not. Has anyone ever mentioned before how strange you men are?"

"The only ones who mention that are people looking for a fight," he answered. "Or women looking to avoid a *different* fight. Are the others right? Is Prince Ijarin trying to get you into his bed?"

"The others have to be suffering from the same disease Ranander is," I said with a sigh. "Or that all of you are. Ijarin thinks *they're* interested in me, they think *he* is, and you're all out of your minds. I'm not of interest to anyone but our Guardian, and *his* interest doesn't include a bed."

"Don't be so sure," was the murmured response from right behind me, and then two hands were turning me to face him. "Gods are notorious for their appetites, almost as notorious as mortal men. I know you don't yet understand how that works, so let me put it as plainly as possible. If Prince Ijarin announces his interest, I want you to refuse him. If he continues to press you, refer him to me. Do you understand?"

I smiled very faintly as I nodded, understanding perfectly. Fearin didn't want anyone interrupting his pleasure, but he also didn't want to lose Ijarin. If it became necessary he would use diplomacy, and everything would be smoothed over.

"Good," Fearin said with a nod of his own, a smile accompanying the hand touching my face.

"That means there's no more need for Silence Challenges or anything like it. Be polite to him, but not overly friendly. I'm the one I want you to be friendly to."

He grinned at that and tapped my nose with one finger, then turned and strode over to retrieve his wine cup. Once he had it he went toward the table holding the wine, the energy fairly crackling out of him.

"Where do you get the strength to keep going like that?" I couldn't help asking, remembering how much slower the others had been moving. "After all the Power you used today, you should be completely drained."

"Why?" he countered, glancing at me briefly over his shoulder. "The Power doesn't come from *me*, all I do is use it. Didn't you know that?"

As a matter of fact I hadn't known that, and he must have seen the answer in my expression when he turned back with his wine cup refilled.

"Look, it's very simple," he said, pausing only for a small sip. "The Power is there for anyone with the knowledge to use it, but gaining the knowledge isn't easy. It takes seasons and seasons before you learn enough even to begin, and then you face the most difficult part of all: the *handling* of the Power. Anyone with enough knowledge can handle the Power, but surviving it isn't that simple."

"Power can hurt the one using it as well as the one on the receiving end?" I said, my brows raised high. "I've never heard that before, at least not put exactly that way."

"I know," he agreed with something of a grin. "What's usually told outsiders is that *we're* the dangerous ones, that the Power does everything we tell it to. That may be true of those who develop the skill of handling, but until they do get that far they're much more dangerous to themselves."

"Why?" I asked, trying to understand what he was telling me. "Once you have the knowledge to control Power, you should be able to do anything you like - including keeping yourself safe."

"Only if you really understand what it means to handle Power," he corrected. "Power doesn't *come* from the user, but it does have to be channeled through him. He gathers the Power and then casts it in the direction he wants it to go, but it has to be the right amount. If he gathers more than his body can stand having channeled through it, he'll do more damage to himself than to whatever his target is."

"But - that doesn't make any sense," I protested, suddenly remembering all the things *he'd* done. "You can't be risking yourself every time you do more than you did the last time, it would be like running blind. No one would take the risk to be really Powerful."

"Only a *few* would take the risk to be really Powerful," he corrected again with a faint, strange smile. "We all have our limits, but we don't know in advance what those limits are. Most are content to wield only that amount of Power they already know they can handle. Some try for more, and some of them die. Those who live either strut around crowing about how good they are, or keep quiet while they continue on. Annoying the gods with your bragging is a good way to find your limit sooner rather than later."

"So it could come at any time," I said, really upset as I looked up into his eyes. He'd come back to stand near me, but that didn't explain why I was feeling so strangely bothered. "The very next time you try to do more than you've already done... And this campaign means you keep *having* to do more."

"No, that isn't true," he said hurriedly, putting a gentle hand to my face. "Most of what I do on this campaign is *less* than what I've already done, no matter how involved it looks to others. I can see I shouldn't have told you all that, or at least not in this particular way. Now you're worried about me, even though there's no need for it."

"Worried?" I repeated blankly, then instantly jerked back from the touch of his hand. "That's ridiculous. Why would I be worried about *you*?"

I was already turned away from him by then, so I used a few steps to increase the distance between us. My heart was pounding above the sour taste in my mouth, and all because of a silly misunderstanding. I wasn't worried about Fearin, how could I be? He didn't mean any more to me than I meant to him; I *knew* I didn't mean anything to the man, so why would I care about *him*?

"I didn't mean to insult you," he said softly after a moment, clearly still in the place where he'd been. "You only worry over someone you care about, and Kenossi women are too strong to care. Isn't that the way it works?"

"Of course it is," I answered very low, seeing no reason to tell him he was wrong. Women among the Kenossi were strong in their *caring*, but for someone like me... What was the use in even thinking about it?

"Then I have a favor to ask," he said, and his voice was still soft with a lack of demand.

"Kenossi women are too strong to care - or to need being cared *about* - but the rest of us aren't the same. We're ordinary mortals with mortal failings, and some of us do have weaknesses and needs. With all the people around who fear me, if just one who didn't could bring herself to pretend... I never knew I needed that, but apparently I do."

"Needed - what?" I asked, turning my head to see that he stood looking at me where I was, an air of forlornness about him. It was almost as though he wanted desperately to come closer, but didn't dare.

"I need to have someone care about me," he answered quietly, his blue gaze unwavering. "I need someone to care about *me*, the man, not the man of Power. I know it's an unreasonable

thing to want in the middle of a campaign like this, but I can't seem to control the desire. That's why I'm asking you a favor. Do you think you could ... pretend to care, even though you really don't?"

With those very blue eyes directly on me, all I could do was stare back in silence. He wanted me to *pretend* to care for him? To pretend that I *wanted* his arms around me, his broad, hard body pressed up against mine? I felt in memory the gentle demand of his touch, the warmth of his lips, the excitement of his desire. How could I pretend I really wanted all that?

"You don't have to mean it," he urged in a murmur, and I blinked back to reality to see that he now stood looking down at me from less than a pace away. "I've come to realize that some people consider showing their feelings the worst kind of self-betrayal, so I'd never ask you to really mean it. But I thought that pretending... Since you have to stay with me anyway for the rest of the moon... You'll suffer, I know, but - Will you do it?"

He wasn't touching me at all, and somehow that made it worse. I hadn't realized how close and airless the tent was, how desperately I was beginning to long for the cool of the forest night. I wanted to run through that night, as fast as I could, away from impossible dreams and painful favors...

But I also couldn't help but remember how he'd helped me that night, after the beast had faded. No one had ever before stayed with me during the illness of that time, stayed and worked to support me through it. Help given demands help in return, especially if it's asked for.

"I'll - try," I whispered at last, needing to warn him that I might fail. "I'm not very good at pretending..."

"We'll work on it together," he promised softly, and then his arms *were* around me, holding me carefully to his chest. "If I pretend too, it should go a lot more easily for you. I can't tell you how much this favor means to me..."

His hand raised my face so that I might see his smile, and then he was lowering his lips to mine. My hands were against his chest, and as the warmth of his kiss began to flow into me I suddenly realized I was trying to hold him away. That was no way to keep my promise to try, so I slid my hands to the broad hardness of his back, holding him the way he was holding me. Suddenly his arms tightened around me, and his kiss became a good deal deeper. He swept me along with him, but after too short a time he ended it.

"Yes, I can see you'll do just fine," he murmured as he kissed my eyes. "And now I think it's time to move us both into bed. If I don't do it right now, we'll be spending the night on this carpeting."

His grin was faint but definitely there, and then he bent down to lift me into his arms. The intention caught me by surprise, so he'd already started to lift me before I could even begin to protest. From the way his grin widened I knew he would have ignored any verbal protests, but then he felt one that was absolutely physical.

"Chaos unending!" he shouted as my scabbard slammed into him, the contact loud enough to hear. "That triple-damned sword!"

Very abruptly I was back on my feet, and Fearin was bending to rub at the places where he'd been caught. It was such a wildly unexpected change from what we'd been in the middle of that I had to work to keep from laughing aloud. Men seemed to use that picking-up-a-woman a lot, but apparently it didn't work very well with women who were armed.

"Don't you dare laugh," he growled in warning as he glared over at me, making it even harder for me to keep my face straight. "Half a hand more to the left and there would have been no reason for you not to go back to your tent. I'm tempted to believe Prince Ijarin gave you that weapon on purpose, knowing in advance what it would try to do to me."

"If that was Ijarin's intention, I think he would have made the effort himself," I suggested, turning away to hide an expression I knew couldn't be trusted to keep the amusement hidden.

"He may be a pest, but he also strikes me as being reasonably honorable."

"All right, that's it," I heard from behind me, and then I was being pulled back to face Fearin.

His big hands quickly unbuckled the swordbelt and threw it away, and then they were wrapped around my arms again.

"You are *not* going to be defending Prince Ijarin," I was told very sternly, the hands on my arms shaking me just a little. "I'd be happiest if you never went near the man again, but since that's impossible we won't even discuss the point. What we *will* discuss is that if he needs defending, you'll let one of the others take care of the matter. That as well as anything else the prince might want."

"I don't understand," I said, shaking my head with the confusion I felt. "What is it about Ijarin that's disturbing you?"

"It's - his distraction," Fearin said quickly after something of a hesitation, his expression clearing as he released my arms. "You're in the middle of doing me a very difficult favor, and I don't want it made harder yet. That's why I don't want him distracting you with his bother, distracting and - bothering you. Do you understand?"

"Oh ... sure," I managed to answer with a weakly smile, preferring not to admit that I hadn't the faintest idea of what he was talking about. It was possible the strain was getting to be too much for Fearin, and if he didn't relieve it by occasionally acting really strange he would explode.

"Good, I'm glad you understand," he said with a better smile than mine, then the smile widened into a grin. "Now, where were we? Oh, yes, I remember."

And then I was abruptly off the floor, this time with nothing to stop him including my wordless squawk of protest. He laughed as he carried me through a hanging to the bed he'd made for us, and after that we went back to pretending for quite a long while.

Chapter 15

We got an early start the next morning, dawn already finding us on our way. I wore another new outfit, this time in shades of green, and I couldn't say I didn't need it. Fearin hadn't let me get out of my clothes for a long time the night before, and they'd been nothing but sweat-soaked, wrinkled lumps when we'd awakened.

The army of guardsmen moved at a brisk pace, but even a briskly moving army doesn't go very fast. My horse had no trouble keeping up throughout the morning, and was still fresh when we stopped for the noon meal. I was a little tired from lack of sleep, but otherwise felt marvelous. I'd spent the morning's ride letting my thoughts drift, and that had made my mood even better. Everyone was busy with preparations for the great revelation, scheduled to be made during the meal stop. Talasin would speak to one regiment at a time, Garam beside him, and soon the whole army would know where we were going. The two had ridden ahead with Fearin and taken an early meal with him, and now Fearin sat alone in the tent he'd made. He'd stay in the tent until we knew how the army was taking the news - as a just-in-case.

I dismounted and tied my horse to a small tree, giving him enough rein to let him graze, then wandered away to think more of my own thoughts. I'd seen Ijarin that morning, but only from a distance. The barbarian was riding with his men, and although he'd looked my way he'd made no effort to come any closer. I walked along through the thick carpet of grass underfoot, pleased that the barbarian had kept his distance, but even more curious. I still didn't really understand why Fearin suddenly disliked Ijarin so, and would have enjoyed asking if *he* knew the reason...

"Aelana, wait!" I heard from behind me, and although I would have preferred to continue on I stopped and turned around. Ranander hurried up, a smile on his face, friendliness in his dark eyes. "If you're going to walk instead of eat I'll walk with you," he said. "I don't have much of anything to do right now either."

"What about the girls?" I asked, turning to look at the small pavilion they'd been put into for

the time. "Didn't Fearin want you to help keep an eye on them?"

"They had their meal and now they're taking a nap," he answered with a headshake. "Besides, he's using the Power to protect them right now. He kept you really late last night. I wanted to make sure he didn't hurt you."

"No, Fearin didn't hurt me," I reassured Ranander, smiling somewhere on the inside. "At one point he gave me a stern lecture about worrying people for no reason and made me give him my word not to do it again, but he didn't hurt me."

"I'm glad," Ranander said with a wide, relieved smile, walking along beside me as I continued to stroll. "I respect Fearin and admire him for his courage and ability, but you do have to be careful when you're alone with him. At least until you learn what he's really like."

"How hard is it to know what he's really like?" I asked with some of the amusement I felt.

"Fearin doesn't pretend to be something he's not, and he seems to think it's required of him to treat people fairly. What's so sinister about that?"

"Oh, he's not *sinister*," Ranander scoffed with a laugh, but then he grew sober again. "He's just ... different from the rest of us. Even Master Lokkel occasionally makes use of one of the camp women, for instance, but Fearin refuses to touch them. He claims his taste runs to more innocent meat, and he'd been looking forward to taking the city. He was expecting to find any number of girls to play the game with."

"The - game?" I echoed, a sudden disturbance making me stop to look up at Ranander. "What game?"

"Oh, Fearin likes to play a game with girls too innocent to know better than to believe him," Ranander answered with a dismissive wave of one hand. "He could use the Power to make them believe anything he says, but he claims it's more fun *talking* them into going along with him. He tells them how lonely he is, how hard it is to be a man of Power, and by the time he's done they're giving him anything he wants. He thinks treating them like that is funny, especially when he gets tired of them and tells them the truth. They feel so humiliated they just run away, and he doesn't have to be bothered anymore. I never thought that was very funny, but he says I have no sense of humor. Do *you* think it's funny?"

He stood waiting for an answer to his question, his dark eyes looking down at me, but I couldn't say anything. My lips parted as I reached for words, but they simply weren't there. All I found was a terrible illness, worse than anything I'd ever felt. It rose up inside and began to overwhelm me, and all I could do was turn and run.

I ran through the small stand of trees almost to its other side, then stopped just as suddenly as I'd started. Ranander hadn't followed the way I'd been afraid he would, so I could just stand there and be alone. Not far away I could see guardsmen moving through the temporary camp, or lying down in the meadow grass, or -

"You stupid fool!" I whispered aloud, putting both hands to the rough bark of a tree as I closed my eyes in shame. The feared Kenoss fighter, the horrifying Shadowborn - made a fool of by a man who had seen right through her.

"He knew how you felt about him and he took advantage of it," I whispered harshly, folding to the ground as my hands trailed down the tree. And I'd thought I'd kept it so secret, even from myself. Fearin was a beautiful man, broad and handsome and skilled and self-assured - and one who couldn't possibly find interest in me as I now was. I'd *wanted* him to be interested, wanted it very badly - and then he'd asked me to pretend -

There were tears running down my cheeks backed by the sobs heaving my chest, but I didn't care. It hurt so much I thought I would break, shatter like glass and be left scattered and dead in those woods forever. I'd been hurt in my life, many times and sometimes so badly I'd thought I'd die, but I'd never before *wanted* to die. Now I did, and I wished with all my heart that it would happen.

But of course it wouldn't. Even with tears streaming down my face I knew that, and I couldn't say I didn't deserve to have the pain continue. I should have known better than to trust him,

should have known better than to believe anything would ever change for me. I'd been happy this morning, having forgotten there was no such thing as happiness, not for me, not ever. They care about you, he'd said, not *I* care about you. He hadn't lied about that, at least, but I hadn't even noticed.

I sat there cross-legged, holding to the tree as the terrible ache moved through me, and after a while the tears went away. As usual the tears hadn't changed anything at all, and I was glad when they stopped. My head felt heavy and I was completely drained, two more things to add to all the rest. When you act like a fool, you find out what a lot of different sensations feel like. I have no idea how long I sat there hating myself, but the longer my thoughts raged on the worse I felt. He'd been playing a *game*, for the gods' sake, because his tastes ran to *innocent meat*. *Me*, innocent meat! At some point the rage began to grow, a dirty, ugly tide that wanted to drown me in blood red. *His* blood red. The sword Ijarin had given me hung around my hips, and I could feel the thirst in it to slice flesh and stain the ground -

No! I opened my eyes to stare at the tree, knowing killing Fearin would be too easy. I would give myself the pleasure of that eventually, but not with a weapon and not before I returned some of the hurt and humiliation he'd given *me*. I would shred his pride before I shredded his body, in as many ways as I could. I needed something really good to start with, something - My left hand had gone to the hilt of my sword, and just like that I had the answer. Ijarin, and the sudden dislike Fearin had developed for him. The others had all said Ijarin was after me, and for the physical, at least, it was possible they were right. If I gave Ijarin what he wanted I could then turn around and laugh at Fearin, telling him in so many words that the barbarian was able to satisfy me in a way Fearin couldn't. The man of Power would be furious with damaged pride, and that would be the perfect start.

"Yes." I spoke the word aloud with great satisfaction, softly but with deep feeling. I would attack Fearin's pride at every point it was possible to reach, and then I might well have the good fortune to find *him* attacking *me*. At that point I would simply be defending myself, and whatever happened could not be laid at my feet by Diin-tha.

I got to my feet and began to look around, this time with purpose. Ijarin had been with his men, and I'd caught a glimpse of them ... There! West of the stand of trees I'd stopped in and well out of the way. He must have been warned about the announcement scheduled to be made, and was keeping his group out from under foot in case there was trouble.

"And they've even put up a tent," I muttered to myself, seeing most of the riders outside the thing. "Maybe they're afraid their prince will melt if he's left out in the sun too long. It would be typical of barbarians..."

I let the words trail off and didn't restart them. If I was going to use Ijarin to get back at Fearin, the least I could do was refrain from insulting the barbarian. I nodded to myself as I started off in that direction, acknowledging the fact that I had to be fair. Afterward I would owe Ijarin something for the help he would be, and I would pay the debt even if it meant listening to details about that stupid prophecy.

It didn't take long to reach their tiny camp-within-a-camp, and the men I passed looked at me with curiosity. They were dressed the same as Ijarin, boots, tight trousers and bare-chested, and all were armed. I strode right past them and into the tent, which was open in the center both front and back to create a nicely comfortable breeze. The barbarian and two of his men sat to the left, drinking wine, but all three came quickly to their feet when I appeared so abruptly.

"I want to talk to you," I said to Ijarin, ignoring the other two. "Right now, and alone."

I expected his men to have the good sense to leave immediately, but rather than doing that they both looked at the barbarian. He was busy inspecting me with those light eyes of his, both brows slightly raised. After a moment he smiled faintly and nodded, and the two finally left.

