

Sword Singer - Sword Dancer 02

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Sword Singer

Book 2 of the Sword Dancer series.

By Jennifer Roberson

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Table of Contents

One, Two, Three, Four, Five, Six, Seven, Eight, Nine, Ten, Eleven, Twelve,
Thirteen, Fourteen, Fifteen, Sixteen, Seventeen, Eighteen, Nineteen, Twenty,
Twenty-one, Twenty-two, Twenty-three, Twenty-four, Twenty-five, Twenty-six,
Twenty-seven, Twenty-eight, Twenty-nine, Thirty, Thirty-one, Thirty-two,
Thirty-three, Thirty-four, Thirty-five, Thirty-six, Thirty-seven, Thirty-eight,
Thirty-nine, Forty, Forty-one, Forty-two, Forty-three, Forty-four

One

"Flea-bitten... jug-headed... lop-eared--" I sucked in a deeper breath,
"--thrice-cursed son of a Sahet goat!"

Or similar sentiments. Trouble was, I was mostly incoherent, being somewhere on
the delicate edge of discomfort and disaster.

He didn't answer. At least, not verbally. Physically, yes, and fervently; he
humped and hopped and squealed, then buried his nose in the sand. Since he
simultaneously elevated eloquent hindquarters with a powerful precision, I
didn't stand much of a chance.

My saddle does not, thank valhail, have much of a pommel on it, being little
more than a hummock of rigid leather shaped to fit the stud's back and my rump.
I'd bought it thinking mostly of comfort for the long, hot hours spent crossing
the Punja on one job or another. But now I blessed myself for picking it; a man
in imminent danger of taking a nosedive off a horse--headfirst, belly-down,

scraping over the shoulders and neck--doesn't much want to leave the best part of himself hung up on the front of a saddle while the rest of him sprawls in the sand.

Of course, I did have other worries. Like where my sword might end up. Even the most active sword-dancer doesn't generally entertain his opponent upside down in the circle; this meant there existed the possibility my borrowed sword might end up out of its sheath and in something else entirely, possibly even me.

Or--(just give me half a chance)--in the stud himself.

Face-first, I slid over the sloping front of my saddle (sucking up belly and everything else I could) and proceeded to dangle, however briefly, in the vicinity of his head.

To which the stud took an immediate dislike, not being an animal who much cares to have a large, cursing man shrouding his head like a glop of half-cooked egg.

The hindquarters came back down. It was the head's turn to elevate itself.

Because I knew what was likely to happen if I didn't take immediate action, I wrapped arms and legs around whatever equine parts I could grab, and hugged.

Hard.

I'm big. I'm strong. It might have worked.

Unfortunately, the stud had the benefit of panic.

A horse's head is harder than a man's belly. A horse is stronger than a man. But I discovered just how hard and how strong as he tossed me aside like a wad of soiled silk.

--airborn--

Ah, hoolies.

I landed mostly on a tucked right shoulder, but also on the side of my face and

the business end of my sword, sheathed and slung diagonally across my back in harness. Which meant that while it didn't dig too deeply into the sand, the blade did provide just enough leverage, as I rolled purposefully toward my shoulder blades, to tip me back over onto face and belly.

I sucked up enough sand to seed a new desert and proceeded to cough up my lungs all over the border between my land, the South, and Del's, the North.

Del. Some help she was. While I hacked and gagged and retched and discovered I had a bitten, bloody lip, she dismounted (in the normal fashion) and went off to fetch back the stud, who was wandering in a northwesterly direction for no discernible reason.

"--flea-bitten--" I spat out sand. "--jug-headed--" More sand. "--lop-eared--"

Blood, this time. I touched my lip with a tentative finger, felt the sting of salt and sand in the wound. "--thrice-cursed son of a Salset goat!"

I sat up. Scowled horrifically at Del as she brought back the stud. Her expression was bland, noncommittal; innocence personified. (She is very good at that.) Certainly she appeared neither amused nor particularly concerned or sympathetic. But a closer look at guileless blue eyes told me she only bided her time.

I tongued my lip. "Ought to leave him staked out for the cumfa." I had to pick my way with words gingerly around the swelling lip, but the intent was clear enough.

"Long ride on a single horse." So bland. So infuriatingly casual.

I glared. Del began examining the stud for injury.

"He's fine." I paused. "He's fine."

"Just checking."

I glared at her some more, absently admiring the clean lines of her face, so

intent on the stud's condition. Couldn't see much more of her, as she was swathed in a white silk burnous that pretty well hid arms and legs and all of her womanly curves, spectacular as they were. In the South, that's the point of a burnous on a woman: to hide the lady from masculine eyes that might otherwise become inflamed with lust at the sight of a shapely ankle.

Trouble was, the custom caused difficulties, rather than avoiding them; a shapely ankle, promising other related anatomical niceties, becomes little more than an invitation to fantasize about the rest of the woman.

Of course with Del, it took a lot less than an ankle. One glance out of those blue, blue eyes, and I was... well...

Ah, hoolies. Me and every other male.

Deftly, gently, she ran hands down forelegs, briefly examined tendons, led him forward a few steps to observe his action, then proceeded to strip off the saddle, pouches and blankets to look at his back. He was wet where the gear had been, but that was to be expected.

"He does this," I told her. "You know that. You've seen him do it before."

She pursed lips, raised pale brows. "Bit more violent this time."

"So am I." I got up, winced, rolled my head from side to side. "Del--"

"The stud's all right." She turned. "How are you, Tiger?"

Now she asks. "Fine." Flexed wrists, fingers, wriggled shoulders up and down.

Then I unsheathed the sword to make sure all was well with my weapon, as any sword-dancer will do, and as often as necessary.

Hoolies. This thrice-cursed Northern butcher's blade.

It is not mine. Not really, although I use it when I have to. It is borrowed, taken from a dead man who had no further use for it. I hated him, dead as he

was; hated it, although the latter emotion was more than a little silly. But looking at the sword, touching it, wearing it, using it in my profession, reminded me time and again that my own shodo-blessed, blued-steel blade was dead as the man I'd killed in the circle beneath the moon.

Singlestroke.

Well, no sense crying when the aqivi's been spilled.

But I hated the thing. No sense, either, in denying it. Or in denying it frightened me in some weird, indefinable way.

The sword was Northern. Not Southron, as Singlestroke had been; as I am. Northern-forged, Northern-blooded; --a jivatma, whatDel called a blooding-blade, because the man who had made it his own had sought out a respected enemy in order to quench the blade, to blood it, in some unknown Northern ritual. Here in the South, it's different.

Sunlight ran down the blade. Alien runes worked into equally alien metal took life in the light and writhed, though it was only an illusion... or so I've always maintained. For me, there is no magic; I am not Theron, who quenched the blade, and I don't know its name or the key to bring the sword to life.

But he had, in the circle before I killed him. He had, and I'd seen all the brilliant lights of whatDel called the palette of the gods: purples, violets, magentas, all lurid luminescence. Each sword had a soul (for lack of a better word) as well as a name, and that soul marked its passing in a glowing tracery of light, a delicate lattice of visible color. Generally only when keyed, but a little of it showed in the blade even when quiescent:Del 's was salmon-silver, Theron's palest purple.

Or had been, before he died.

It had been a magnificent dance, while it lasted; a test of skill, strength,

training and, on one side, treachery. How we danced, did Theron and I, in the name of a Northern woman.

A sword-dancer called Delilah.

Mouth grim-set, I sighed, expelling the air through my nose. The twisted hilt was cool in the heat of the day. Too cool; not even when we'd been riding in the blazing Southron sun for hours on end did the unprotected metal grow warm. An odd, eerie silver, ice-white/blue-white, like the snowstorms Del had described.

But snow and snowstorms, like the sword, are alien to me. Born of the Southron sun, knowing heat and sand and simooms, I couldn't begin to comprehend (or even envision) the things she told me existed in her cold, Northern land.

All I know is the circle.

"One day," she said, "you will have to make your peace with Theron's sword."

I shook my head. "Once we can spare the time for me to seek out the shodo who trained me--or one of his apprentices--I'm trading this thing in on a real sword, a Southron sword, something I can trust."

"Trust that one," she told me calmly. "Never doubt it, or yourself; in your hands, it knows no magic. With Theron dead, it's only a sword. You know that. I've told you."

Told me, yes, because she knew how I felt about it. About the loss of Singlestroke. To a sword-dancer, a man who makes his living with the sword, a good blade is more than just a piece of steel. It's an extension of himself, as much a part of him as hand or foot, though decidedly deadlier. Your weapon lives, breathes, takes precedence over so much, because without it you are nothing.