"They're not sure it's safe to leave me alone with you," Ijarin said when they were gone, his amusement obvious. "They can see you're the one the sword was made for, and also know the last thing you said to me. They really don't care for the idea of having to take my dead body

home to my father."

"Then let's set their minds at rest, even if it's only a little," I returned, reaching to my swordbelt. Opening the belt and dropping it to the ground took no more than a moment, and then I was able to move closer to Ijarin. "Now, push me."

"Do what?" he asked blankly, the amusement gone behind brow-raising puzzlement. "What are you talking about?"

"I said, push me!" I repeated in a harder tone, having no patience for bush-beating. "Put your hands to my shoulders and push."

He clearly still had no idea what I was doing, but he could see I was in no mood to waste time answering questions. Since I stood no more than a pace in front of him with my fists to my hips, it took no effort at all on his part to reach out with both hands. The strength he put into the push might have bothered the balance of a toddler just learning to walk, but since I was expecting little or nothing I was completely prepared. As soon as I felt the feather-light double tap I let myself fall backward, flat down to the thick, cushioning meadow grass the tent had been pitched over.

"I declare myself bested," I said while I lay stretched out, then was able to sit up and rise smoothly to my feet again. "All right, that's taken care of. Do you want to come to my tent tonight, or would you rather I come here?"

He stood staring down at me in silence, arms folded across his chest and face creased into a frown, obviously trying to understand what had happened. I left him to settle his mind in peace and began to look *him* over, the sudden thought of what I'd be doing with him making me curious. He and Fearin were about the same height, and their shoulder width wasn't much different either. Ijarin's hands were slightly bigger, though, and not quite as fine-fingered. I wondered if there were other size differences, and if so...

"Will you please stop looking at me as if I were a goat you intended to sacrifice to the gods?" he said suddenly, a faint annoyance in his tone. "I've managed to figure out that I've just been accorded an unexpected honor, but I still don't understand why. What's this all about?"

"What difference does it make?" I countered, walking back to retrieve my sword. "All you have to decide on is the location. If you're afraid of having your image tarnished by me coming here, you can come to my tent instead."

"Aelana, this doesn't make any sense," he said with a sigh, clearly forcing patience on himself.

"You've done nothing but insult me from the first moment we met, and now, out of the blue, you're inviting me into your bed? If nothing else, I'm entitled to an explanation."

I thought about that for a moment, wondering if he was right, then shook my head.

"No, you're *not* entitled to an explanation," I denied, looking over at him with my fingers to my swordbelt. "All you're entitled to do is accept or refuse. If you're not interested I'll just have to look elsewhere."

I held my expression completely neutral, trying very hard to keep him from knowing I didn't want to look elsewhere even if I'd had where to look. *He* was the one Fearin would hate losing to, so he was the one I had to have. He'd seemed to be making a habit of doing exactly what I didn't want him to, so if I acted as though I were trying to make him refuse he ought to immediately agree.

"You make this whole thing sound so enticing, I don't know why I'm hesitating," he commented, his words and accompanying expression very dry. "I know I'll probably regret asking this, but what will Master Fearin be doing while I'm entertaining you? And if you try to suggest he doesn't have to know, I'll paddle your backside right here and now."

"What makes you think *Fearin* has anything to do with this?" I demanded, privately appalled that he had even asked. "He may be the leader of this attack force, but he has no say over what *I* do. If you feel you need his permission first, I've obviously come to the wrong tent."

"So that's it," Ijarin said, his head coming up as his tone went flat. "The High Master said or did something to get you mad, and you've decided to walk away and leave him standing. Would

you like to tell me what it is you use to think with? It's fairly obvious it couldn't possibly be brains."

"If you're trying to make a point, you'd better get it said," I growled, fighting off an avalanche of insult. If I hadn't needed that idiot barbarian...

"The point is made," he growled back, putting his fists to his hips. "You've spent at least two nights in Fearin's bed, and I've seen the way he looks at you. If you're not with him again *this* night, it won't be *his* choice. Don't you have any idea at all of what you're trying to do? Think about the amount of Power he wields, and then picture him getting angry. Forgetting about me, do you really want *yourself* on the receiving end of that?"

"He won't use his Power on me," I returned with a snort, passing over any mention of Diin-tha. "And even if he decided to, he still doesn't frighten me. If you don't feel the same, I can see I *have* come to the wrong tent. I hope you'll pardon the intrusion."

"Hold it right there," he ordered as I began to turn to leave. "Considering that the gods tend to protect fools and little children, I can believe you're not afraid of Fearin's Power. And I doubt that you really understand how things work between men and women, so you'd better listen to me. Any man with any sense would be afraid of Fearin's reaction to your bright new idea, but I don't think most of the others know about what's been going on between you. If you offer them what you offered me they'll probably accept, and that could well be the end of them."

"I don't believe that," I said with my back to him, not *wanting* to believe it. "Fearin needs them badly, and he'd be a fool to cause them harm."

"Of course he would be a fool to harm them," Ijarin agreed, taking his turn at snorting. "But that doesn't mean he would refrain. A man in the throes of jealousy *does* before he thinks, and by then it's too late to think. Why don't you tell me what you two argued about; maybe I can come up with a suggestion to settle the dispute."

"We didn't argue and Fearin would certainly not be jealous," I said, hating to admit that he didn't have to be. Pinched pride would do an even better job, and I'd never even thought of that. "But you're right in what you *didn't* say. I can risk my own life if I please, but not the lives of innocent bystanders. Just forget I said anything. I'll come up with something else."

"Come up with something to accomplish *what*?" he demanded, his big hand closing around my arm to keep me from walking out. "Sit down with me and have some wine, and then you can tell me what this is all about."

"But I don't *want* to tell you what it's about," I informed him reasonably, turning just my head to look at him over my shoulder. "I thought I made that clear right from the beginning."

"Do you know what your biggest problem is?" he asked, giving me the benefit of a very light-eyed stare. "You've done such a thorough job teaching yourself to ignore your emotions, you think everyone else is exactly the same way. How long do you intend to take before you learn that the rest of us are different, and that includes the High Master Fearin? If you wait until he's forced to teach you the lesson himself, you'll find yourself a very unhappy little girl."

"I've already learned everything I intend to from High Master Fearin," I said, having no trouble pulling my arm out of Ijarin's grip. "What I intend now is doing some teaching, and if you'll take the advice of an emotionless child you'll stay well out of the way. When the time comes, I won't care much about innocent bystanders either."

That time I did walk out, leaving behind a man who thought he knew the meaning of being annoyed. *I* was annoyed, and all because I had no idea what to do. I'd been used and humiliated, but getting my own back wasn't proving to be easy.

I returned to the stand of trees and spent a lot of time prowling through it, trying to decide on a positive plan of action. I was so deeply into it that the passage of time lost all meaning, and it came as a surprise when I realized the army was beginning to move again. Talasin and Garam had finished their chore, then, and we still had a fighting force.

I went back to where I'd left my horse and mounted up, but not because I'd come to any

decisions. The only decision I *seemed* to want to make was to ride away and never see Fearin again, but I couldn't do that. Diin-tha wasn't likely to be understanding about desertion, and I couldn't let Fearin simply get away with what he'd done. I wanted him to feel the same hurt I had, and *then* I'd be able to ride away.

The rest of the afternoon passed into the distance, and suddenly it was time to make night camp. The guardsmen got started doing it just the way they always did, but they were somehow both noisier and more quiet than usual. Even I noticed that when I rode up to the tent that had been created for me, especially when the guardsman who took my horse made no effort to say anything to me. He looked too preoccupied for conversation, but not particularly worried. I shrugged over the problem of whether or not there would be trouble with the army once they understood and believed what they'd been told, and went into the tent. I had my own problems to occupy me, and if we lost the army it could well be exactly the help I needed. Diin-tha's plans would have to be held off on while another army was recruited, and that opened up a lot of possibilities. I poured myself some wine and sat down with the cup, then considered possibilities.

Time disappeared behind thought again, and the first I knew of it was when I heard the sound of throat-clearing by the entrance to my tent. I looked up to see Lokkel standing just inside, and when my gaze touched him the Healing Master smiled faintly.

"I don't mean to disturb you, child, but Fearin asked me to fetch you," he said. "Our meal is set out in his tent, and the meeting is about to begin. Will you allow me to escort you there?" I was tempted to refuse to go, but couldn't see how that would help anything. Simply thinking about the problem hadn't done me any good *so far*, and seeing the man in front of me just might trigger an idea. It was at least worth trying, and if I later felt like walking out I could certainly do it.

"Master Lokkel, I would be pleased to have you escort me," I said as I put my cup aside and rose to my feet. "Is it any cooler out there yet?"

He immediately seized on the topic of weather, and began to tell me how weather can actually affect a healing spell if the master isn't careful. We walked through the darkening camp together, him deeply into the lecture, me trying to think about nothing at all, and then suddenly we were there. The outside blue of Fearin's tent gave way to the gold of the interior, and Lokkel's hand on my left elbow guided me over to the food table.

"Fill up a healthy plate, now," he directed with a chuckle. "As you can see, the others are busy getting Prince Ijarin's impressions of how the men are taking the news. Fearin asked him to look them over, and as usual it was an excellent idea. I'll finish speaking to you later."

He patted my shoulder before walking away, and that was when I realized he hadn't completed his lecture about healing and the weather. Since I'd seen everyone gathered around Ijarin, I hadn't paid attention to where Lokkel had gotten, but obviously it hadn't been where he wanted to be. As I reached for a plate I wondered if he'd just been threatening about going back to the subject later, and then I wondered why I'd taken a plate. I had no appetite whatsoever, not for anything the food table offered.

"So this time you were just in your tent," a soft voice said from behind me. "What I'd like to know is why you didn't decide instead to be in *my* tent. I would have enjoyed finding you here when I came in."

"I'll bet you would have," I muttered, making no effort to turn and look at Fearin. "Or at least you think you would have. What do you want *now*?"

"Why do I have to want anything besides talking to you?" he asked, and if I hadn't known better I would have believed the almost-bewildered tone in his voice. "Is something wrong? I know I've been too busy today to give you much in the way of attention, but I fully intend to make up for that later tonight. We can pretend we're the only people left in the world, and - " "Aren't you bored with that *yet*?" I interrupted, suddenly getting the idea I'd been very nearly praying for. "I am, which is why I tried something different this afternoon. You know, Fearin,

you really ought to get more practice with women, *without* all that pretending nonsense. You don't know what you're missing, but now *I* do."

I'd made my voice go very smug and satisfied, but for a moment there was no response from him. I thought he might be considering what I'd said, and when he stalked around to my right I was sure of it.

"Say that again, only this time with more detail," he ordered in a very soft voice, a glance showing him to be ... Annoyed? Angry? Shocked? "*What* are you bored with, and what sort of different thing did you try this afternoon?"

"I'm bored with *you*, and what I did this afternoon is none of your business," I answered with the smugness still intact, at the same time beginning to fill my plate. "It is, however, *my* business, and the sort I intend to continue with. You'll just have to find some other female meat to play your games with."

"What in the name of chaos are you talking about?" he demanded, a growl forming from the small smile I'd sent him. "Not only is this totally unlike you, I can't believe you'd just spit on everything we had together. It's as if someone came along and put a spell on - By all the gods, that must be it! Someone's talked you into this nonsense. Tell me who he is!"

"You think it's beyond me to see through you all by myself?" I demanded in turn, putting the half-filled plate down in order to turn on him with my sudden anger. "What's the matter, Fearin, was I supposed to be too innocent to know you for what you really are? Well, I *do* know, and there's nothing you can do to change things back."

"What do you mean, you know me for what I really am?" he growled with that false bewilderment just touching him again. "What am I supposed to be?"

"A lowlife and a sneak," I pronounced clearly into his anger, my fists to my hips. "And don't bother trying to deny it, you'll only make yourself look even more ridiculous."

"Ridiculous," he echoed with mounting fury, and then those blue eyes hardened as he straightened. "I'm going to know exactly what's going on here, in detail and step by step. As soon as this meeting's over we'll sit down together and - "

"No," I stated, unimpressed with the stare coming down at me. "Since there's nothing you have to say that I care to listen to, I'll be leaving when everyone else does. To spend some time with a man who knows what he's doing."

I added that last like the thrust of a dagger to his middle, and the stroke made him stiffen with outrage just as I'd hoped it would. The blue of his eyes intensified as though he were about to start the fight I wanted, but then he suddenly looked away from me and toward the others.

"Stop pretending you haven't heard what's been said here," he ordered, and I turned to see five men who were busily inspecting various parts of the tent - in every direction but where Fearin and I stood. "I have the sudden certainty one of you knows the reason for this ... idiot's tantrum, and I want to know right now what it is."

Five voices began to speak at once, all of them apparently trying to declare innocence, and I suddenly remembered what Ijarin had said. If Fearin thought one of them was guilty he might act before stopping to think about consequences. And if he found out it was Ranander who had told me the truth... Simply not mentioning any name hadn't worked, so I now had to be more definite in my lack of information.

"You can't possibly think it was one of *them*," I said with as much scorn as I could muster.

"Your ever-faithful and obedient followers? *They* think you're wonderful, the poor, blind fools. It was someone else who told me the truth, a person it's entirely beyond you to think of."

"Oh, so it *was* someone who talked you into this childishness," he pounced, making me curse my unthinking tongue. "I'm not about to let this drop, Aelana, so you might as well tell me now who it was."

"Maybe ... it was one of the camp women," I suggested in an airy way, just to see what his reaction would be. "They'd certainly know everything that was going on, not to mention the men doing the going. Yes, it was probably one of the camp women."

"I've never had anything to do with the camp women," he came back immediately, having no idea he'd just confirmed the accusation against himself. "They'd have nothing to say about me at all, and haven't the imagination to make something up. I don't believe it was one of them."

"Well, then, I'm fresh out of suggestions," I returned with a shrug, refusing to show how torn up I felt on the inside. "If you can't come up with a better idea yourself, let's get back to the meeting. Since I have an appointment later, I'd like to get out of here as early as possible."

Five men winced as Fearin drew himself up again, but I ignored them all. I could see I'd have to be certain not to go near *any* man for a while, but that wasn't likely to be much of a hardship. And they certainly wouldn't be coming after *me*, that was for sure. I would be left completely alone and unbothered, but for some reason couldn't decide whether or not I liked that idea...

"The men aren't happy about going through the Valley of Twilight, but since I'll be going in first they're willing to trust my ability," Fearin said in a very brusque way. "They're pleased with the looting and gold they were given the chance at so far, and they're willing to take a small risk in order to get more. Does anyone have anything to add to that?"

Talasin and Garam exchanged glances with Ijarin, then those three looked at Ranander and Lokkel. When the last two simply shrugged, Garam shook his head.

"No, that's the conclusion we've all come to," Garam began, obviously intending to add something else. Fearin must have seen that as clearly as I, but decided not to allow it.

"Then I declare this meeting over and done with," he announced in a very flat way. "If you men will excuse us now, Aelana and I want some privacy. There's something she's going to be telling me, I swear by all the signs of chaos that she will. I'll talk to the rest of you again tomorrow."

Again five voices spoke together, this time to show instant agreement, but I rounded on Fearin in a rage. I intended to refuse to stay, in fact intended to tell him I'd never speak to him again, but all I had time for was to part my lips. Words became impossible when the air suddenly ... *blurred*, a soundless echoing ring accompanying the blurring. I had no idea what was happening, but the shocked understanding on Fearin's face said that he did. He was looking past me, and when I quickly turned I also began to understand.

The mist I'd seen only once before was appearing in the tent, and in the mist the form of Diin-tha grew. The others stood staring, Garam and Lokkel looking as if they wished they'd been able to leave before the appearance, Talasin curious, and Ranander unworried. Ijarin all but stared open-mouthed, and then he suddenly looked as though a puzzle had been solved for him. Diin-tha solidified in the mist, as imposing as the first time I'd seen him, and his handsome face immediately smiled at his chosen leader.

"Do not upset yourself, Fearin," he reassured the man in his soft giant's voice. "I have taken steps to see that none will enter the while I remain, and in any event shall not stay long. I come only to give your group my approval for your efforts, and to give a special gift to one of you. So pleased am I with that one, that I see no reason to continue with what must surely be a punishment. You have earned the right to your own self, Kiri, and will continue so while you move in my cause. Do not thank me, for there is certainly no need."

I stood there with my mouth open as he smiled at me, then watched while he dissolved back into mist. When the last of the mist wafted away into nothing it took the blurring and soundless noise with it, but that wasn't the end of the episode. I finally looked around to see that everyone was staring at me, all with the same stunned shock in their eyes.

"All right, so now you know my real name," I conceded, seeing it would be a waste of time to deny it. "I don't know why he felt he had to tell you, but it really doesn't matter. And I happen to prefer Aelana, which was my younger sister's name. She didn't survive one of the Trials, so I haven't taken anything someone else is entitled to."

"But you did put aside something *no* one else is entitled to," Fearin said slowly, his stare even deeper than that of the others. "Kiri is the name given every generation to the first-born daughter of the Kenoss royal family, and no one else in the entire nation is allowed to use the

name. That seems to explain a lot of things."

"Yes, like why the presence of three princes didn't impress her at all," Garam agreed, his dark eyes unmoving from my face. "Since her brothers must also be princes, it simply wasn't anything new to have us around. Or to argue with us."

"Especially to argue with us," Ijarin added with a grin. "Now that we've been properly introduced, I'd like to say how delighted I am to meet you, Princess Kiri."

"I knew Aelana wasn't her real name," Ranander said with satisfaction, his eyes bright. "I'm happy to meet you, too, Kiri."

Lokkel added something of his own with a smile, but Talasin didn't bother with words. He came forward without moving his gaze from me, took my hand, then kissed it! I was so shocked I snatched the hand back, but his grin said it was too late. The others had come forward behind him, and looked as though they intended to do the very same thing.

"What's the matter with all of you?" I demanded, finding it impossible not to take a couple of steps backward. "How can a name turn you all into blithering idiots? And I told you I prefer to be called Aelana, so that's what I expect you to call me."

"It's hardly just the name that's turned us into idiots," Talasin said with a continuing grin, the others chuckling their agreement. "And we *can't* call you anything else, not without offending Diin-tha. Somehow Kiri fits you beautifully, a beautiful name for a beautiful girl."