For me, it was less than nothing; Singlestroke had given me freedom.

Theron's sword, I knew, was not precisely dead, but neither did it live. Not as Del's blade did. But there was something about it, something odd; when I put my hands upon the twisted hilt, I always felt a stranger, a usurper, little better than a thief. And I always felt a funny little twitch in the hilt, a recoiling, as if the sword, too, was startled by my touch. As if it expected another's flesh touching its own in that odd intercourse of man and sword. More than once I'd wanted to mention it to Del, but I never had. Something kept me from it. Pride, maybe. Or maybe just an unwillingness to admit I felt anything; I am not a man who puts much stock in magic, and the last one to admit I sensed such power in a sword. Even if it was mostly dissipated. For one, she might tell me I was imagining things.

For another, she might tell me I wasn't.

Del understands swords. Like me, she is a sword-dancer, improbable as it sounds. (Hoolies, it had taken me long enough to admit it; even now I still flinch a little when she steps into the circle to spar with me. I'm just not used to facing a woman--at least, not in the circle.) Our customs are so different, too different here in the South, where the sun and sand hold dominance. Del had done her best to alter my perceptions (and continues to alter them on a daily basis), but parts of me still view her as a woman, not a sword-dancer.

Of course just about the last thing a man might want of Del is a sword-dance. Dancing, yes, but not in the circle. Not with a steel blade... or whatever other kind of metal the jivatma was.

In the South, a woman has nothing to do with weapons of any kind. She tends the house, the hyort, the wagon; tends the children, the chickens, the goats; tends the man who calls her his.

But Del is Northern, not Southron. Del has no house or hyort or wagon, no

children, chickens or goats. And she does not, most emphatically, have a man who calls her his, because Del belongs solely to Delilah.

Of course, I know better than to try.

I know better. But I try.

I looked at Del, knowing better than most what lay under the burnous; beneath the sleeveless, thigh-length, rune-stitched leather tunic hidden by glossy silk.

She is tall. Slender, but sinewy. Narrow-waisted, but wide-shouldered. Tough.

Fit. Far stronger than an ordinary woman. There is nothing at all of fragility about Del, though she is all female, and all the pieces are quite distinctly in the proper places.

Blue-eyed, fair-haired, fair-skinned bascha, although after a few years under the Southron sun the hair is nearly white and the skin a tawny, creamy gold.

We are so different, Delilah and I. I am a true son of the desert: skin burned dark as a copper piece, dark brown hair bleached on top a streaky bronze, green eyes couched in a fan of sun-baked creases that, when spread, display the color I was at birth, thirty-some-odd years ago. Paler then, though darker still than a Northerner's creamy color.

I am tall, broad, heavy, but considerably quicker than I look. Sword-dancing teaches even the slowest man how to move--or it teaches him how to die.

I looked at Del, because Del is good to look at. But I also looked at the sword hilt that rode her left shoulder. I know it well now. Better than I prefer, because I had been forced to learn. All the months of watching Del wield it with uncanny skill and grace, knowing it more than simply a sword, I had had time to learn to respect it, even to fear it, because it was more than just a sword. In her hands, it was alive, and a thing of awesome power.

Boreal: born of Northern banshee-storms, blooded in the body of one of the finest sword-masters of the North. Her sword-master--her an-kaidin--a man she honored and respected, who had taken a determined fifteen-year-old girl bent on a highly personal revenge and honed her into a weapon nearly as lethal as the one she'd eventually sheathed in him.

Boreal. Who had, in my hands (however briefly loaned) come to life at the sound of her name, saving me, saving Del, destroying the man who meant to kill us.

But Boreal was Del's. I had no part of her. No more than I did of Theron's blade, which now replaced Singlestroke even if only temporarily.

Necessity is often distasteful.

I sheathed the sword and ignored it, accustomed to its weight across my shoulders. Then I took the stud's reins from Del's hand and led him a few steps away.

"Look, old son," I began, "you and I have to come to an understanding. That sort of blowup is acceptable when we're in a village or a town or an encampment and there's money riding on the outcome, but not when it's just you and me and Del, and that sandsick horse of hers." I patted his neck. "Understand? You could get one of us hurt out here in the desert, and that's not such a good idea."

He blew noisily through brown nostrils and flicked a tufted ear. Then he bared his teeth in a sideways attempt to bite.

"Affectionate as ever." I thumbed the prehensile lip and he twisted his head away, rolling an eloquent eye.

Del caught up the reins of her own mount--a gutless, washed-out speckledy gray-white gelding with a frazzled tail and the temperament of an aging woman who considers herself still skilled at being coy--and looked at me. "How long before we reach Harquhal?"

"Should be by nightfall." I shielded my eyes and squinted up at the Southron sky that seemed to shimmer in the warmth. "Of course, we're losing time with this idiot horse."

"Then saddle him and let's go."

"In a hurry, are we?" I took the stud back to where his gear lay and bent to gather up the bits and pieces. "The North will still be there, Del... has been for years."

She mounted, swinging free of her billowy white silk burnous one long leg and slender foot with its Southron sandal cross-gartered to her knee, "And it's been six since I was there."

"Not quite six," I corrected. "You've been with me, not counting respective captivities, for at least nine months." I grinned as she shot me a scowl beneath sun-bleached blonde brows. "Even if it took us five and a half more years, bascha, it'd still be there."

"You forget yourself, Sandtiger." Her tone was suddenly cool. I stopped saddling the stud and turned to look directly at her. "Only two months remain before Theron's agreed-upon year is done... and then they will be sending another sword-dancer to collect the blood-debt I owe."

Not a laughing matter, with Del or with anyone else. What she faced was serious. If, in the specified months, Del refused to go North to face trial for that blood-debt, the task of killing her would then belong to any man, or multiples thereof. Northern, Southron, sword-dancer, soldier, bandit; it simply didn't matter. Her killer would be rewarded for discharging the blood-debt owed for the murder of her an-kaidin,

Del was guilty. She had killed the an-kaidin. She carried blood-guilt freely,

and did not deny responsibility. It made the sentence just in the eyes of the Northern an-kaidin and all their students, the ishtoya and an-ishtoya. Hoolies, in a weird sort of way even I understood the reason for it. But anyone who wanted her would have to go through me.

Two

In the desert, the sunsets are glorious. I've never been a man for painting pictures with words, but often, at day's end, watching, I wished I was. There is something oddly tranquil and satisfying in watching the sun slide down beyond the bright blade of the horizon, setting the ocher and umber desert ablaze with the brilliance of richer colors: copper, canary, saffron and cinnabar. The desert is transfigured into a paradise of pigments, a collection of colors on the palette of gods different from those Del knew, or created with Boreal. Sunset. There is something that speaks in quiet inner places about the ordering of the world, today and tomorrow, then and now, and all of the yesterdays. I sat my bay stud and stared westward, watching the sun go down, and knew contentment in the company I kept. Del was mute, watching as I watched; feeling, I knew, some of the same feelings, sharing the quietude. There were many things unknown between us, many things unspoken, because we had both been shaped by circumstances far beyond ken or control. We were an odd amalgam, the woman and I; sword-dancers both; dangerous, deadly, dedicated, as loyal to the rituals of the circle as to one another. And yet denying, in our own independently stubborn ways, any loyalties to one another at all; preferring, for countless ridiculous

reasons, to claim ourselves invulnerable to the normal course of human wants, needs, desires.

And knowing, perfectly well, we needed one another as much as we needed the dance.

The sunset gilded Del's face. She had pushed the hood off her head so the silk settled on her shoulders, baring hair and features. She was all aglow: old gold, ivory, ice-white. In profile, she was flawless; full-face, even better.

Inwardly, I smiled, thinking of the bed we would share in Harquhal. A bed bed, not a blanket spread upon the sand, or the naked sand itself. We had not, yet, ever shared a proper bed, being confined for so long to the Punja.

But now we left the deadly Punja far behind, passing out of dunes and flatlands into the scrubby, hilly high desert that presaged the borderlands. Already it was cooler than the scorching days spent on blinding sands, hiding vulnerable eyes amidst the shade of burnous hoods.

Here there were tough, fibrous red-throated grasses, warring with other groundcover; the tangle and tang of jade-hued creosote, haphazard in its growth; vast armies of thorny trees with feathery silver-gray leaves. Even the bloom of fragile flowers, unexpectedly tenacious, climbing out of the fretwork of webby groundcover and the tassles of taller, duller grasses to wave fluted gaudy petals, like pennons, in whatever breeze they could find.

Here there was water. Here there was game. Here there was the promise of a survival less difficult than in the arid sea of sand known as the Punja.