I felt the chill then, the horrible cold that sent my hand to my face with the dread of premonition. Diin-tha couldn't have done that to me, he *couldn't* have, not when he said he was rewarding me! I knew I had to turn it back, was determined to turn it back, but Fearin stepped closer to put his hand to my shoulder.

"If you're trying to make yourself look the way you did before, I'm afraid it isn't working," he said in a very neutral voice. "Our Guardian said you'll continue in your own self for as long as you move in his cause, and it seems he meant it. You're still the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

"Beautiful and desirable," Garam corrected in a husky voice, his dark eyes almost literally drinking me in. "Let's see if we can find something to argue and fight about."

"I think you've all forgotten," Fearin said as he stepped out a short way in front of me, his voice the least bit louder. "You were about to leave before we were visited, and now would be a good time for you to get on with that leaving. As I said, I'll talk with you all again tomorrow."

"You don't really think we're just going to walk out of here?" Talasin said with a short laugh that had a lot of amusement in it. "We might have been willing earlier to let you court a messy death without interference, but now things have changed. We have as much right to risk an ending as you do, especially since it's less likely to turn out that way for one of *us*. Why don't we let the lady decide?"

"If it's ending you're looking for, the lady isn't the only one who can provide it," Fearin returned in a very soft voice, his eyes locked to Talasin's. "Do I have to get more specific before you remember who you're talking to?"

Garam and Ijarin immediately began to speak at once, with Lokkel and Ranander offering softer, less aggressive comments. I didn't know if the last two were adding to the argument or trying to stop it, but even beyond that I didn't care. I turned and got out of the tent just as fast as I could, returned to my own tent and laced up the entrance flap, then opened my swordbelt and threw myself down on my bedding.

"I don't believe this is happening," I whispered to the dim, empty tent, too numb to feel anything *but* disbelief. "It's just a bad dream, like the ones I had when I was a slave. When I wake up things will be just like they were."

But it wasn't a bad dream, at least not the kind you can wake up from. I didn't understand what had happened, didn't know why Diin-tha had done as he had. A reward, he'd said, but a reward for *what*? And why now, rather than after we'd secured his victory for him? It didn't make any sense, not the least little bit.

The fear I'd been trying to hold off stole over me, and I shivered where I lay. I didn't want to be beautiful, not when the worst things happened to you when you were, but I couldn't change it back. My insides were turning so fast I thought I would throw up, but I couldn't afford not to pay attention. If anyone tried to come in after me -

I slipped my sword out of its scabbard, my fingers closed tight around its hilt as I rolled to sitting. If anyone tried to come in after me I would kill them, by the gods I would! It wasn't going to be like the first time, it would never be like that again! I swallowed hard as I stared at the lacings, but it didn't matter. No one was here to see my uncertainty, to see how my hand trembled. After a while I would conquer the fear again, but right now all I could do was shake with the terror of memory.

It took a long time to pull myself together, a long time before my fingers eased their grip on the sword hilt. Everything took a long time that night, but then, it was a very long night.

Chapter 16

More than half the morning was gone in our continued march to the west, and the heat was beginning to make the day uncomfortable. I rode alone because I refused to have it any other way, but I wasn't completely alone. Hundreds of stares followed after me, stares I'd tried to believe were my imagination, but the belief was wearing thin. If I turned I would find the eyes behind those stares, but having done that once already was enough.

I'd fallen asleep a few times during the night just past, but not soundly or deeply and not for very long. Once a voice had come to whisper at my laced-up tent flap, but no one had tried to unlace the flap and come in. By dawn I'd had the fear put back where it belonged, in the usually-forgotten past, and I'd been ready once again to take things as they came.

But not all things. I'd found another clean outfit in my tent, obviously by courtesy of Fearin, but had ignored it. The clothes I had on were more than well worn, and that suited me just fine. After almost two seasons of being a slave the smell of sweat was an easy one to stand, but the others would hardly find it the same. If they didn't care to stay away from me of their own accord, I didn't mind helping them do it.

The sound of hoofbeats drew me out of inner reflection, and I looked around to see five of my six associates pulling up to either side of me. I didn't know what was happening, but I soon found out.

"We'll be stopping for the noon meal up ahead there, where Lokkel is," Fearin told me, indicating the direction with a nod. "We also have to have an emergency meeting to come up with an immediate plan. This can't be allowed to continue."

His expression was half grim and half furious, and the rest of them didn't look much better. I thought Fearin would go on to give me some idea of what the problem was, but he didn't.

Possibly we were too close to where we would stop so it didn't pay to go into details now. I wondered in passing if it had turned out that the army wasn't as willing to go through the Valley of Twilight as they'd thought, then dropped the idea with an inner shrug. Whatever it was, I'd soon hear all about it.

We drew rein near the small tent Lokkel stood in front of, then handed our horses over to two guardsmen once we'd dismounted. The two had watched our arrival with a lot of attention, and then weren't too fast about leading the horses away. Garam cursed under his breath then added more volume to the comments, and the men finally got the idea. They moved themselves out of our way, and we were able to follow Lokkel inside the tent.

"Help yourselves to the food while I take care of our privacy," Fearin said, waving to the table set up to the left. He, himself, turned right, but I wasn't given the chance to watch what he would do. Very suddenly I was surrounded, but unfortunately not by enemies.

"You stay right here, girl, and I'll fill a plate for you," Garam said, looking down at me with

still-smoldering eyes. "We can talk while we're waiting for Fearin."

"I have a better idea," Talasin said with a smile, looking only at me. "Kiri will say what she wants and *I'll* get it, and then she and *I* can talk."

"I already know what she likes and doesn't like," Ranander said very clearly, most of his usual good humor gone. "*I'll* fill a plate for her, and then - "

"Really, my lords and princes, the child is clearly tired and hungry," Lokkel announced in dry, impatient tones. "Leave her to me, and - "

"You two wouldn't know how to treat her even if I *did* leave her to you," Garam snapped, glancing at Ranander and Lokkel, then briefly moved his eyes to Talasin. "Or better yet, make that the three of you. I'm the only one here - "

"Who knocks a woman down and considers that a compliment?" Talasin interrupted, finally looking at Garam. "If you know the meaning of the word gentle, none of the women you ever associated with are aware of it. You - "

"And none of the women *you* ever associated with even knew you were there," Garam countered to Talasin while Ranander and Lokkel demanded their own pieces of the argument. I stepped aside to give them a better chance at each other, and only then saw Ijarin standing near the food table, watching the argument with a lot of amusement. It was only possible to move a few steps away from all of them, which means Ijarin took no time at all to join me.

"You don't seem to be pleased that they're not showing real concern and caring any longer," he remarked, his very light eyes still filled with laughter. "You can't mean you liked it better when you had to fend off good intentions rather than active courting."

"It's well known that crazy people find amusement in things where no sane person would," I stated, looking away from him. "With that in mind, I intend to ignore anything and everything you say."

"Well! I'm relieved to see at least one thing about you hasn't changed," Ijarin declared with a chuckle. "If you were ever civil to me I'd suspect you'd just been told I was dying or some such. I think I know how hard you're finding this, but try to bear in mind how hard it is on *them*. Last night Fearin said you were the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, and I have to agree with him. Our unexpected trouble is coming from the fact that I'm not the only one who agrees."

"Not the only one by half," another voice seconded the comment before I could ask about it, a growly, irritable voice. "I find it hard to believe that our men can handle the idea of marching through the Valley of Twilight, but are losing control fast after one look at a woman. You'd think they'd never seen beauty before."

"I think we both know there's more to it than that, Fearin," Ijarin countered, finally losing all that amusement. "The only positive point we've encountered so far is that they're all so jealous of one another they refuse to cooperate to get what they want. If they banded together we'd really have our hands full. No, their obsessive attraction is anything but natural, but I'd rather not think about what else it could be."

"I *have* thought about it, but I'd rather not discuss what I came up with," Fearin grumped, staring at me balefully. "If you haven't gotten the point yet, Aelana - *Kiri*, I mean, it seems we've discovered that most of the army has decided it wants you. If you're willing to accommodate them just say the word, but if you're not we have to find a way to turn them disinterested fast. *Before* there are any incidents, unfortunate or otherwise."

"That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard," I told him, annoyed that they would try to tell me something like that. "*No* one is beautiful enough to attract an entire *army*, and I resent your trying to make me believe *I* am. If you have nothing better to do with your time than play stupid tricks - "

"Kiri, he isn't joking and this is no trick," Ijarin said, his eyes directly on me as he spoke the words slowly and clearly. "Of course no woman is *supposed* to be that beautiful, but for some reason you are. Can you think of why - someone - would cause that to happen?"

"Someone," I echoed, knowing immediately that he meant Diin-tha. The cold closed in with that thought, along with bewilderment and a vast amount of confusion. The *god* had done this? *Why?*

"Maybe our Guardian decided she'd earned punishing when he saw the way she was treating me," Fearin suggested, his darker blue eyes showing he agreed with Ijarin's idea. "I would have preferred to handle it myself, though, especially since this situation gives me even more of a headache. And the reason it's happened doesn't make much difference right now. What we need is something that will stop it."

"I know what will stop it," a new voice volunteered, and then a still-sober Ranander was standing with us. "It's really very simple and will take care of the problem for good."

"Is this suggestion your own idea, or do you really *know*," Fearin asked him, frowning with sudden interest. "This is important, Ranander, so consider your answer carefully before you give it."

"I *know*," he answered at once with a shrug. "Since it only makes a little sense I wouldn't have thought of it on my own, but Kiri can handle it and then she won't be bothered. Afterward she can spend her time with friends."

"Tell us what the idea is, Ranander," Ijarin nudged gently when Ranander began to smile at me. "The sooner we know, the sooner Kiri will be safe."

"Of course," the brown-haired man agreed, moving part of his smile to Ijarin. "Kiri will fight a representative part of the army, and when she wins the rest will be too afraid to come near her. I'm not sure why it will work out that way, but it will."

"Absolutely not," Fearin stated while I stared at Ranander with even more confusion. "That's the most idiotic suggestion I've ever heard, and we're not even going to be considering it. If I have to I'll use the Power to protect her, but she's not going to be fighting *anybody*."

"You'll use a Power that's already stretched thin with everything else it has to do?" Ijarin asked him before I could say anything myself. "That sounds to me like you'd first have to gather more Power, and I've heard masters speak about how unsafe that is. What you're already handling is - "

"Is my business alone and none of yours," Fearin rapped out, looking coldly at Ijarin. "I'll know when I'm approaching my limit, and so far I know no such thing. And even if I were, how can you prefer the idea of the girl throwing her life away to my taking a very small chance? Of course no one will bother her again if she fights. Who wastes time trying to bother the dead?"

"Dead?" I echoed in outrage, refusing to let Ijarin interrupt again. "What suddenly makes me that incompetent a fighter? I looked this way through every one of my Trials as a Life Seeker, and I not only won through them I did better than most. Just because *you* would be feeling fainthearted over a little fighting doesn't mean - "

"If *I* could do the fighting then there *would* be nothing to worry about," he growled back, those eyes nearly glowing at me. "I don't care *how* good you think you are, I won't have you running around offering your neck to the blade. You - "

"Wait!" Ijarin bulldozed his way between us, interrupting before I could suggest that I *show* Fearin how good or bad I was. "Let's just wait before getting to generalized bloodshed. Since we have someone here who can *know* the truth of what we believe, why don't we get our questions answered through *him*?"

Fearin glared at me while I returned the favor, so Ijarin got nothing in the way of a verbal response. I was aware of the fact that Garam, Talasin, and Lokkel had stopped their own squabbling in deference to ours, but before any of them could venture an opinion Ijarin hurried on.

"All right, Ranander, Fearin has made two suggestions," Ijarin said. "The first is that he protect Kiri with his Power, and the second that he do the fighting *for* her. Can you tell if either of those ideas would work?"

"First the Power," Ranander said, and I turned my head to see the very distracted look in his

eyes. "There's a small, weak yes there, but - Oh, I see! It doesn't solve the problem, it just puts it off until he's distracted by something else. Then - No, let's just say it doesn't work." Ranander didn't even glance in my direction, but he didn't have to. His fast change of subject told the story all too clearly.

"What about Fearin doing the fighting?" Garam asked, his voice hard. "Or, for that matter, Talasin or me?"

"Someone else fighting," Ranander repeated, back into distraction. "Two out of three of you would win easily, the third would be wounded but would still win. In any event, it would change nothing. Someone else's winning would not keep them away from Kiri. Only her own victory will do that."

"And you're that certain she'll win?" Ijarin pressed, now sounding encouraged. "If that's so, we have nothing to worry or argue about."

"He *can't* be that certain she'll win," Fearin said as Ranander hesitated, sour satisfaction in his voice. "He may *know* she has to fight to solve the problem, and he may *know* she won't be bothered again if she wins. What he *doesn't* know is if she'll win with ease or even if she'll survive the win. With her being Shadowborn, he can't reach close enough, not the way he can with the rest of us. Am I wrong, Ranander?"

"No," the downhearted answer came, along with a short breath of weary vexation. "It's as bad as having heavy Power in the way. I know she has to fight and win, and I know what will happen if she does. I just can't tell whether or not she *will* win, or whether she'll survive if she does. I'm sorry, Kiri. I guess Fearin is right and I should have kept quiet."

"There are a lot of things Fearin isn't right about, and this is just one," I came back immediately, having already made the decision. "This meeting was for the purpose of solving a problem, and that's been done. Which of you will be arranging this fight, and when and where will it be?"

I got a lot of voices shouting at me then, all of them arguing one point or another. I let it go on for a short while by showing them my back, and then I turned again with a hand up.

"All right, one of you come up with a better idea," I challenged into the seething silence I'd forced. "At the very least it has to guarantee to do the job if it works, just like the first idea. Well? Let's hear all those suggestions."

There was some muttering and foot-shuffling in response to my demand, not to mention dark looks of disapproval. What I didn't get was words, which let me nod slowly in their direction.

"Exactly," I told them. "There *are* no other ideas to try, at least none that will work. Now, which of you will be arranging the fight, and when and where can it be?"

"Arranging it has to be mine and Talasin's to do," Garam grudged, glancing at a stony-faced Fearin. "At least it will be if everyone agrees we're going ahead with this. Since there are ten main regiments, I'd suggest one representative from each. Not their best, of course, but -"

"It has to be their best or I'll be wasting my time," I said, gesturing aside the silliness of what he'd been about to suggest. "How about when and where?"

"The forward scouts tell me there's a very old amphitheater dug into the ground only half an afternoon's march ahead," Talasin supplied, even more grudging than Garam had been. "They think the place may have been used for secret rites of some sort hundreds of seasons ago, and we were going to alter the march to avoid it. Since it will still be light enough when we get there, I suppose we can make use of the place. *If* everyone decides we're going through with this." The everyone they'd been referring to was still expressionless, except for the look in his dark blue eyes. Fearin seemed to be fighting inside himself, struggling with a decision he obviously didn't want to make. I didn't understand what he thought he could possibly gain by refusing to go along with a clear necessity, but even as the question crossed my mind he stopped wasting his time.

"All right," he granted, showing Garam and Talasin what real grudging looked like. "We've been given no other choice than to go ahead with this madness, so that's what we'll do. But one

thing our lady had better understand, and that clear as a bell. If she's hurt during this thing, she'd better pray she doesn't survive. If she does survive she'll wish she hadn't. Let's get this meal over with and then we'll get on with it."

He gestured the others away with him as he headed for the food table, leaving me to stand and stare while buried in confusion up to my ears. What *had* he been talking about, right there at the end? Men of Power enjoyed making cryptic statements, I knew, but that one hadn't been cryptic it had been ridiculous.

"It seems you have your orders," Ijarin said from my left, amusement back in his voice. "He let you get your way, but you'd better fight with every bit of ability you have or you'll really be in for it. But I wouldn't count on having gotten away with anything if I were you. You've made him so mad it won't be long before he comes after you anyway."

"Let him come," I said, completely unsurprised that Ijarin had supposedly understood what Fearin had said. Two of a kind, if ever I'd seen it... "And mad is the least he deserves to be. If he decides to come forward with any complaints, I can always turn mad into shredded."

"You seem to be blaming Fearin for something, but I'd say he doesn't understand what that something is," the barbarian offered after the briefest of hesitations. "If he did something to hurt you, why not talk to him about it? Unless I'm totally mistaken, I believe he'd be willing to promise never to do it again."

"You expect him to promise to change his nature?" I asked with a sound of ridicule. "Then let me know how much of a bet you'd back your belief with, and I'll find a way to match it. There's no such thing as ever having too much gold."

"Didn't I hear you admit you'd been told something by someone else?" Ijarin persisted, his tone now thoughtful. "Yes, that's exactly what you said, so we may not be talking about something Fearin *did*. You can't be blaming him for something someone *else* said he did?" Those light blue eyes were now staring directly at me, and there wasn't much in the way of laughter in them. For some reason I could feel my cheeks beginning to warm, but I quickly shook off the feeling.

"What makes any of this *your* business?" I demanded, straightening where I stood. "If it's just that burning need of yours to interfere with everything in reach, that's really too bad. I don't happen to like being interfered with, and I've been known to take exception to those who try it anyway."

"Do you let yourself get angry so often because you know how beautiful you look when it happens?" he asked with a faint grin, the expression in his eyes changing to match. "That may help you with men like the rest of us, but Fearin isn't the same. Your anger won't impress him, your beauty won't impress him, and he won't want to hear that someone else told you stories. If you don't have something to point to that he did personally, you can bet the first thing he'll do is *give* you something to point to. Take my advice and talk to him *now*, before this misunderstanding gets any worse."

"That happens to be a very good idea," another voice said from behind me, one that was back to sounding calm and in control. "You tell me what I'm supposed to have done, and I'll tell you whether or not I really did it. It isn't fair to accuse a man without giving him a chance to defend himself."

"I did give you that chance," I said without turning, feeling myself stiffen over how close he was. "I asked you about the camp women, and you told me yourself you'd never touched any of them. I suppose if you'd known what I was after you would have answered differently, but it's too late for that. I have the truth now and won't let you tell me any differently."

"What in all the corners of chaos is *that* supposed to mean?" he demanded in exasperation while Ijarin stared at me blankly. "You would have been happier to hear that I'd had every one of the camp women a dozen times each? I know you can't be expected to look at things the way ordinary females do, but that doesn't mean you can't make sense."

"If it's sense you want, then how about this," I said with the growl I felt, finally turning to look

at him. "If I'm not what you'd call an ordinary female, what *would* you call me? Surely not innocent?"