Harquhal. It rises out of the desert like a blocky pile of mud, girded by sloping hills and taupe-gray abode walls to hide its many faces from the threat of capricious simooms blowing northward out of the Punja. It is a characteristic

of the South that towns, villages, semipermanent habitations, as well as the countless oases, are warded with man-made walls or hills or natural rock formations so that the deadly sandstorms, called simooms, cannot sweep away what men, women and children have labored so hard to build. In the Punja, it is necessity; the sands, never sated, swallow towns and cities whole if not properly maintained, disdaining the curses of powerful tanzeers and the wretched poor alike.

I have seen walls, left to crumble by lazy inhabitants, swept away in a matter of hours, and the dwellings within destroyed by abrasive, voracious wind. I have seen cisterns and natural springs filled permanently by choking sand, though we have none to spare, in the South, in the Punja. I have seen scoured skeletons eaten clean of even a shred of flesh; by no beast but the wind, the sand, the heat. Horse, dog, goat. Man. Woman. Child.

There is no mercy in the South, from humans, beasts, elements. There is only the way things are, and will be forever; ceaseless, unchanging, moved by no pleas for leniency or forgiveness.

If there are gods who hear those pleas, they pass the time with fingers planted firmly in useless ears.

Del sighed. "I thought, when I went home again, my brother would be with me." So much said with so little. Del hoarded thoughts and feelings like a merchant coin, dispensing each with grave deliberation and at unpredictable moments. She had said nothing of Jamail for weeks, locking away in tenacious silence all the pain born of a futile search.

For five years she had meticulously prepared herself to track down and free the younger brother stolen by raiders for profitable commerce with Southron slavers who knew the true value of blue-eyed, blond-haired Northern boys in a land of

dark-faced people. For five years she had apprenticed herself to a shodo--in Northern lingo, an-kaidin--to learn the requirements of sword-dancing, fashioning herself into a human weapon with the sole purpose of rescuing Jamail. Knowing it was not perceived a woman's task; knowing also there was no one else to do it. No one even to care; the raiders had robbed her of kin as well as innocence.

Futile. No, not exactly. She had found Jamail, but there was little left to rescue.

Tongueless, castrated, shaped in mind and body by years of Southron slavery, Jamail was not the ten-year-old brother she had adored. Only a boy-man who could now, never, be a man, no matter how hard he wished it; no matter how hard she did. Jamail, Delilah's beloved brother, who desired to stay in the South with the savage tribe he had grown to love.

I wanted to touch her, but our horses stood too distant from one another.

Instead, I nodded. And after a moment, intending to lighten the mood, I smiled and shrugged. "Well, you do have me."

At length, she slanted me an eloquent glance from the corners of her eyes without even turning her head. "That is something, I suppose."

"Something," I agreed blandly, choosing to ignore Del's tone altogether. "I am the Sandtiger, after all."

"After all." She twisted her head to look north. "There is food in Harquhal. Real food; something other than dried cumfa and dates."

I nodded, brightening. "And aqivi as well."

"We don't have the coin to spend on spirits."

"Do you expect me to drink goat's milk?"

She contemplated me a moment. "They both smell about the same. What difference would it make?"

"About as much difference as you swapping Boreal for Theron's sword." I stopped short as I saw how shock turned her to stone. And then I realized what I'd done.

"Del--Del, I'm sorry--" Wondering: Oh, hoolies, how could I have been so stupid?

"Del--I'm sorry--"

She was white-faced with anger as she reined her speckled gelding next to the stud. She didn't seem to notice as the stud laid back ears and bared teeth stained yellow by Southron grasses and grains.

But I noticed. I noticed also the rigid hand that reached out to catch my wrist.

And closed. More tightly than was pleasant.

"Never," she said distinctly, "speak her name aloud again."

No. No, of course not. I knew better. I knew better. "Del--"

"Never," she said again, and took her hand away from my wrist.

There were marks upon it. They faded even as I watched, but the sensation didn't. Certainly the memory wouldn't. Ever.

I flexed my hand to see if all the fingers worked. They did; Del isn't that strong. But strong enough; I felt guilty as well as resentful that she could command me so easily.

"I'm sorry," I repeated, wishing there was something more I could say.

Del's mouth was a flat line. Its grimness ruined the symmetry of her features, but also impressed upon me the depth of her displeasure. "Her name is sacred."

It was so taut a tone as to lack definition, and yet I heard the undercurrent of shock, fear, despair.

"Del--"

"Sacred, Tiger." Del released an unsteady breath and I saw some of the tension

leave her body, replaced with outright anguish. "It's all a part of the power, the magic... if you divulge her name to others, all the rituals are undone--"

She stopped short, searching for comprehension in my face. "All the time, all the years, all the dedication... the sacrifice is as nothing--"

"Del, I know--I know. You've told me. It was a slip, nothing more." I shrugged, keenly uncomfortable, knowing I devalued her feelings even as I tried to assuage my guilt. "I promise, I won't ever say her name again."

"If another heard it--another Northerner trained as I was trained, knowing how to tap the magic, how to destroy the jivatma--" Again she broke off, then scrubbed a hand against her face and swept fallen pale hair out of blue eyes. "I am in trouble enough because of the blood-debt. A man sent to fetch me back, to kill me, could take my skills, my strength, my blade--all with a single word."

"But I know her name. You told me."

"I told you." The tone, now, was lifeless. "I had no choice. But you are a Southroner, lacking the magic, the power, the knowledge; you know nothing of the jivatma, and what it means. And yet you saw how it served you, how she served you, answering your need."

"But not as she serves you."

"No. No, of course not." Distracted, frowning, she shook her head, and the curtain of hair rippled. She had not braided it lately, leaving it loose to fall over shoulders and down her back. "There are rituals--personal, private rituals... no one else may know them. Only me, when I make the sword my own."

Her eyes were on the hilt poking above my left shoulder, freed by the slit cut so deliberately in the seam of my russet burnous so that nothing would hinder me if I required it. Theron's jivatma made powerless by his death. "Had Theron

known her name, he would have killed you. Killed me--"

"--and killed the sword." I nodded. "I understand, Del."

"No," she said, "you don't. But I cannot expect it of you. Not now. Not yet. Not until--" And abruptly she shrugged, clearly choosing not to finish what she had begun, as if I was not prepared to hear it. "It doesn't matter. Not the understanding; not yet. What does matter is that you never again say her name, not aloud, to anyone."

"No."

"No, Tiger."

I nodded. "No."

Her stare was so direct I wanted to look away, but I didn't. I saw her seek some answer in my face, some expression she could trust, assurances unspoken but as binding, if not more so, than the words. There had been many things between us--death, life, survival; more than mere affection, more than simple lust--that counted for very much, but I knew, looking at her now, that nothing counted to her so much as a man who kept his word.

After a moment she turned her gelding north, toward Harquhal. She said nothing more of the sword or my commitment to permanent silence, but I knew the slip was not forgotten. Nor ever would be.

Hoolies, I hadn't meant it. But an apology wasn't enough, no matter how sincere.

In the circle, it means nothing to a dead man to hear his killer's apology.

Harquhal is representative of most towns in the South. Adobe walls ward it against the wind, showing handprints and other geometric patterns laid in at construction. Cracks are plugged with fresh gobs of claylike mud, meticulously fingered into place, denying the wind and sand even subtle means of entry. But walls, like intentions, are transitory; tents and stalls and wagons clustered

haphazardly around the perimeter of the walls like chicks around a hen, ignoring the possibilities of such things as simooms and smaller sister storms.

Harquhal is also representative of most border towns. Serving Northerners and Southroners alike, it has no nationality, and fewer loyalties. Ostensibly Southron, Harquhal pays only haphazard allegiance to the land I call my home. Here, wealth holds dominance.

Del and I had little. In the weeks since we had left Jamail with the Vashni in the mountains near Julah, we had survived on wagers won and a few odd jobs here and there; collections for a Punja-mite of a greedy merchant who then tried to cheat us out of our commission; effecting the rescue of the kidnapped son of a powerful tanzeer who embraced the Hamidaa religion, which proselytized the uncleanliness of women, while all the time the kidnapped "son" was in reality a daughter; escort duty for a caravan bound from one domain to another; other assorted employments.

Nothing, certainly, requiring remarkable ability with sword or guile. Nothing that added to the reputation of the Sandtiger, the legendary Southron sword-dancer, whose skill in the circle was matched by no man.

Unfortunately, now there was a woman. And she had displayed remarkable abilities with a sword, relieving a renegade sword-dancer of his life. As for guile, Del had little; she was blunt-spoken, straightforward, intolerant of Southron word courtesies that often did little more than waste time. And time was her enemy.