"In a lot of ways that's exactly what you are," he answered, blue eyes narrowed. "Innocent and unworldly with things that the rest of us take for granted. But what has that got to do with -"

"Then that's why you suggested we play a 'game,'" I went on, refusing to stop now that I'd gotten started. "You knew I was far too innocent to refuse, and it was easier playing the game with me than with some girl from the city. The girl you might have had to leave behind, but I'd be going along on the campaign anyway. We could keep ... *pretending* just as long as I continued to believe you, which would be until *you* got tired of the game. It wasn't likely I'd be finding out the truth on my own, not as innocent as *I* am. Now try telling me I'm *not* innocent, and there wasn't any game."

"Chaos take it, of *course* I made it a game," he answered, and even had the nerve to look annoyed. "How else was I supposed to keep you from shying away in panic? You couldn't even stand to have someone tell you you were looking fit. How was I supposed to tell you I -" His words broke off as frustration flashed across his features, and that I could understand. My own expression was showing him exactly what I thought of him and it couldn't have been considered pretty, let alone beautiful.

"Now I know how arrogant it's possible to get," I told him in disgust. "You stand there making mindless statements, refusing to admit the guilt even when you're caught. Me, shying away in panic from *anything*? Please, do tell me another one. If I ever again believe anything you say I *will* be a hopeless innocent."

I began to turn away from him then, glad everything was finally in words, but arrogant is as arrogant does. High Master Fearin decided there was more to say, and his hands came to my arms to force me into turning back to him.

"I made what we had between us a pretense for *your* sake," he insisted, speaking the words slowly and clearly. "I claim I wasn't lying or trying to take advantage of you, but there's a way you can prove I'm stretching the truth after all. Call my bluff by agreeing to marry me."

Our audience made various sounds in reaction to that, some of them groans of exasperation, but they needn't have bothered. I knew I wasn't innocent, and that was what I intended to prove.

"By the gods, but your generosity is amazing," I said, raising my arms to pull them out of his grip. "Now that you know what I really look like you'll let me force you into marrying me in order to clear your name. I'm so overwhelmed I can't think of a single thing to say."

"Fearin, she has to fight later," Ijarin said quickly, putting a big arm up across the chest of the High Master. The man of Power had begun to take a step toward me, his face dark with anger, but the barbarian had saved him from a possibly fatal mistake. "Afterward you and she can try to straighten this out, but for now you'd better let it rest."

"Rest?" Fearin said, forcing himself to look at Ijarin. "You see something restful in this insanity? When I get my hands on whoever gave her those ideas he'll find the permanent kind of rest. And if I don't kill *her* for being gullible enough to believe it, they'll undoubtedly carve my name in stone as the most patient man ever to have lived. If she's going to be fighting later, make sure she eats something now."

I expected him to glare at me before he stalked off, but apparently he was smarter than that. I was really bristling over having been called gullible, and if he'd even glanced my way I would probably have started the fight myself.

"Didn't anyone ever tell you that killing looks simply bounce off men who wield Power?" Ijarin asked, and wasn't it nice that he was amused again. "You're wasting your time, so you might as well switch to doing something more productive. What would you like to eat?"

"His heart and liver," I muttered in answer, not joking in the least. "It's been a while since I've had really fresh meat."

Then I realized that I *could* do with something to eat, and stalked away myself to the food table. I was delighted I had a fight to look forward to - even if the fight *wasn't* with my victim of choice - and apparently everyone could see that. They all left me alone, even when we left the tent to continue following the march.

By the time we reached the amphitheater Talasin had mentioned, you would have thought there was a lightning storm hovering above us. The air all but crackled with tension and expectation, and the rumble of muttering voices rose and fell but never really stopped. The guardsmen had finished their march for the day, but no one was taking the time to make camp. They just about dropped their possessions where they stood, and immediately began to form up to climb down into the amphitheater.

"We'd better get down there ourselves," Ijarin said in a mutter as he watched them, his horse to the right of mine. "Prince Garam has the ten you'll be facing, but he isn't happy about who they turned out to be. Each one is his regimental champion, and the men seem to have gotten the idea that if *their* champion wins, so do they. None of us likes it, but it may be the only thing currently holding the men back."

"I'm *going* to find out what this is all about," I promised myself out loud, feeling more foolish than afraid. "Three or four men might hurt me, but I couldn't possibly survive the attentions of a regiment. This has to be the most insane thing I ever heard of, the most outrageously unbalanced - "

"Let's not get into that now," Ijarin cautioned, dismounting to hand his reins to one of his own men. "The first thing you have to do is survive this encounter, and then we can worry about the rest. How are you feeling?"

"Just as weak and helpless as the next Kenoss Shadowborn," I answered, doing my own dismounting. "Why do you ask?"

"I noticed you didn't eat very much this afternoon," he said, following after me as I walked toward the entrance steps that had been reserved for me. "I'd hate to think you were regretting now that you didn't take more."

"There's one Kenoss Trial that demands you go without food for three days before you attempt it," I commented, watching where I was going rather than turning to look at him. "And as far as Shadowborn training goes... No. No, I don't regret not having eaten more."

He let it be after that and simply followed me down the steps into the amphitheater. Which was good, because now wasn't the time for distractions...

Chapter 17

The amphitheater was very old, with step seats cut down into the rock that was only a few feet below the loam of the meadow. It would have been impossible for an ordinary person to know that that rock was there, so the ones who built this thing must have had special help. The steps went down quite a distance into the ground, and at the bottom was a smooth circle of brushed rock more than sixteen strides in diameter. I wondered if someone had cleared away the small stones and such that should have littered the circle, then dropped the question entirely. As strange as the rest of that episode was, there was very little chance that I'd like the answer to my cleaning question.

One glance had shown me that there would not be enough room in the seats for our entire army, but they were huddling close to allow as many in as possible. The only reasonably uncrowded area was the part that would be our fighting circle, and even that wasn't being allowed to stand empty. Ten men dressed only in tunics crouched at the far side of the circle,

while five others stood or walked elsewhere in it. Garam and Fearin were two who walked together, and when they saw me descending they came to meet me.

"The more I think about this, the worse an idea it becomes," Garam growled, his face dark with anger. "Those men are looking forward to winning, and they don't much care what they have to do to make it happen. I know them all and I've never seen them behave like this before."

"But it all fits in so nicely with the rest of the insanity," I answered, waving one hand. "An army gone mad, a very convenient place to hold an exhibition, and no other path open to us. It doesn't matter how good or bad an idea it is; there's nothing else to be done."

"I wonder," Fearin murmured, his face expressionless, then he seemed to pull himself out of reverie. "For right here and now we *don't* have a choice. The fight will happen, but I think you'd all better remember that Kiri has no guarantee of winning. She'll have to fight with everything she has, and if she wins it will only be because she earns the victory. If she was *meant* to win, if this was supposed to be no more than an exercise, there would have been no need for such elaborate arrangements. Do you understand what I'm saying, girl?"

"You're not the only one who thought of that," I returned, barely glancing at him. "This is *real*, and that's the way I'm looking at it. How much longer before I can start?"

"Soon," Garam answered when Fearin didn't, looking around at the rapidly filling steps. "Very soon."

I nodded and walked past them both, found a place of my own in the circle, then crouched down to run through the inner preparation I'd learned from the Inadni. I could feel all those eyes staring at me, could almost hear the thoughts behind, then firmly pushed it all away. The effort about to be made was the only importance in the universe, and the Learning helped me to know that in every bone and sinew of my body.

I became aware of someone standing over me, and when I pulled my vision outward to look up I saw Garam. Behind and around him the entire amphitheater seemed filled, with men crouched or standing around the upper edge as well. The sun was low in the sky, so low that part of the seats were covered with shadow, and that had to mean it was time. I straightened slowly until I stood erect, then looked toward my opponents with the eyes of one readied.

"I'll get things started and make sure they're done in proper form," Garam began, his gaze clinging to my face, but I slowly shook my head.

"No," I said in the whisper that could be heard so clearly, a lingering aftereffect of having touched so closely to the rest of the Learning. "It's for me to do. You just stay well back with the others."

His frown had only just begun to grow when I walked away from him, heading for the center of the circle. The rumbling thunder of voices had been a constant backdrop, but when I reached my place and stopped the thunder did the same.

"Stand up, step forward, and say whether you wish to face me barehanded or with weapons," I told the ten whose eyes stared at me so hotly. "Do it now."

"Barehanded," came an immediate answer, and one of the ten rose first to step forward with a grin. "I mean to have something left to repay me for the trouble I'm taking."

"Barehanded," I agreed, removing my swordbelt and holding it out to my right. Someone came to take the swordbelt, Ranander, I think, and then I had no attention to spare for anyone but my opponent.

An opponent who was already moving toward me, his own waist bare of a swordbelt. He was a regimental champion, I'd been told, someone who knew how to fight, so I stood loose while waiting for his first attack. I waited while he simply strode across the circle and up to me, then put out his right hand to close it around my left arm. Attack was what I'd been expecting, stupidity was what I'd gotten. It was more annoying than surprising, but it certainly wasn't something to ignore.

I quickly reached over to his hand with my own right hand, thumb below his thumb, fingers

wrapped around the opposite edge. Using my left hand at his elbow to assist in the twist I turned him away from me with a scream torn from his throat, bending him over helplessly. That was when I brought up my left knee into his outer elbow with strength, making him scream even louder before he fainted and collapsed. I released him when his senses fled from having had his elbow shattered inward, then looked at the remaining nine.

"Remove this, and then let's have another," I said into the strained silence now being maintained. "And one more capable, if you please."

Two men came to move the unconscious one, neither of them members of the nine, and when they'd gotten out of the way there was another opponent already waiting. This one also wore nothing of a swordbelt, but unlike his predecessor he showed nothing of a grin. He came forward cautiously, his hands already up, his eyes studying my stance and movement. *Better*, I thought as I awaited him, *much better*.

But it wasn't. From the anticipation everyone seemed to be watching him with I expected a display of at least adequate skill, but the speed and angle of his first kick killed that idea. I blocked the kick and the next as well, let his fists fly past in blows he should have been ashamed of, then abruptly lost patience. A front kick took him hard in the groin, slowing his rush, and then I spun about and delivered a roundhouse kick to his face. He went back and down to sprawl on the stone, his neck possibly broken, and that was the end of a second one.

"If this is the bet any of you can do, you're wasting my time," I said after a general sound of disappointment surged and then died. "Among those I studied with, these pitiful specimens never would have survived. Is there someone *capable* to face me next?"

"I'll face you," a growl answered, and one of the eight stepped forward - wearing a swordbelt. The tension in the air all around seemed to shift its stance, something I paid only a small amount of attention to as my last opponent was removed and my own swordbelt was returned. There was now a difference, but I wasn't certain as to what it was.

Something of a hint came when I returned my attention to the next challenger - only to find that there were two. A second armed man had joined the first, and despite the shouts of protest from the leaders of their army they were both drawing their weapons as they came forward. Without hesitation I freed my own blade, then went to meet them.

The fight was brisk and fast-moving, but didn't last very long. The two attacked together, but had obviously never *fought* together. I circled fast to my right, parrying a slash as I went, and that man whirled to face me and continue his onslaught. The only thing he didn't notice was that his shift had blocked his companion's efforts, and *he* was blocking the man himself. I slid a swipe, parried a backhand riposte, then plunged my blade deep into my opponent's chest. The newly dead man was only just beginning to fold to the ground when his companion broke free to face me, and the shock of now being alone hit the second man hard. He parried my immediate attack as his face went pale, and he tried to keep his eyes from the red staining my blade. He beat at my weapon as though he held a stick, the breath hissing out of him through clenched teeth, and then he seemed to realize he was no more than heartbeats from being ended. He forced a clumsy disengage by stumbling quickly backward, and then he was hurrying to rejoin the six men remaining.

Six men who were already on their feet with swords in their fists. The last of the sunlight glinted from their weapons, underscoring the blood-thick silence that lay heavily all around. Silence right now should not have been, especially not a silence of straining madness. I felt it in all its unnatural presence, saw the seven already coming forward as one, and had no choice but to meet unnatural with unnatural.

I could feel the shadow beginning to gather around me as I stared at the seven, the beast already starting to peer out of my eyes. It was the only way I could survive against them all, the only way to preserve my own existence, the undeniable way I'd been given no choice about using. When my life was in danger the beast would emerge, even if my preference was to meet the danger and let it best me.

But this particular danger wasn't about to best me. More and more shadow had been drawn to me, the better to let them see the burning red eyes of the beast. For a handful of moments my appearance meant nothing to them, and then a ... trance of some sort seemed to break, ending the dream they'd been walking through. At the same moment it ended for the men watching, and *then* the shouts and yells - and screams - came amidst the surging of thousands of bodies. The surging of thousands but the freezing of seven. Those seven now knew what they'd been approaching, or at least could see it, and knew even better that they wanted nothing to do with it. The beast was coldly delighted with their presence, drinking in their fear, already tasting their blood in imagination. The men in front of it were frantic, wanting nothing more to do with what had been going on. But the beast watched them backing away, and then she began to move after them.

And I couldn't stop it. Somewhere deep inside I knew it should be over, the madness and fighting no longer something to worry about, but I couldn't force the beast back and down. It had come out much too far, almost to the point of taking over the last vestige of *me* as it always did. I tried to stop the next step taking me after the seven terrified men, fought with all my strength - and managed to do no more than slow the step a little. I'd never entered a fight without expecting to win, but the beast was one opponent I had no chance against.

And then there was a ... tingling stepping in on my side, a force that was helping me to fight down the beast. The beast snarled and tried to claw free, wanting nothing so much as to be turned loose, but the tingling wasn't letting it happen. There was a heavy blue glow that I could feel rather than see, and the glow was smothering the beast and sending it back to the place it came from. The glow gave me the strength to do my own clawing, out of the shadows and back into the fading light, to become aware again of what was happening around me.

"That's it, push it back and keep it there," I heard a voice say, and there were hands on my arms from behind. The hands were closed tight, and the sword I still held rested with its point to the stone. "It's all over and you're the undisputed winner, so let's end this the right way." I took a deep breath to force the usual shudder down with the rest, then moved away from his hands to resheathe my sword. Fearin had used his Power to keep the beast from winning over me, and I remembered my previous thoughts about his creativity and strength. It wasn't supposed to be possible for anything to best the Learning, and the Inadni probably would have been shocked gray.

A sudden babble of voices erupted as the others joined us, relief and delight and expansive satisfaction coloring the words. Our army was making haste to leave the amphitheater, not quite knocking each other down now that the beast was gone, but still hurrying as they glanced over their shoulders. It was a normal reaction from back-to-normal men, and the insanity was done with. For now.

"You see?" Ranander's voice broke through the rest. "I *knew* her winning would solve the problem. And I also knew she would win, even though I didn't *know* it. Kiri's the best there ever was."

"This calls for a celebration," Talasin announced with a laugh. "Formal style if Fearin can manage it, informal if he can't. We have a victory to raise our cups to, a victory and a victor."

"Victory," I echoed, turning to look at his delighted expression. The others were just as delighted, all but Fearin. "Those men never had a chance against me, but someone still forced them to try. Think about how you'll feel if *you're* the next to be forced to face me and then tell me what it is you feel we have to celebrate."

I watched their delight die away into a heavy silence, one that was filled with the sort of understanding they should have had to begin with. Obviously things still hadn't completely returned to normal, at least not among our inner group, but we weren't given the chance to dwell on it. One of Garam's special squad came over to speak softly to him, and his reaction was anything but soft.

"Damn it, we have trouble," Garam announced, speaking mostly to our distinguished leader.

"The men don't understand what happened, and now that they're out from under whatever spell was on them they're just on the edge of going wild. We'll have to work fast to calm them down." "Then let's get started *now*," Fearin rapped out, looking around at the others. "Master Lokkel, you see first to the ones Kiri faced who are still alive. Once you've healed them bring them with you, using Ranander's help to find the rest of us. We'll be out moving among the men, talking to them and calming them down, and you can..."

His voice faded out as I climbed higher out of the amphitheater, filled with some of the delight the others had lost. They were so involved with their new problem they hadn't seen me go, which meant I might be able to have some peace and quiet for a while. Especially if Fearin had taken the time to create our tents before the big battle...

But he hadn't. Once I reached ground level I was able to look around, searching for something I hadn't thought to look for earlier. I'd been too caught up in what was ahead of me, all that planning and anticipation that had been for nothing. I looked around again, for once wishing *I* could create a tent, and then noticed something I'd missed. A short distance away and to one side of the balance of our not-quite-camp stood Ijarin's tent, his men relaxing around two cooking fires as they watched the goings-on in our area with open curiosity.

"As if they have no idea about what's been happening," I muttered to myself, suddenly realizing it was more than possible that they *didn't* know. I hadn't seen any of them in the amphitheater, and not even near it. Now, wasn't that strange...

Or maybe not so strange. Without stopping to do any more thinking I headed for the tent, leaving my horse where I'd tied him before the confrontation. Either someone would take care of all the horses, or we'd end up not needing them anymore. At that point I would have been happier with the second possibility, but couldn't quite see it happening. That would have been the easy way, which meant it couldn't be something *I* was involved in.

Ijarin's men watched me walk past them into his tent, but none of them spoke or tried to stop me. He'd said something about them knowing the sword had been made for me... As though that told them things no one else knew... Possibly about me, possibly about that supposed prophecy. As if I didn't have enough questions thundering around in my mind demanding answers. There were cushions scattered on the carpet-covered grass to the left, so I sat down among them in the soft dimness of almost-night and let my mind wander where it willed.

When Ijarin came in he brought a candle with him, a long, thin taper in white whose flame he shielded with one hand. It was completely dark outside, and quite some time had passed. He glanced at me in a way that said he'd been told I was here, spent a few ticks lighting three other candles in a small, metal-bound stand, then blew out the long candle and turned to look at me.

"Everything is back to normal and the men have quieted down," he said. "Fearin told them the enemy was trying to stop their army with spells of destruction, but his own Power turned the spell into nothing more than a brief episode of temporary imbalance. It might happen again with the same meager results, or the enemy could get smart and give up that line of attack. Since we're as safe as any army can be, we can afford to sit back with a smile and wait to see what happens."

"And they believed every word," I said, already knowing it to be true. "How many of those men did I kill?"

"Actually, none of them," the barbarian answered, then smiled faintly at my stare of disbelief. "Even the one you sworded was still alive when Master Lokkel got to him, although the man wouldn't have been alive for much longer. That second man, the one you kicked, had a broken neck and would have been crippled, but he's also healed. The one with the broken arm wasn't as easy as the Healing Master expected him to be, but he was taken care of as well."

"I think I'm getting really mad," I muttered, trying to hold down a temper that wanted to flare out in all directions. "For what conceivable reason is he doing all this?"

"Who?" Ijarin asked, the faint smile replaced by a narrow-eyed look. "And I thought you'd be happy that you didn't do any permanent damage. Why don't you *sound* happy?"

"I'm too mad to be happy," I answered in the same mutter, then stared directly at him. "Have you realized yet that that nonsense was nothing more than some sort of elaborate joke? Don't worry, folks, it's all in fun and nobody gets hurt. You know, like they say during the performances put on by those traveling posture shows? Well, it *was* all in fun because nobody *did* get hurt."

"That wasn't my idea of fun," he denied with a headshake. "If Master Lokkel hadn't been there... And what about *you*? You could have been hurt or killed at any time, and if you'd died even Fearin couldn't have helped. While those men were under that spell there was no joke about it."

"But that's the whole point," I said, getting to my feet. "While those men were under that spell I *was* threatened, up to the point of needing to seriously defend myself. I was the dancing bear in the show, demonstrating how well I'd learned to whirl around to the music. But then the people in the audience saw that it was a *real* bear they were playing with and started to get out their hunting weapons, so the music stopped. No more dancing, no more worry, that's it, folks, the show is over."

"Kiri, I don't understand what you're trying to say," he protested gently, looking down at me with worry in his eyes. "Or possibly I'm *trying* not to understand. I'd hate to think you were about to do something foolish - like take offense over the doings of a god. Or do you think if you get angry enough, you'll be able to change things?"

"I know better than to think I can change things," I said in a growl. "The best I can hope to accomplish is to see the next time coming and simply not cooperate. But I want to know *why*. Why is Diin-tha doing this to me?"

"The gods often have reasons for doing things that mean little or nothing to mortals," he answered with a shrug. "Or maybe it's no more than a whim that's got you caught up. Are you absolutely certain it *is* Diin-tha?"

"Who else could it be?" I returned, already having considered the point. "If it wasn't *some* god, your men would have been just as affected as the men in the army. Since you and they are dedicated to a goddess who makes you invisible to other gods, your men stayed untouched. And are you trying to suggest that Diin-tha would allow *another* god to interfere with this very important task we're in the middle of performing? Somehow I don't think so."

"I'm forced to go along with that," he agreed heavily, his gaze turned inward. "Diin-tha is strong enough to keep other gods out of his affairs, which means *he* caused that insanity. All I can think to suggest is that it has to be part of his plans."

"But how can that nonsense possibly be part of his plans?" I demanded, filled to capacity with frustration. "What if I *hadn't* been good enough to keep myself safe and alive? What if the men had rioted out of control afterward and the army was turned into a useless rabble?"

"But it wasn't," another voice pointed out, and we both turned to see Fearin standing in the entrance. "The men didn't riot, you weren't hurt or killed, and there was no permanent damage done. Possibly our Guardian grew temporarily bored and decided to divert himself with a little entertainment."

"As I said earlier, that's not my idea of entertainment," Ijarin stated, the words flat. "Is there something else you need me for?"

"Actually, I came to tell the two of you that our meal is ready and waiting in my tent," Fearin replied, an odd ... neutrality to his voice. "After we eat we'll discuss whether or not we can keep this from happening again."

Ijarin nodded and began to move toward Fearin, but I didn't. I just stood there waiting for them to leave, but they didn't.

"Kiri, we've all had a long, hard, involved day," Fearin told me, apparently knowing my exact intentions. "Whatever patience I've had until now is entirely gone, so don't force me to do something I might later regret. Come to the meal and the discussion, and afterward we'll straighten out the misunderstanding between us."

"There *is* no misunderstanding between us," I denied, my tone as flat as Ijarin's had been.

"Just in case I haven't made myself clear, I want nothing to do with your meal, your discussion, and most especially you. Take my advice and leave me alone. If you don't our Guardian will be very unhappy with me."

"Is that threat supposed to frighten me away?" he growled, drawing himself up as his blue eyes turned harder than steel. "Haven't you been left alone enough in your life? I am *not* guilty of whatever it is you think I've done, so I won't be frightened away and I won't leave you alone. Tell me what you've been told and I'll *prove* I'm not guilty."

"You can't," I said, refusing to look away from his anger. "You've already proven it *is* true, and every time you say something else you simply make it worse. Why is it so hard for you to admit that the game is over? Because this time it didn't end on *your* terms? Well, that's too bad about you because this time it won't go any other way."

"*This* time," he echoed behind a frown. "You said 'this time,' and talked about a game. Is that what you were told? That I'm playing a game with you that I've played before with others?"

"Why don't you deny it," I invited, folding my arms. "Tell me I'm the first woman you've ever paid attention to and it was my outstanding beauty that first drew you to me. Go ahead, say it just like that."

"You're not the first woman I'd had in my bed, but you *are* the first one I've paid attention to," he stated with a growl, those blue eyes still very hard. "Beauty isn't difficult to find, especially not for someone of *my* standing; most of the time it comes looking for *me*. But beauty without anything behind it gets boring after a while, and then bored turns into repelled. If there's one thing you aren't it's boring, and *that's* what attracted me to you. Not to mention the fact that you need someone to look after you."

By then *he* was the one refusing to look away, and that despite the glare I was sending.

"I need someone to look after me?" I repeated in disbelieving outrage. "*Me?* Are you trying to convince me you did what you did because you're crazy? That must be why you dislike Ijarin so much. His own craziness is too much competition."

"I'm not crazy or even mistaken," he maintained, a slight darkening of his skin and a very brief glance for Ijarin the only reaction to the rest of what I'd said. "Despite your skill and ability - or maybe because of it - you really do need someone to look after you. I intend to be that someone, so there's no sense in arguing. Come join me for the meal and then I'll prove how wrong you are to disbelieve me."

He put his hand out, intending to take my arm, but I couldn't stand the thought of being touched by him again. I stepped back quickly, my arms loose at my sides, and simply shook my head.

"I'm *not* wrong to disbelieve you," I said, trying to keep everything I felt from coming through in my voice. "The wrongness is in having believed you to begin with, in having forgotten how stupid it is to believe or believe in *anyone*. Don't come near me again, High Master, and even beyond that don't ever try to touch me. If you do you have my word you'll regret it."

"Kiri, wait!" Ijarin called as I circled the two of them and left the tent, all but running. I didn't know what the barbarian wanted, and I also didn't care. What *I* wanted was to get out of there and be alone, and I intended to have it.

It wasn't difficult to see that the tents had been created, even the one that was mine. Fearin was probably using a blanket spell to make all the tents at once, and hadn't bothered to change the spell even when he didn't think I'd be using the tent. Well, he'd been wrong about that, but not as wrong as I'd been.

There was a candle burning in my tent when I walked inside, so I paused to lace the flap closed before going to my pallet to lie down. After putting my sword in easy hand reach I stretched out, then forced myself into the thought-mold of deliberate calming. I had to hold out until that campaign was over, and then I would be free to leave. Until then...

Until then I had to keep reminding myself how stupid it was to believe people. Especially when you really wanted to.

Chapter 18

The next day our march resumed, and although I acted no differently toward the others I felt a good deal different. I'd done some thinking the night before, and my thoughts had taken a very odd turn.

It all started when a meal suddenly appeared in my tent, obviously through the efforts of Fearin. He'd been wise not to press me about joining him and the others, but I still wanted nothing from him. My interest in food had disappeared completely - or so I thought until a bottomless sense of emptiness grabbed me by the throat. My body suddenly felt convinced that it was starving to death, and it wasn't possible to keep away from that food.

I ended up attacking the meal and stuffing down more than I had since joining that group, and when the compulsion to eat finally disappeared I felt ready to explode in more ways than one. Fearin had to have been the cause of that compulsion, there was no other explanation, and all the anger inside me wanted to do was hurt him as much as he'd hurt me. But I had to be able to move in order to do that, so I forced myself to pour a cup of water to drink while I fumed and waited for the meal to be digested.

My thoughts were filled with demands for revenge and visions of bloody dismemberment for a while, but then the anger faded to a point where a question worked its way through the rest: if Fearin was able to force me to eat, why hadn't he done so before now? He'd been as much of a pest about that as the others, but he'd never tried to force me.

"Maybe he only just thought of it," I'd muttered, trying to bring the anger back. Being angry is a lot easier than asking yourself odd questions, but that particular question didn't seem to want to be ignored. I knew perfectly well that Fearin shouldn't have been *able* to force a compulsion on me, and that held true even if he *had* helped me to fight off the beast. That time he'd simply added his strength to something I wanted to do, but this time...

This time it wasn't the same, so it shouldn't have happened. But it *had* happened, which meant there had to be a cause other than the one I'd immediately assumed was true. And that realization brought me another, just as disturbing as the first: someone else was not only responsible for the compulsion but also seemed to want me to blame Fearin.

I shifted in my saddle as I felt that understanding touch me again, but it still wasn't possible to deny what made it true. Fearin had undoubtedly sent the food, and the compulsion had touched me too quickly after that for it to be a coincidence. But it had also come to me that if Fearin had found a way to give me a compulsion, it wouldn't have been simply to eat. As undeniable as that compulsion had been I could have been made to go to Fearin's tent either before or after eating, plus any number of other things. Making me eat had hardly been the only thing on Fearin's mind...

So the compulsion hadn't been sent by him, but I was meant to think it had been and was supposed to blame him. Being wrapped in layers of fury would have kept me from asking how he'd managed to do it, and also would have kept me from wondering who might be responsible if Fearin wasn't. As though anyone with a mind would have to wonder for long...

I nearly found myself saying Diin-tha's name aloud, and in a tone no one in their right mind would use when speaking of a god. Of course it could be argued that I wasn't *in* my right mind, not after all the things the god had caused to happen around me, but justifying my actions or being discreet wasn't my top priority. Finding out the reason *behind* all that insanity was higher on the list, right below finding a way to make it stop.

"Good morning," Ijarin's voice came just as he rode up, distracting me from thoughts of insanity. More and more I felt like telling Diin-tha exactly what I thought of him, no matter what the god did to me because of it...

"That's your opinion," I answered Ijarin's greeting, making no effort to look directly at him.

"What do you want this time?"

"Aside from wanting to bask in the warmth of your graciousness?" he countered, amusement now clear in his tone. "Only to tell you that we're nearly to the entrance of the Valley of Twilight, so your presence will soon be required by the group. Only Talasin and Lokkel will stay behind with the army and my own men. The rest of us and a small escort will continue on into the valley, and that includes the coach with the girls."

"Now I understand what the plan is," I said sourly, still looking around. "We're going to threaten to turn the girls loose in the Valley if our army isn't allowed through without being bothered. In the face of a threat like that they'll probably give us anything we want."

"I was foolish enough to think their attitudes might at least have started to change by now," Ijarin said, and a glance showed more annoyance in him than amusement. "Rational human beings usually understand when their circumstances change and at least *try* to change with them, but not those two. For some reason Fearin let them join us for dinner last night, and the experience just about ruined everyone's appetite. I'll swear they're worse now than they were."

"What's surprising about that?" I asked, wondering what his own upbringing had been like that he didn't understand the point. "All their lives the girls have gotten whatever they wanted by demanding it. That taught them the proper way to behave, so why would they try to change?"

"Because when something stops working you *do* try to change," Ijarin said, lightening my mood by actually looking and sounding annoyed. "You don't throw a tantrum and keep on with the demands, not when no one around you is responding. Rational, reasonable human beings -"

"Ah, there's that phrase again," I interrupted, glad to be able to lecture *him* for a change.

"Rational and reasonable, I mean. Haven't you noticed yet that those girls were never *taught* to be rational and reasonable? They were taught to demand things and then to throw tantrums if their demands weren't met. It may have occasionally taken some time, but I'll bet their demands were *always* met eventually."

"Are you trying to say that they're permanently ruined to be intelligent members of a society?" Ijarin demanded, his frown now much more evident. "I don't believe that, and can't see myself ever believing it. They're still just children, so they *can* be taught differently."

"They may be young but they're not children," I disagreed, adding a headshake. "They're mature individuals who have been raised in a particular way, and that way will always be the right one to them. All my people know that, but there's still one or two every now and then who forget it when their own children are involved. Trying to change things at the last tick never works out, and that's something I saw with my own eyes."

"Among the Kenoss?" Ijarin asked with brows raised. "Somehow I can't quite picture that."

"Even a Kenoss can sometimes take the wrong path," I admitted, finding it hard, even now, to speak against the people who were no longer mine. "In the Life Seeker Trials the season before my own, one of the entrants came from parents who hadn't been able to have more than that one child. His mother hadn't ever been able to let go of him, and had made him obey *her* decisions rather than letting him learn to make decisions of his own. No one understood that until the boy was wounded in one of the Trials, and then simply lay on the ground begging his mother to tell him what to do. She wasn't close enough to tell him anything, so he didn't survive very long."

"But ... how could she do that when she knew what he would have to face all alone?" Ijarin asked, obviously disturbed. "It isn't possible to live someone else's entire life for them."

"It turned out she'd decided she *would* be there forever, no matter what," I said with the chill I still felt when remembering the time. "She even tried to interfere in the Trials, but couldn't work her way through the safeguards in time. When she found her son dead she had screaming hysterics, and the hysterics continued on until she was executed for the murder she'd committed."

"Murder?" Ijarin echoed, startled again. "But that wasn't murder. It was foolishness and bad

judgment, but she was punished for that by the loss of her son."

"The loss was his, not hers, since she stole the life from her child," I disagreed with a snort.

"And if she'd been left unpunished others might have tried the same. Not to mention the fact that she would have eventually blamed the rest of us for the death, not herself. She wasn't able to admit she'd been wrong even with her son's body at her feet, which means she'd never have been able to admit it."

"Why didn't you consider the boy equally guilty?" Ijarin put sourly, not at all pleased with what he'd learned. "After all, he's the one who let her get away with what she did without protesting."

"The boy proved *himself* guilty and paid for the crime," I pointed out, something I was surprised to have to do. "If he'd lived he would have been chained forever to someone else's will, first to his mother's and then to that of whoever took over after his mother died. He would have been incapable of living life on his own - or would have gone crazy under the restrictions and started to kill innocents to relieve the horror in his mind. Don't you know that?"

Ijarin sent me a glance before refusing to answer, which meant he did know what I'd been talking about. At one time, hundreds of seasons earlier, the Kenoss had been plagued with the same problems. Then the Life Seeker way had been adapted, and things had begun to change for the better. Until the Inadni had first come around, that is...

Ijarin's silence let me go back to my own thoughts, but not for long. After what seemed like only a short while I became aware of the fact that the army had stopped to pitch camp. Ijarin and I just kept going, of course, until we reached the place where the others were. Garam had his special squad surrounding the coach, and Fearin just glanced at Ijarin and me before looking around at everyone else as well.

"The Valley of Twilight is just ahead, so we're going to stop for a good meal before we continue on," he said. "While we're in the Valley we won't eat or drink *anything*, not even what we happen to bring with us. Once safe passage is arranged we can march through in just under a day, and the same restrictions will hold. If anyone eats or drinks anything - or stops to dally in any way at all - I won't be able to save that person. Do you all understand?"

No one spoke up to say they didn't, so Fearin turned away to pay attention to producing a meal for us. I'd eaten only some of the breakfast which had appeared in my tent this morning, so by now I was hungry again. If we weren't supposed to eat or drink where we were going, I decided I might as well see to the matter now.

When the large table heavy with food appeared everyone went toward it and I joined them. We managed to get two or three paces closer to our objective, and then an unpleasant interruption stopped us in mid step.

"We haven't yet been told which of you will be getting *our* meal," a young but very imperious voice rang out. "Tell us now, and then those designated may continue on. The rest of you will wait until your betters have been served."

We all turned to look toward the coach and found that the twin girls had been helped out of it by one of Garam's special squad. The girls now stood beside the coach, looking at the rest of us as though we were less than dirt.

"But you don't have our permission to eat until *we've* finished," the second girl added, a vindictive smirk on her face. "That will teach you not to tell us lies again, especially not ones that are so easy to see through. Princes indeed."

Garam and Talasin looked annoyed over that, which explained the girls' new attitude. They hadn't gotten the adoration they felt was due them from real princes, so the two men couldn't possibly be princes. I noticed that Ijarin was just as annoyed rather than being upset, but the reactions of others didn't concern me right now. My own reaction was to continue on toward the table, and an instant later I had the company of everyone else doing the same.

"Don't you dare disobey, don't you dare!" one of the girls screeched, immediately joined by the other screeching something else entirely. From the sound the two seemed just about ready

to throw a real tantrum, but this time they were the ones who were interrupted.

"Silence!" Fearin thundered, and it was clear he'd used the Power to amplify his voice after moving closer to the girls. "Stop that mindless squawking this instant!"

Indignant shock apparently got Fearin the silence he wanted, but even a glance showed it wasn't likely to last very long. Which was probably why he didn't waste the opportunity.

"How long is it going to take you two to understand that the days of your being served are over?" he demanded, looking back and forth between them. "No one cares whether or not you feel insulted, and no one is going to fetch and carry for you. This food is meant for everyone, but we'll all be helping ourselves. If you feel it's beneath you to do the same you can go hungry."

They stared at Fearin with identical pouts and expressions of hatred, then tossed their heads and turned back to the coach. They seemed to have decided to punish us by starving themselves, which wasn't exactly a crushing surprise.

"I don't believe that," Ijarin muttered as I took a plate and began to fill it, showing that not everyone was unsurprised. "They didn't even ask why things were supposed to be different now, they simply rejected the entire concept. That isn't a normal reaction no matter *how* you look at it."

"In their frame of reference it's perfectly normal," I reminded him, uninterested in going into details again. "Keep demanding and you'll get what you want, just the way you always have." Ijarin made no answer to that, which let me appreciate the peace and quiet - for all of another handful of ticks.

"... miserable spoiled brats," Fearin muttered angrily as he came up behind us, and then his voice suddenly strengthened. "And as for you, I refuse to take any more of your nonsense. As soon as the army is out of the Valley of Twilight you and I are going to have that talk. If you don't like the idea, too bad."

And then he stomped away, probably to find some poisonous reptile to bite the head from. Personally I just kept filling my plate, wondering how he had the nerve to call someone else a brat.

"You still refuse to hear him," Ijarin noted after a moment, a sigh behind the words. "Are you really going to force him to hurt you before you'll listen?"

The question wasn't one that deserved an answer, so I didn't bother supplying one. My plate was already as full as I wanted it to be, which meant I was able to turn away and go looking for a private place to eat. I found one not far away and folded to the ground, then applied myself to the meal. Fearin wasn't a topic I meant to discuss until I figured out why Diin-tha apparently wanted me to hate him even more than I did. After what the god had already done to me I felt nothing of an urge to cooperate with his desires.

For once Ijarin seemed to understand that I wanted no one's company, so I finished my meal without being bothered. The others sat with Fearin as the man of Power spoke to them, probably about last minute instructions. When I was through eating I carried my almost-empty plate back to the table, then poured myself a cup of water. By the time I drained the cup we were ready to get moving again.

Talasin and Lokkel joined the closest guardsmen in watching us ride off, Talasin looking calm, Lokkel looking relieved. A clamor had started inside the coach as soon as it began to move, but no one paid any attention. The girls were undoubtedly outraged that no one seemed to be suffering because the two had refused to eat, and that made me curious. They weren't being taken with us for no reason, so why hadn't Fearin *made* them eat? Especially after what he'd said to the rest of us...

That was another question I couldn't answer, but in just a little while I found myself distracted from the annoyance of mysteries by the handful. The road we followed suddenly began to angle downward, and as soon as my mount crested the drop and began to move downward as well everything ... changed. The mid-afternoon light immediately dimmed to the point you find just

before night settles in, but nothing around us could have accounted for the change. The trees weren't high or thick enough, and neither was the now-rising landscape. We should have had bright sunlight - but we didn't.

"So this is why they call it the Valley of Twilight," Ijarin remarked from where he rode beside me again. "I wonder if it stays like this even in the dark of night. It's the worst possible light to see things clearly in."

"Worst possible for us, not for the ones who live here," I pointed out. "And they're already watching us. Can you tell?"

His head came up and he began to look around, but his senses weren't quite keen enough. He clearly couldn't detect the odd scent I'd picked up as soon as my horse had carried me into the twilight, which meant he couldn't use the scent to lead his gaze to the slim, flitting shadows moving almost silently to both sides of us. It looked like our arrival wasn't in the least unexpected, and a welcoming committee - of sorts - had been provided.

"I'm sure Fearin already knows, but I'll pass the word up to him anyway," Ijarin said, finally giving up on trying to see what I had. "Stay here and I'll be right back."

He urged his horse a short distance ahead, to the place where one of Garam's special squad rode behind the coach, and then he spoke briefly to the man. His words were received with a curt nod, which meant Ijarin could slow his horse until I reached his position. The guardsman had moved to another of the squad in front of the coach, passed on the message, and then waited to resume his position. The guardsman up front caught up with Garam, and Garam in turn spoke to Fearin.

"The High Master doesn't look particularly upset, so he must have known after all," Ijarin remarked, then he turned his head toward me. "And I really need to ask if you're feeling all right. You haven't insulted me since yesterday."

"You make it too easy for it to be fun for very long," I remarked back, keeping most of my attention on the beings hidden in the shadows all around us. "Besides, this isn't the time for distractions of any kind, not even the verbal sort."

"I appreciate the way you eased my worry so quickly, but you're right," he said, the words very dry. "We do need to be alert right now, so conversation can wait. But not forever. We have one war waiting for us on the other side of this valley. We really don't need two."

He lapsed into silence after that, but there was no reason he shouldn't have. He'd already said a good part of what he'd wanted to, and now could wait until lecturing didn't put our safety at risk. Vast annoyance flashed through me, bringing me the urge to tell him again to mind his own business, but I swallowed the urge and let it slide away. Once we were out of this valley I'd find a way to rid myself of Ijarin and Fearin both, flamed if I wouldn't...

We rode on for a while with absolutely nothing happening, and I couldn't help but notice that our pace was more leisurely than hurried. Fearin seemed to be announcing that we had nothing to worry about, but I wasn't quite as certain. That odor I'd noticed at once had been slowly growing stronger, until now the air seemed drenched with it. The not-quite-dark but shadowy air was unconcerned and unchanging.

We finally seemed to get where we were going, which meant the coach began to slow because of Garam's upraised arm. The road we'd been traveling had leveled out some time back, and now there was a crossroads just ahead. On the near side of the crossroads to the left was what looked like a small house, and a being of some sort sat leaning partially out of the window. The being said something I couldn't hear, and Fearin held up a hand that seemed to be telling the being to wait. At that moment Garam rode up to me, looking the least bit anxious.

"Fearin needs you, girl," the fighter said as softly as he ever spoke. "He told me that sometimes these ... *things* speak in our own language but a lot of the time they pretend they don't understand a word of it. If that happened I was to come and get you, because now you're the only chance we have."

Because of all the different languages I'd learned from the Inadni. There was no guarantee the

language being spoken here was one of them, but Fearin hadn't thought it necessary to ask me about it beforehand. I felt like snarling out my opinion of the man's intelligence, but instead just nodded curtly before letting my horse move forward. Words could be exchanged with Fearin later - assuming we all lived through whatever came next.

Garam and Ijarin followed along behind me, but the closer I got to the small house the less aware of others I became. The being in the window was man-shaped in a general way, but most of the details about him were grotesque. His face was lumpy, his mouth showed fang-like teeth, his ears were filled with hair, and his body was uneven and bent. Too-light eyes watched my approach with interest, and then I saw a bit more of those sharp and jagged teeth.

"Well, now, this is more like it," the being said as he looked me over carefully, the language he spoke one of the lost Khotian dialects. "What a shame you won't understand me either, sweetheart. I know you'll be delicious, but I would have preferred to appreciate you in another way entirely."

"Be glad you aren't in a position to try either way," I told him coldly in the same language, getting a good deal of satisfaction from his immediate startlement. "We're not here to be appreciated but to offer your king something he wants. Are you able to arrange a meeting with him, or do we have to play another game first?"

"Where did you learn that language?" the being demanded, this time speaking Rhovari. "I have it on good authority that no one speaks it beyond our borders!"

"No one does," I agreed, also switching to Rhovari. "And the same goes for *this* tongue. It must be your imagination that you're hearing *me* speak them. Are you going to arrange that meeting, or does our High Master get to see just how good his talent is?"

"All right, all right, don't be so impatient," the being grumbled after glancing at Fearin. "The man fairly reeks of the Power, not to mention the fact that *you* were able to start the dicker. I'll get word to the king and he won't keep you waiting long."

"What did he say?" Fearin asked when the being leaned back from the window and began to speak to someone out of sight. "Tell me what's happening."

"He's sending for his king because I was able to start the 'dicker,'" I responded without turning to look at the man. "How lucky for everyone here that I was able to understand him."

"Luck had nothing to do with it, so don't you dare try to scold me," Fearin came back, sounding almost as annoyed as I usually felt. "I mentioned the point when it came up, and was assured that these people spoke no language you didn't know - even if you usually turned deaf to *this* language. Since the last of the comment was so true, I had no trouble believing the first of it." He seemed about to add something else, but then swallowed down the words. He must have realized that this wasn't the time or place, but I'd realized something as well. What he'd said about me turning deaf to the language he and I used... He'd been *told* that by Diin-tha, and the comment was too inflammatory to be innocent. What in the name of all creation could the god be up to?

"All right, now that word has been sent, our king will be here in just a short while," the being in the window said with another toothy smile as he turned back to us. "The wait won't be long, but you'll find it easier to endure with refreshments in hand. I've already sent for those as well, so -"

"Is that your idea of behaving in an honorable way?" I demanded, taking a small part of my ... displeasure with Diin-tha out on the being. "Telling people they've followed your rules and then offering them something you know they can't accept and remain safe? Do you also wait until they're sound asleep before sneaking up in attack?"

It was very difficult to tell in that light, but the being's too-pale complexion seemed to darken a bit while its gaze no longer met mine. There was also the sound of shuffling behind it, as though others moved about in discomfort.

"You don't understand," the being said after a tick, something of the same discomfort in its tone. "If someone is foolish enough to do something stupid, there's no reason we can't take

advantage of it. This is *our* valley, after all, and you weren't invited to come here. Since you came anyway, you deserve whatever happens to you."

"What a poor excuse of a code to live by," I said coldly, ignoring the self-justification the being had tried to put forward. "If people come to do you harm you have every right to do the same to them. But to do it first, before finding out their motives for certain? You aren't being protective of your valley, you're hiding from the world. And doing yourselves out of whatever pleasure honest trade would bring you. I'd be disgusted if I didn't feel so sorry for you."

For the second time the being wasn't looking directly at me, but this time it didn't seem to have anything to say. That, however, didn't mean there was silence.

"Would you mind translating what's being said to you?" Fearin put in, his tone now faintly impatient. "Just to keep me from feeling entirely useless, you understand. And when they get around to offering us food or drink, let me know at once. I know the way to refuse diplomatically."

"They've already offered and I've already refused," I told the man, still not looking at him.

"Since they aren't insisting, I'd say my response was diplomatic enough to do the job."

"I just realized I *know* something," Ranander offered before Fearin could add to what he'd said. Ranander had been riding with the forward coach guardsmen, but now had moved up to join the rest of us. "I know why these people keep changing languages."

"And why is that?" Garam finally asked when Fearin didn't. "I could tell they shifted from one to another at the beginning there, but I couldn't understand a word of any of it."

"The shifting isn't their choice," Ranander replied, sounding sad. "I asked myself why they would choose to speak in a way that no one else understood, and that's when I *knew* the choice wasn't theirs. They're forced to go through a ... cycle of languages, I guess you would call it, and what they speak depends on what part of the cycle they're up to."

"So it isn't completely a game, but they decided to make it into one," Ijarin said with a nod of understanding. "It was probably done by whoever or whatever made this valley be the way it is, but I wonder *why* it was done. Did these people earn being treated like this, or are they victims?"

"Definitely victims," Ranander said, his tone now positive. "Someone probably didn't like the way they looked, so they were hidden away here. And forced to stay because of that cycle thing."

"They should have looked for a way around the restriction," Ijarin said with a headshake.

"Getting even with whoever came by probably made them feel better to begin with, but then they should have realized they were only hurting themselves more. Not to mention the fact that they were only getting even with innocents, not the one who did this to them. I wonder if it's too late to point that out?"

I had the feeling that Ijarin's question was meant for me, but since it wasn't put directly I made no attempt to answer. I'd noticed the way Fearin sat his horse apart from the rest of us, a hidden tension in the supposedly relaxed posture he'd adopted. The High Master was usually in the middle of everything, handing out orders - and bothering *me*. Rather than feeling relief at his absence I felt suspicious, even though I didn't know precisely why...

The conversation lagged after that, but the being hadn't lied when it had said we would not have long to wait. In an unexpectedly short amount of time we heard the sound of hoofbeats, and a group of riders appeared out of the gloom. Their king had undoubtedly been told about our presence since the moment we'd entered the valley, so I decided his speedy arrival really wasn't much of a surprise. He probably wanted to be on hand no matter whether we lived or died.

Well, it looked like the time had come for one or the other thing to happen...

Chapter 19

King Sallain of the Valley of Twilight came well attended to meet us. There were at least fifty riders with him, and as they got closer it was possible to see through the almost-night dimness that most of them were dressed as guardsmen. Rings of steel protected their boiled leather just as it did for our own guardsmen, and even the king wore the same. This was not your average, stay-at-home king, then...

"There's something wrong with the way he looks, but I can't put my finger on what," Ijarin murmured from beside me, his stare caught by the approaching monarch. "Maybe it's this less-than-light distorting his features... "

I didn't say so out loud, but it wasn't the light that was distorting King Sallain's face. At first glance he looked like any other man, but a second, longer inspection showed that every part of his face was ... skewed just a little. At one time his dark hair and brown eyes might have been part of a very handsome, tall, and broad-shouldered man, but now it was more than a little disquieting to look at him. All but five of his followers stopped a short distance away while the king led those five closer to us.

"Welcome to the Valley of Twilight," he said in a deep voice in our language as he stopped his horse just a few feet away. "Not many of our visitors actually ask to see me, and I must say I'm terribly flattered. Are you pleased now that your request has been granted?"

Sallain hadn't missed the fact that our guardsmen - and Garam and well - weren't able to look directly at him, and the bitterness in his voice sounded more than tired. I could hear a hint of the emotion that often causes people to cry with the pain they feel, hopeless sobs wracking their bodies. I would have bet gold that Sallain was no stranger to that kind of crying, and the fury that sometimes came after it as well. Ijarin was clearly forcing himself to look at the man, and so was Fearin. But Fearin was doing a better job of it, so I moved my horse beside his to confirm an idea that had just come to me.

"Your Majesty, thank you for meeting with us," Fearin said with something of a bow from his saddle. "I have a very intrusive request, but I'm prepared to offer my thanks in advance. I have a gift that will hopefully please you."

"The only gift that would really please me is beyond mortal man to offer," Sallain replied, then his gaze moved to *me*. "Haven't you looked your fill *yet*, girl? Or are you having trouble tearing your gaze away from the most horrible sight you've ever had the misfortune to come across?"

"Hardly the most horrible sight *I've* ever come across," I answered with a faint sound of ridicule. "And speaking about sights, haven't you ever been told that you're the one causing most of that distortion? If you adjust your thoughts in the proper way you'll probably look whatever way you used to."

"That's absurd," Sallain growled, gesturing a dismissal of what I'd said. "Do you really think I would look like this if it were *my* choice? I was also told in so many words that no mortal man would ever be able to help me rid myself of - of what's doing this. Do you expect lying to help your cause?"

"I don't *have* a cause, and what I expected to find was some small amount of intelligence," I countered, more than annoyed by his attitude. "I know what you're doing because I was taught to do the same thing myself, and since you've obviously missed the point let me underscore it: I'm not *any* kind of man, mortal or otherwise. Or didn't that interpretation of what you were told ever occur to you?"

He opened his mouth to argue what I'd said, paused as he stared at me, then shook his head.

"It can't be that simple, it just can't be," he muttered, still staring at me. "But it would be just like her to... " Then he pulled himself together and sat straighter on his horse. "I apologize for

the boorishness of my previous speech, dear lady," he said, and rather than sounding smarmy he sounded wearily sincere. "I've lived with this ... punishment for a very long time, and I like to think I've learned my lesson - under most circumstances. And when the rage isn't on me. Any advice you can give will be most gratefully accepted."

I moved my horse to the left of his, and as I faced him I murmured the words he had to memorize. One of the Inadni had called the words a mantra, but it was the words themselves that were important rather than what they were called. Even I didn't know what language the words came from, but they weren't that difficult to memorize. Once Sallain had them down with the right pronunciation I added the final instructions.

"First picture yourself the way you want to look, then pronounce the words in your mind," I said. "After you've practiced for a time, the effort will come without ... effort. But keep practicing, or the words could slip away from you."

"If this works I'll *never* let it slip away," Sallain vowed, painful and fearful hope in his eyes. "I've got to try it, to find out for certain... "

And as I backed my horse to return to the place beside Fearin, Sallain made the effort to do as he'd been taught. It took quite a few ticks, but suddenly the distortion disappeared and his features cleared. He wasn't able to tell by himself, of course, but the exclamations coming from all around forced his eyes open.

"Is it done?" he demanded, looking all around. "Have I actually - Does anyone have a mirror?"

Most people don't travel with mirrors, of course, but one of our guardsmen dug into one of the bags on the back of the coach and came up with a jeweled and gilded hand mirror. The man must have been one of those who'd packed up after the twin girls, and that's why he knew what was where. He brought the mirror to Sallain, who seemed to be bracing himself before taking the thing and looking into it.

"It *is* done," Sallain breathed, staring at himself in a way that became pure delight. "I'm not a monster any longer! This is incredible!"

He seemed to be ready to add even more delighted comments, but then he sobered and lowered the mirror.

"There aren't any words of thanks adequate for this gift, but I'm afraid it won't do," he said to Fearin, and his sadness looked real. "I'm required to demand a material gift for any ... intrusive favors I grant, and the gift has to be for someone other than myself. I didn't make that rule so, much as I'd like to, I can't break it."

"For a moment I had hope, but I wasn't counting on it," Fearin responded with a sigh. "The gift I have *is* material, and it isn't for you but for your sons. Does that qualify?"

"It would if it were something my sons could share equally," Sallain answered, his expression having turned wry. "Dorin and Korin don't like to take turns using something, and they tend to covet each other's possessions. If your gift will set them at each other's throats, I'd really rather not have it offered."

By then two of the men behind Sallain moved their horses up to bracket him, and the grins they showed were identical. There was no distortion in *their* faces and they looked very much like their handsome father, but they looked like each other even more. The two young men were twins, and that suddenly told me what gift Fearin was offering.

"Oh, you can't be serious," I protested to Fearin, turning my head to look at the High Master. "Even if these people were slaving monsters the offer would be cruel and unfair."

"Kiri's comment refers to the ... nature of my gift," Fearin admitted reluctantly to Sallain's questioning look, his glance at me more of a glare. "You could say that a certain amount of ... tolerance will be necessary if you accept what I offer, but aside from that... Suppose I show you what I mean."

Fearin turned and gestured to the guardsmen around the coach, and one of them went to the coach door and opened it. When an offered hand produced no results, the guardsman reached

in and pulled out one of the girls, then half climbed into the coach to get the other. Their squawking outrage was more than just loud; I had the distinct impression that some of the silent shadows that had been sliding through the dimness between the trees of the forest actually flinched before disappearing.

"Silence!" Fearin shouted at the highly indignant pair, using lung power to get the quiet he wanted before he turned back to Sallain. "King Sallain, allow me to present the princesses Liara and Piada, known familiarly to each other as Lia and Pia. They have no true place in the outer world as even their father would prefer that they weren't returned to his court. If, however, your sons the princes approve..."

Fearin let his words trail off as Dorin and Korin rode over to the girls and dismounted, their grins even wider now. The girls put their noses in the air and pretended that the two men weren't there, which brought the male twins to chuckling.

"It looks like you've actually found the ideal gift," Sallain said as he watched his sons, his own amusement clear. "Perfectly matched princesses, something I would have sworn wasn't possible. Exactly what favor were you after for this gift?"

"I need to bring my army through your valley," Fearin answered without hesitation. "Marching them through should take less than a day, and then we'll be out of your hair. You also have my word that none of them will try to interfere with your people in any way. If one or two of them *should* happen to try, their disposition will be yours."

"With that qualification, your request isn't unreasonable," Sallain said, relief now mixed into his amusement. "I'm delighted to be able to accept your gift and grant your favor, but you'd do well to warn the men of your army. If the disposition of any of them falls to me, they'll certainly wish they'd never been born."

"I'm certain they already know that, but I'll stress the point before we begin the march," Fearin promised, his own pleasure a bit less than Sallain's. "If you'll excuse me now I'll get them moving, and then I'll be back to visit while they move through your domain."

Fearin gestured to Garam, who in turn gestured to his special squad, and in no time they were all moving back the way we'd come. That left Ranander, Ijarin, and me, and the two men moved their horses over to mine.

"It's hard to believe that Fearin is using two little girls to get us safe passage," Ranander said softly with an accompanying sigh. "You know what I think of those girls, but to just give them away like porcelain dolls..."

"Fearin isn't any happier about doing it than we are to see it done," Ijarin surprised me by commenting. "That's why he kept to himself once we got here, I think, the way he hasn't done until now. The necessity shames him, something we can all understand."

"Don't include *me* in on that understanding," I said, this time *doing* the surprising. "Those girls really do have no place in the outside world, and I have the suspicion that if they were returned to their father their lives would soon be over. He'd never be able to marry them off to anyone he wanted to stay on friendly terms with, but here they *will* be married. And to real princes, who probably know they'll never again have a chance at women from the outside world."

"I hadn't thought of that," Ijarin said, suddenly brightening. "And if the servants around here don't understand them, the girls will have to have their new husbands translate for them. That should be a good enough reason for them to be moderately polite to the men. It looks like Fearin was feeling ashamed for no reason."

Ranander made a sound that could have indicated agreement, but for a change there were no words bubbling out to join the sound. In point of fact Ranander didn't look very happy, and the following silence let me do a little more thinking.

After a little while Sallain came over to talk to us, explaining that his sons had put the girls back into their coach in order to take them to his palace. Half of Sallain's escort had gone along with the coach and his sons, and I silently wished them all good luck. If the girls didn't wear out their welcome before the last of the army left the valley it would probably be nothing

but luck...

"I wonder if it would be possible to convince *you* to visit with us for a time," Sallain said, and I turned my head to find him staring at *me*. "There isn't much in the way of beauty in this valley, so your presence would be very welcome."

"If it's beauty you want, you're looking in the wrong place," I told him, having half expected the invitation. "All you can see is the outside of me; inside is something you really don't want to ever meet. Don't you know why I was able to speak to and understand your people?"

He stared at me in puzzlement for a moment, probably having forgotten about the language thing because he spoke *our* language, and then the truth dawned on him. He paled the least little bit, and I could almost see his lips forming the word *Shadowborn*...

"Yes, of course, you're perfectly right," Sallain said after a handful of heartbeats. "Please excuse me now, I need to speak to my men."

He turned and rode away, obviously trying not to look as if he were hurrying, and Ijarin made a sound of scorn.

"I like the way he thanked you for helping him," the barbarian murmured, clearly annoyed on my behalf. "The least he could have done was behave civilly."

"If you think *that* was bad, be glad we won't be here when the full truth hits him," I murmured back. "It occurred to me to wonder why I was allowed to help him if he's being punished for something, and a little thought brought me to the conclusion that my helping him must have made his punishment worse. Anyone want to guess how looking normal would be worse for him than looking the way he did earlier?"

"All right, I see it now," Ijarin grugged, all annoyance gone. "Until now Sallain was satisfied to stay in this valley because it was his hiding place. Now that he no longer *has* to hide, he'll want to go back out into the ordinary world. What will happen when he probably isn't allowed to leave?"

"I don't even want to think about it," I answered, and that was the complete truth. I'd been used by whichever god had placed Sallain here to begin with, and wasn't *that* a novel experience...

The first of the army wasn't long in reaching our position, the men moving more than just briskly. They trotted past our position in a gait they'd be able to keep up for quite a while, and their glance at us was filled with a good deal of relief. Fearin and Garam must have assured everyone that the rest of us were still in good health, but seeing the truth for themselves clearly made the men feel a good deal better.

Garam led the way on his horse, and Fearin came by in a little while to ride up and down the column. The various wagons were being pulled by more than the usual number of horses, which would hopefully make it unnecessary to stop and change the horses. Ijarin's people came by after a while and looked like they were going to join us, but he gestured to them and they reluctantly kept going. The faster we got everyone out of the valley the better off we would be. But fast isn't a word that can be used for moving an army through a distance that would take almost a full day to complete. The men and wagons moved as quickly as possible for the length of time they had to *keep* moving, but the actual time dragged by like a dying man in a desert trying to reach the water that would save his life. He might *want* to get up and run, but pulling himself along by his fingers was the best he could accomplish. And, as usual, waiting was more deadly and tiring than almost any kind of effort one might be forced to. Not to mention hunger- and thirst-making...

At least the trouble held off until the very last of the army was almost out of the valley. Fearin joined Ranander, Ijarin, and me as we brought up the tail end of the march, and we could see the rise in ground a small distance ahead that ought to signal the way out. Half way between that rise in ground and our own position there was a sudden flurry of activity, and Fearin headed for the flurry at once. I felt tempted to follow, but suddenly had the conviction that that was what I was expected to do.

I had no idea where the conviction came from, but it didn't seem wise to argue the point. For that reason I stayed where I was, and in a short while I was able to urge the last of the guardsmen to keep going. Fearin stood a few strides to the left of the column with four guardsmen, the four currently surrounded by beings who looked very much like the one I'd spoken to in that house. The beings looked much too innocent, Fearin looked frustrated, the guardsmen looked frightened, and some of Sallain's people, in armor and still mounted, looked smug. I murmured to Ranander and Ijarin to get the last of the men out of the valley and then rode over to see what the fuss was all about.

"... two stories that don't quite match," Fearin was saying with tightly-held anger as I rode up. "Your ... citizens insist that these men made lewd gestures in their direction, and therefore need to be punished. My men say they're the ones who were gestured toward, and they simply returned the effort. If your people started the trouble, you can't expect to punish *my* people for getting involved."

"Your people weren't supposed to get involved in anything at all," one of the armored men retorted, an ugly amusement behind his words. "Now that they did, you have to turn them over to *us*. After all, you can't say you weren't warned."

"That's not what we were warned against," I put in as Fearin seethed silently. "Our people weren't supposed to interfere with yours, and they haven't. If your people considered some gestures as interference they wouldn't have started the exchange, so you have nothing to complain about. Back off and let us take these men out of here."

"We don't take orders in our own valley, and certainly not from a female," the spokesman came back, his expression still ugly even without the amusement. "Those fools are ours to see to, and there's nothing you can do to change that."

"That's not quite true, but I don't have to bother with any of you," I said, showing my own version of an ugly smile. "If it's a trade you want, your lives for theirs, the man of Power next to me can take care of it. If our people are bound not to make trouble, so are you and yours. You're in the midst of breaking that agreement, so your lives are forfeit. Who wants to die first?"

"Don't be ridiculous," the spokesman said with a nervous laugh after glancing at Fearin, while the beings who had been gathered around began to slide toward the dimness among the trees.

"He won't use his Power here, not when he can't kill everyone in the valley. It would start a war, and that's the last thing you people want."

"But we've already been through one war, and now we're headed for a second," Fearin said at once, his dark-blue gaze locked to the spokesman. "Besides, how bad a war can it be if your people die if they try to follow me? You may be under the impression that I can't use Power here in the valley, but that's a mistaken impression. Would you like me to prove it?"

When Fearin raised his right hand the men mounted behind the spokesman began to back their horses, which produced a snarl in the spokesman even while his expression said he wanted to do the same.

"All right, all right, you win," the spokesman snarled, clearly hating to say the words. "We *were* told that you couldn't use your Power, but - Just get those fools out of here and don't come back."

Fearin nodded at the four guardsmen, who turned instantly and began to run after the last of the men we could see climbing the rise. When Fearin mounted again we followed along behind the four, eventually taking our turn at reaching and climbing the rise. The silence was lovely until we left the twilight behind, coming out into early afternoon that had actual sunlight. We were the last to leave the valley, and once we were a dozen strides away Fearin finally turned in my direction.

"Do you have any idea how lucky you were?" he demanded in a voice that actually shook. "Or maybe I should say how lucky *we* were. In the future do you think you might check with me before you threaten people with my Power?"

"If you're saying you couldn't use your Power in the valley after all it doesn't matter," I responded without looking at him. "If they hadn't believed me I would have had to let the beast loose, so the bluff was worth trying. Letting them get away with cheating wasn't something I would have been able to do."

I heard him muttering under his breath rather than speaking out loud, but I could guess what he was muttering about. He also hadn't been able to let innocents be taken because those valley people made cheating a way of life, which is why he'd been arguing with Sallain's guardsmen. He may have been overly concerned with diplomacy, but even someone like that would find it hard to hand over four innocent men without doing what he could to stop the farce. I'd realized that if he hadn't already used magic it was probably because he couldn't, but happily the valley people hadn't thought the thing through quite that thoroughly.

The army had kept going for a good distance before the first guardsmen stopped to make camp, and Garam probably hadn't had to urge them to go that distance. The meadow beyond the valley was wide and welcoming with a thick stand of trees beyond *its* expanse, and by the time we reached the middle of the camp our tents were already in evidence. The rest of the inner circle waited for us near those tents, along with a couple of guardsmen assigned to see to our horses. Fearin and I dismounted and handed over our mounts, and once the guardsmen were gone Fearin turned to the others.

"We're all really drained after that trek through the valley, so even though there's a lot of day left we'll hold our next meeting tomorrow morning at breakfast in my tent." Fearin looked around as he spoke, probably seeing the relief in everyone's face just as I did. "The men are even more tired than we are, but I've set a spell to make sure that those men on sentry duty stay awake and alert. You all have food and drink in your tents, so have a good meal and a good sleep and I'll see you in the morning."

As soon as the group began to break up I started for my tent, but I managed no more than a single step before Fearin's hand was on my arm.

"Not you," he said, annoyance mixed with weariness in his tone. "You and I have a discussion waiting for us, and it's waited too long already."

"I think I've said more than once that we have nothing to discuss," I responded without turning my head to look at him. "And even beyond that, do you really want to start an argument with me when we're both so tired? There isn't a chance that you'll get what you think you want, High Master, so show everyone how wise you are and let go of my arm."

My mentioning "everyone" wasn't a turn of phrase; the rest of our circle had stopped leaving, and now they stood and stared at Fearin and me with disturbed expressions. It actually took half a dozen heartbeats before Fearin's hand left my arm, but when it happened I didn't comment any further. I simply went to my tent, waited for my own food and drink to appear, then had my meal while I thought some more. The conclusions I came to were very disturbing and left behind a single, burning question: what was I supposed to do about the situation? Since *that* answer refused to come, I laced closed my tent flap, got out of my clothes, then let sleep take me. I'd have to see what happened tomorrow, and then maybe an answer to the most important question would come... How long was I likely to live if I tried to do *anything*...?

Chapter 20

I was dressed and out of my tent before dawn the next morning, this time wearing the new clothes Fearin had provided. The new day started out overcast and heavy with the promise of coming rain, the sun god's splendor hidden behind a dark gray ceiling like the top of an angry tent. Not a breath of a breeze stirred the heat and moisture-laden air, and I couldn't help taking this weather as a bad sign. More than one storm was waiting to break, and when it did...

Getting back to the area of our tents showed me people on their way to Fearin's meeting, so I followed

them to the dark blue tent. I got a number of worried looks that I ignored, going instead to the food table and beginning to help myself. Ranander was, of course, the last to arrive, most likely having stopped on the way to see if I were still in my tent. He sent me a light and friendly smile where I sat with my food, and then went to the table to get his own plate. Fearin sat to one side, paying attention to no one, apparently distracted by his thoughts. No one saw fit to interrupt his thinking, so the meal passed in relative peace and quiet. Once most of us were finished, though, Fearin brought his attention back to his guests.

"I think most of you know by now that we're less than two days away from our ultimate destination," he said, his words slower than usual and on the heavy side. "Prince Garam, you and your special squad will enter the city first, primarily to escort Kiri. She'll help you locate the cardinal points your men will need to be stationed at, and you'll help *her* to find the places she'll be exercising her ... talents."

"Which talents are you talking about?" Garam asked after nodding, nothing but curiosity in his voice. "If she's going to be talking to rats again - "

"What she's going to be doing is distracting people just before we attack," Fearin said, interrupting what would probably have been nonsense. "She has the ability to ... make things uglier or more beautiful as she sees fit, and she'll be doing both. Men will be clawing down walls with their bare hands to get at the object of their most intense desires, and other men will be screaming and fighting to get away from their greatest terrors. If all those men are city guardsmen, we may not even have much to do in the way of fighting once we're inside the city's walls."

There was a time of silence while everyone stared at me, Garam with his brows high, Talasin with a smile, Lokkel with a satisfied expression, Ijarin with nothing of his feelings showing, and Ranander with a grin. Fearin still hadn't looked at me directly and I was fairly sure I knew why, but that wasn't the point needing to be made first.

"You've never mentioned the name of the city that's supposed to be our ultimate aim," I commented, watching Fearin carefully. "Since we're almost there, no one should mind if you share that information now."

"The city we'll be taking for our Guardian is called Stophen-Zur," Fearin said after a very brief hesitation.

"It's the city that was stolen from him, and - "

"No," I interrupted, having anticipated getting that particular answer. "That *can't* be the city he lost to an enemy. I visited that city before I went on to Faerza and fell slave, and there was a large, well-attended temple to him that was thriving. But the main point is that his wasn't the only temple doing well, so the whole city *couldn't* have been his."

Exclamations of surprise and shock sounded from the others, and Fearin finally looked at me with a frown.

"You have to be mistaken," Fearin said, disturbance in his dark blue eyes. "You heard our Guardian for yourself, so there's nothing to argue about. You and Garam and his men will leave here today at - "

"No, I won't," I said again, this time bringing anger and worry to the expression in his eyes. "There was an excuse to reduce Faerza because of the slaves they kept and the way they treated people, but Stophen-Zur has a law against slavery and they even help out people down on their luck. The city doesn't deserve to be destroyed because of a whim, so I flatly won't do it."

"Even if the reason for the attack *is* a whim, you seem to forget whose whim it has to be," Fearin pointed out at once, which silenced the others again. "Since you don't want to make the mistake of offending the one in whose cause we move, you'll just - "

"You don't seem to understand," I interrupted again, carefully making sure not to think about what I said. "I've had enough of this farce so I won't waste any more time on it. If that city is attacked, I won't be part of the effort."

Lokkel was open-mouthed with shock, Talasin had covered his eyes with both hands, Garam was trying to order me to keep quiet and do as I was told, and Fearin seemed to be trying to find what to say.

Ijarin, who sat to my right, voiced a sigh, and then his hand was on my arm.

"Kiri, this isn't something you can afford to be stubborn about," he said, his voice filled with weariness.

"The first time you ignored the wishes of a god you paid for the act with your freedom. Do you really

want to find out the hard way what you'll lose *this* time?"

"Listen to him, Kiri," Ranander urged from my left, his hand on my other arm. "I *know* you won't have any trouble doing what our Guardian expects of you, so I don't understand why you're hesitating. Maybe if we all told you how wonderful we think you are you'd feel better about - "

"Are all of you deaf?" I asked, ignoring the words of agreement coming from the others. "I'm not being stubborn and I'm not hesitating, I'm flatly and absolutely refusing. This trained bear has done her last dance no matter *how* many times the music is played again, and that decision is final. If you think that taking Stophen-Zur is so important, go ahead and do it without me."

"We should be able to do just that," Garam said to Fearin, speaking into the strained silence. "Once I get a look at the city I can devise a strategy that will do the job even without the girl's help. They don't know we're here, so there's no reason to hold back a quick, decisive thrust."

"You've absolutely right," Fearin said, clearly pulling himself out of the strange mood that had held him.

"Our army won't have trouble taking the city, and then - "

"No, we can't!" Ranander protested, cutting off Fearin's words without hesitation. "We *have* to have Kiri doing her part, otherwise our Guardian will be furious!"

"How sure are you about that, Ranander?" Talasin asked without the hope that Fearin had started to show in his expression. "Is that just your opinion, or do you *know* it?"

"I'll bet he *knows* it," I said before Ranander could respond. "Would anyone like to bet gold *against* the point?"

"Why are you acting so strangely this morning?" Fearin demanded before anyone could take my bet.

"What's gotten into you?"

"Why don't you tell us first what's gotten into *you*," I countered immediately. "You've been distracted since we first got here, not even pestering me the way you usually do. If you're not in the mood to share with us, maybe I can guess the answer."

I'd added that last because Fearin's jaw had tightened with an expression that usually meant he was about to snarl something about intrusion.

"If you think you can guess, why don't you just go ahead and try," Fearin returned, his tone eloquent with the knowledge that I'd be wasting my time. "If you *can't* guess, don't bother asking the same question again because you still won't be getting an answer."

"Then my guess had better be good," I responded, smiling into his anger. "What I think put you into so distracted a mood is the visit you had before we got here. You were told not to keep trying to speak to me, and probably also not to tell me about the visit. You were ordered to leave me completely alone, and you've been trying to figure out why the god would say something like that."

"How in the name of chaos could you possibly know that?" Fearin demanded while almost everyone else made sounds of shocked surprise. "I know you weren't anywhere near my tent during the visit, so how did you find out?"

"I didn't *find* out, I *figured* it out," I answered sourly. "You were pressing too hard and in a way that might bring out the truth, so you had to be stopped. In a way I was almost expecting something like this."

"How could you be expecting something the rest of us didn't even know about?" Ijarin demanded, looking almost as disturbed as Fearin. "And what do you mean, the High Master was pressing too hard? What truth was involved and what did he have to be stopped from doing?"

"Fearin had to stop trying to prove he was innocent of the accusation leveled against him," I explained, finding very little enjoyment in the close attention everyone was paying me. "He was supposed to turn away from me in disgust when I gave him such a hard time, not keep trying to deny his guilt. It was finally necessary to actually warn him off, but that warning off won't do the good it was supposed to. I'm still not going to be available."

"Look, I have no idea what you're talking about, and I doubt that *you* understand any better," Fearin said, more than a little weariness in his voice. "There's only one question to be answered right now, and here it is: Do you really want our Guardian to find out what you've been saying? Since the answer has to be no - "

"But Diin-tha already knows what I said," I interrupted to point out. "He's been in the middle of all this

right from the beginning - hasn't he, Ranander?"

I'd turned to look at the man on my left, almost everyone else adding silent stares of shock, but Ranander only looked confused.

"Are you asking me to *know* if our Guardian has been somewhere around, Kiri?" he tried, his air of innocence as real as ever. "I thought you understood that my ability doesn't work where strong Power or a god is concerned. And what you said doesn't make any sense anyway. A god has better things to do than hang around with a bunch of mortals and ... watch... Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I was just remembering what you said when we first met," I told him, still examining the man closely.

"You said you tried to be friends with everyone, but some people were less than kind to you. That was supposed to make me feel sorry for you, especially when Garam got personal and nasty almost every time he saw you. But you *knew* Garam would act like that because of his nature and you were even counting on it."

"Counting on it for what?" Ranander put, still projecting heavy confusion. "Kiri, I don't understand - "

"You were expecting my feelings about Garam to get you into my bed just to spite the man," I said, letting the impatience I felt color my tone. "I was supposed to believe that you were the only one Garam treated like that, and not realize that he behaved the same toward all people he considered non-fighters. You'd already told me how well the camp women liked you, so you expected everything to go according to your plan. After all, as ugly as I looked I would be rejected by all the rest of the men around me and that would leave *you* as the only one I could turn to. But I *wasn't* rejected by the other men around me, not even when they found out what I was."

"Does anyone understand what she's talking about?" he asked of the others in our circle, the plea almost pitiful. "All I did was offer friendship and acceptance - "

"Yes, all you did was offer two of the things you knew I'd come to believe I'd never get from *anyone*," I said, bringing his attention back to me when no one else answered his question. "You never noticed that Fearin was ready to offer those things right from the beginning, and then Garam reversed his position completely after the attack. To make matters even worse, your specially chosen leader of this army snuck around while I was supposed to be brooding about how alone I was and Earned his way into my bed first. That must have come as something of a shock after the way Fearin ignored women on a regular basis. You must have considered *him* even less competition than anyone else."

"Kiri, are you feeling all right?" Ranander asked in a plaintive, worried way, his tone gentle. "You seem to be imagining all kinds of plots that I'm responsible for, but it isn't true. If you stop and think for a moment or two - "

"I've already done the necessary thinking, and I've even consulted my memory," I returned. "You made sure to mention that 'some people' were less than kind to you, but you never responded in any way to Garam's baiting. If you were what you claim to be you would have been bothered in *some* way by what was said; you wouldn't have simply dismissed it all as completely unimportant. And then there's that little tidbit you told me about Fearin."

"You don't mean that *he's* the one who caused all that ruckus!" Fearin put in with a growl. "What did you say to her, Ranander, and why would you do something like that? I've never been anything but courteous to you - "

"Really, Fearin, I'd never say anything bad about *you*," Ranander protested, just the right amount of nervousness and innocence added. "I don't know what's wrong with Kiri, but she seems to be confused about a lot of things."

"I'd say unclear rather than confused," Ijarin offered in a thoughtful way. "Kiri, you mentioned that our Guardian already knew what you said. Were you suggesting that Ranander is ... spying for our Guardian? Is that why he felt safe when he tried to get between you and Master Fearin?"

"No, that's not what I'm suggesting," I said to Ijarin while the others exclaimed over the contention.

"Ranander is definitely not spying for Diin-tha."

"Then what *do* you mean?" Fearin asked, his voice riding over those of the others asking the same question. "And what has all this back and forth got to do with our attack against Stophen-Zur?"

"It took me a while to accept this part of the theory, but I was left with no other explanation," I said,

deciding it was time to get to the most outrageous part of the situation. "If you'll remember, I had to guard those twin girls as a Shadowborn in Faerza. Then, while we were in the palace, we were attacked by assassins posing as Kenoss. At that time I fought as a Kenoss, with a sword rather than as the beast, but I had to let the beast out a little in order to search for the assassins. Then came that nonsense about me being 'rewarded,' which brought about that confrontation with the regimental champions of the army. Again I fought as a Kenoss, but at the end I had to let the beast out part way to end things completely. And in case you were wondering, that beauty-ugliness thing is part of the Learning, which means the beast would have come to the surface yet again in Stophen-Zur. Doesn't all that tell you what's happening?"

I'd put the question to everyone but Ranander, but none of them cared to venture a guess. Their expressions suggested that they didn't *want* to understand, and for that I couldn't blame them.

"You were probably hoping I'd have to use the beast in the Valley of Twilight when those people tried to steal some of the men from our army," I said to Ranander when it was clear no one else would be saying anything. "But by that time I was already suspicious, so I tried a bluff instead and it worked. That meant you *had* to have us continue on to Stophen-Zur, after which we probably would have been told that that was the wrong city after all. Just how long did you think you could go on with this?"

"That's the second time you've suggested that Ranander is behind our efforts," Fearin said slowly when Ranander just sat there and looked at me with a sad expression. "Are you saying that this man found a way to make us *believe* that we were moving in Diin-tha's cause when we really weren't? I can't believe that that's true."

"You don't *have* to believe it because it *isn't* true," I said, noticing the hint of amusement in Ranander's dark eyes. "The god Diin-tha *is* behind everything, including the attack in Faerza and the insanity of the army. For some reason Diin-tha is . . . attracted to the beast in me, and has been trying every which way to bring the beast out into the open. Isn't that right, Diin-tha?"

There were choking sounds from some of the others as I looked directly at *Talasin*, which banished the amusement in Ranander's eyes. "Prince Talasin" looked back at me without expression, the same way Ranander now looked at me. Those expressions actually made me smile.

"Was I really supposed to blame it all on 'Ranander'?" I asked Talasin. "When everyone knows that gods can be in two or three places all at the same time? I'll bet your next move would have been a plan to 'avoid' Ranander's ardor by offering yourself because Fearin wasn't available. You knew there was no way I'd ever lie with Ranander, so I'd probably take you up on your offer rather than hurt the poor man. And in case I actually did get suspicious of Ranander, *you* would still be there to take over. How do my guesses sound *now*?"

"One of them was completely wrong," Talasin said with a very faint smile. "It isn't just your beast that I'm attracted to, it's all of you. You're bright and beautiful and deadly, and I felt the pull of you from the moment you first came to my notice. I knew I had to have you, but I did want to see you in action first. Now that the play time is over, we can go to my tent."

"No," I said as he began to get to his feet. "Ranander" had started to fade when Talasin began to speak, and now there was nothing left of the other "man." "I'm not going *anywhere* with you, and I certainly won't share your bed."

"But you have to," Talasin said, sounding like the most reasonable being in the world as he settled back onto the golden floor weaving. "I'm a god, and you can't deny a god's desires. Tell her, Fearin."

"How can I tell her anything when *I* don't understand what's happening?" Fearin said, almost a plaintive note in his voice. "You're actually Diin-tha? But what about Ranander? Why would there be two of you?"

"There *weren't* two of him," I supplied when Talasin simply smiled. "Both of them were him, which let him keep his thumb on as much as possible. 'Ranander' wasn't lying when he said he couldn't *know* things when Power was involved or when I was. Diin-tha had to be present if he wanted to keep track of what went on. He made his initial move against me when I first got to your camp, right after he 'saved my life.' He expected me to be grateful enough to do anything he wanted me to, and when things didn't work out that way he used 'Ranander' to set up the next plan. After that things started to go even more wrong, but if nothing else he's adaptable."

"Don't forget determined," Talasin said, that familiar grin showing. "You know I'm going to get my way eventually, so why don't you just make things easier for both of us and stop being stubborn? I'd really hate to have to force you to do as I want... "

"But you *can't* force me, can you?" I said while the others paled or looked really uncomfortable. "I don't know *why* you can't use force, but if you could it would already have been done. Go ahead and tell me I'm wrong."

"This is one side of you I *don't* admire," Talasin said, no longer grinning. "I'm not used to having mortals tell me what I can and cannot do. Come with me right now or suffer the consequences."

"Kiri, don't argue with him," Fearin said before I could respond, his voice tinged with worry. "Just go ahead and get it over with."

"No, wait, she's right," Ijarin said, and *he* seemed more distracted than worried. "For some reason Diin-tha *can't* force her to do as he wants, he needs her free agreement."

"Which he isn't going to get," I stated, still staring at the being I'd known as Talasin. "Not now and not ever."

"But why?" Talasin demanded, annoyance and exasperation clear in his voice. "How can you sit there and refuse the attentions of a god?"

"I don't like people - or beings - who care about nothing but their own desires," I answered, having wondered if he would ever get around to asking. "Mortals are totally unimportant to you even though you mimic them fairly well, and you would have let our army destroy the lives of everyone in Stophen-Zur just to let you watch me perform. You also don't care how much *I* suffer, just as long as you have what satisfies *you*. I don't expect you to understand what I'm talking about, but that doesn't matter. As long as I have the right to refuse you I'm going to exercise that right."

"That speech of yours tells me that you do care about people," Talasin said, now looking satisfied again.

"With that in mind, why don't I say that if you try to refuse me again I'll destroy every mortal within five hundred strides? That should help you change your mind."

"But that would be forcing me, and you aren't allowed to use force," I pointed out, hoping I was right.

"Why don't you change *your* mind instead, and find someone who will recognize the great honor you're trying to bestow on her? There have to be millions of women like that around, so just pick one."

"I *can't* just pick one, and wouldn't even if I could," Talasin - Diin-tha - answered in a growl. "You're the one I want, and you're the one I mean to have. Tell me what I *can* do to make you amenable."

"Sure," I answered, keeping the disgust from entering my tone. "You can learn to act like a responsible mortal, and maybe then you'll have a chance. I don't guarantee it, but the possibility exists."

"Very well, then that's what I'll do," he answered, his tone saying the matter was settled. "You'll teach me what you think I need to learn, and once I've done perfectly you'll change your mind. I've occasionally wondered what it would be like to live completely like a mortal, and now I'll find out. Are we going to start now or would you prefer to rest here for a time? And when we do leave, where will we be going?"

"You know, just because I was sarcastic doesn't mean you also have to be," I pointed out sourly. "And that's something else you have to learn, not to take sarcasm quite that far."

"I wasn't being sarcastic, I was agreeing to your terms," Diin-tha said with a gleam in his currently human-looking eyes. "I asked you to state terms, you did that, and I agreed. So when do we leave and where are we going?"

"You can't seriously think I'm going *anywhere* dragging an army behind me?" I said with a rude sound, letting him see that I *was* bothered so he'd stop the nonsense. "But dragging an army would be better than dragging a god, so -"

"Oh, the army won't be coming with us," Diin-tha interrupted, now back to being amused. "Prince Garam was promised the use of the army once I was done with it, and I'm now done with it. Prince Garam's father was murdered by a cousin and his throne stolen, and now Prince Garam means to take the throne back. He thought the army would also have to be used on 'Prince Talasin's' behalf, but it's no longer necessary to keep up that pretense."

"The army is mine now?" Garam said, a bit of color coming back to his face as he straightened where he sat. "That *is* what I wanted and needed, so you have my most sincere thanks, Lord."

"You've earned the army, Prince Garam, so there's no need to thank me," Diin-tha said, a hint of dryness to the words. "But that army is only what you want, not also what you need. To fulfill the second part of my promise, I'll give you this thought: consider what you'll do with the army once your father's throne is back in your possession."

Garam frowned as he stared at Diin-tha-in-Talasin-clothing, obviously trying to understand what he'd been told. He hadn't yet gotten to the point of seeing that you might need an army to regain a stolen throne, but what do you do with the army once you have the throne back? If you're into conquest the answer is easy, but if all you want to do is sit peacefully on your throne you have a problem. Idle armies are expensive to maintain, and if the members of that army don't have enough to distract them many of them tend to turn to making trouble...

"And now that the time has come to hand out rewards, I might as well finish that chore," Diin-tha said, turning from Garam to look at Lokkel. "Your greatest desire, Healing Master, was to have a copy of the lost scroll containing the ancient Master Dolfrin's healing spells, so here it is."

Diin-tha took a scroll out from under his tunic, a scroll it hadn't been possible to see earlier. Lokkel took the thing with great reverence, and there were tears in his eyes when he looked at Diin-tha again.

"Thank you, Lord, my most devout thanks to you for putting this scroll into my hands," Lokkel said as he tried to smile. "It's been my life's ambition to find this, and now I have it."

"Yes, Healing Master, you do have it," Diin-tha agreed, that gleam back in his eyes again. "What you also need, however, is a warning. You don't *quite* wield enough Power to actually use any of those spells, so you have a decision to make. You can remain as you are and never use any of the spells in the scroll, or you can try to channel more of the Power. The decision, of course, is yours."

Lokkel wasn't smiling any longer, and his face had paled quite a lot. It seemed fairly obvious that Lokkel was afraid to try channeling more of the Power, but if he didn't try he'd never get to use the spells on the scroll. I was tempted to feel sorry for the man, but Diin-tha had turned his attention to Fearin.

"As for you, High Master, your most ardent wish is to find a place where you might live in peace,"

Diin-tha said in a way that was more oily than smooth. "That place can be yours if you like, and right now."

"I think I ought to ask first where that place is," Fearin said without expression, his full attention on the god. "Just to be certain it's what I had in mind, you understand."

"Of course," Diin-tha said, his amusement coming out in a grin. "The place I found is a beautiful valley, full of animal, bird, and insect life. It's lovely enough even to charm a god."

"But no human life," Fearin said, having picked up on the omission the same way I had. "Why doesn't it have human life?"

"Possibly because no human has found it yet," Diin-tha hedged, then he laughed. "Or possibly because it isn't accessible to the outside world. I thought I might get that small point past you, High Master, but apparently I couldn't. Would you now like to hear what you *need* to know?"

"Certainly, Lord," Fearin agreed, and I could see the muscles of his body tighten even though he still showed nothing of an expression.

"Of course you would," Diin-tha said, his human eyes gleaming. "The situation is rather interesting in that your greatest rival, also a High Master, is determined to find and face you to prove that he wields more of the Power than you do. Where Power is concerned there really is no way to determine beforehand what the outcome of such a meeting will be, so you could well be destroyed. Unless you ask me to send you to that valley I mentioned..."

Diin-tha let his words trail off, but studying Fearin's face gave him no more information than it gave any of the rest of us. Fearin was clearly considering his options, then he smiled very faintly.

"I appreciate the information, Lord, but I'll need some time to think about it," Fearin said at last. "When I make my decision I'll be certain to let you know."

Diin-tha's expression said he didn't much care for that answer, but there seemed to be nothing he wanted to do to change it - for the moment. Instead he turned to Ijarin, and his lips curled into something of a smile.

"It was interesting to have you among us, Prince Ijarin, but beyond a pleasant thank-you for your

company I have nothing for you," Diin-tha said. "You were, you'll recall, promised nothing for your participation in our efforts."

"That's all right, Lord Diin-tha, I don't mind," Ijarin answered with amusement of his own. "My wants and needs are seen to extremely well by the Lady I serve. It was my pleasure to participate in your effort."

"You're giving him nothing even though you used him?" I put in before I could decide it might be wiser to keep the words to myself. "You didn't want his assistance with your 'efforts,' you wanted him as someone Fearin would consider a rival if the High Master ever did find any interest in me. That's why you gave Fearin the sudden feeling that Ijarin ought to join us. When Fearin and Ijarin started to argue over me, 'Talasin' would have been able to step in as someone who was above such childish, demeaning behavior. You don't believe in rewarding your stalking horses?"

"It's all right, Kiri," Ijarin said while Diin-tha glared at me. "Lord Diin-tha isn't permitted to give me anything, not while I'm dedicated to a goddess. And since I'll be joining you and the Lord on your journey, we don't want to generate any hard feelings that will take time to overcome."

"I'm *not* going anywhere with a god," I stated to Ijarin, then turned my head to look directly at Diin-tha.

"I have matters of my own to take care of, things that are more important than tickling the fancy of a being I have nothing in common with. The idea of traveling with you is a farce, and I don't enjoy farces."

"But what you do enjoy is the idea of being free of the Learning," Diin-tha said, looking at me with eyes that gave the impression of being dark rather than light. "What you *want* is to no longer be a Shadowborn, and what you *need* is to control what you call the beast until you accomplish that end. If you make no effort to back out of the pact we made, I'll see to it that you at least have what you need."

"I can help her with that need," Fearin said suddenly, startling everyone including me. "The Power has let me help her before, so there's no reason to believe it won't again. After all, since I'm going where she goes, there's no reason not to give what help I can."

I felt a definite urge to close my eyes, but this time I knew it would not be possible to hide in the dark until all my problems gave up and walked away. Diin-tha had hinted that he could give me what I wanted, freedom from the Learning, but apparently I wasn't as innocent as some people believed. If the god could have freed me from being a Shadowborn he would have said so straight out, since that would have gotten me into his bed instantly.

But Diin-tha *hadn't* made the promise, which must mean that he wasn't able to keep it. Regaining full freedom would be mine to do, but it would help enormously to have control over the beast while I searched for the path to complete freedom and *that* Diin-tha *had* promised. But I'd have to travel with him, "teaching" him what it was to be a mortal. As if he was likely to actually learn the lesson...

And Fearin would be coming with us. Diin-tha had nearly snarled at Fearin's offer to me, but he hadn't told the High Master he *couldn't* come along. It was perfectly clear that Fearin hadn't given up on his determination to bring us close again, but I couldn't let that happen. If Diin-tha got even more ... jealous, for want of a better term, something horrible could certainly be made to happen to Fearin. And I didn't *want* anything to happen to the man, even though I also didn't want to go back to the relationship we'd had. What I did want from or with the man wasn't clear, mostly because I hadn't been able to bring myself to think about it. And still didn't want to think about it...

And then there was Ijarin, who'd announced that he was also going to be joining us. What *he* wanted was even less clear than Diin-tha's motives, but at least he'd stopped mentioning that prophecy he'd bothered me about right at the beginning. I still didn't want to know about anything a prophecy said, even though it could well be relevant to what was now going on.

The one thing I *had* to do was find a way out of the trap of being Shadowborn. And I could almost see Bellid rolling on the floor and weeping tears as he laughed, picturing me doing that with a god, a High Master, and a barbarian prince with a secret trotting along behind me. Did one have to be a prophet to know that they would be more hindrance than help in the effort? Not in *this* lifetime...

The End