The worst part of our journey was done. The Punja lay far behind us. What we faced now, once free of Harquhal, was the North.

Hoolies. I was a Southroner--what did I want with the North?

Nothing. Except Del, who had more than casual ties with the land of snow and

banshee-storms.

More than casual ties with powerful Northern magic.

Glumly, I swung down off the stud in front of a lopsided adobe cantina roofed with a lattice of woven boughs, and tied tassled reins to a knobby post set crookedly in the ground. I heard the sounds of laughter and merriment inside, male and female; smelled the pungent stink of huva weed, the aroma of roasting mutton, the tang of wine and aqivi.

Also the sweet-sour smell of urine; the stud was relieving himself.

Swearing, I skipped back and nearly stumbled over my own sandaled feet, not wanting my burnous splattered. The stud rolled an eye in my direction and wrinkled a pale-brown muzzle forested with whiskers. I began again my endless litany of unflattering equine appellations.

Del avoided the steaming puddle as she dismounted and tied her gelding to another post. Absently she hooked a left hand up to the exposed hilt of her sword, snicked it twice against the tip of the hidden sheath to check ease of movement, nodded once. I'd seen her do it before, many times. It is a habit, though varied in execution, all sword-dancers develop.

We all have idiosyncracies. Some of them keep us alive.

"I take it you want to leave at first light." I waited for her to fall into step beside me.

She shrugged. "There are things we much purchase first. Food, clothing--"

"Clothing!" I frowned. "I admit we could use cleaner apparel, but why spend good coin on things we already have?"

She pulled aside the threadbare vermilion curtain at the door. "If you wish to go north with nothing more to wear than a dhoti and burnous and freeze your geheeties off, you may. But I have no intention of freezing to death." And she

ducked in, forgetting, as usual, that I require more room than she does in entrances built for shorter men.

I jerked the curtain off my face and scowled after her as I followed. Then I coughed; huva smoke packed the exposed rafters of the cantina, drifting in slow, eddying, malodorous ochre-green wreaths. The vice is one I abhor since a sword-dancer needs all his faculties in the circle. Of course Del had taken my opinion as somewhat tainted by the fact I drink aqivi with great abandon, pointing out that a man with a gut full of aqivi is no less likely to die than a man with a head full of huva dreams.

(Well, Del and I don't always agree on everything. Sometimes we don't agree on anything.)

She squinted and waved a hand in front of her face, peering irritatedly through the smoke as she sought an open table. And, as is common when Del walks into a cantina (or any place, for that matter), desultory conversation devolved into a muddle of hissed comments, muttered questions, unsubtle speculation.

I sighed. Wished I had Singlestroke. Bared my teeth in a lazy, friendly grin at the two dozen or so men who looked from Del to me, to see if I was capable of protecting the Northern bascha.

I don't consider myself a vain man. What I am is fact: big, strong, quick. There is a certain dangerous edge in my face, my posture, my eyes, shaped by the demands of my profession. And there are times I am perfectly willing to flaunt whatever advantages this affords me; I fight when I must, and with gusto, but only when there is no other way around it.

Idly I assessed the room, letting them see what I did. Just as idly I scratched the scars on my face. Deep scars, old scars; four clearly defined claw stripes

curving from right cheek to jaw, unmistakably from a beast some men labeled mythical: the lethal Punja sandtiger from which I'd taken my name.

My badge of honor, in a manner of speaking. For men who knew of sword-dancers, it identified me at once.

(Not everyone carries the mark of his profession and expertise on his face; I rather like it. Saves time.)

"No trouble," Del muttered under her breath. Half suggestion, half command.

I slapped a spread hand over my heart. "Need you even say it?"

She grunted. Waved away more smoke. Strode across the floor through crowded aisles to a tiny table in a corner at the very back of the cantina.

Still smiling, I followed, watching everyone else watch her, even the cantina girls, who scowled, chewed bottom lips, nibbled thoughtfully on thumbnails. And who, if they were quick enough, realized they had better beguile their chosen partners immediately, if they were to recapture clearly divided attention.

One of the girls, perched on the thigh of a lean young man sprawled casually at a table, got up at once and made her way to me, blocking my view of Del.

Black-haired, dark-skinned, brown-eyed. A typical Southron girl: lush-figured, bold of features; at sixteen or seventeen, in full bloom. But it would fade too quickly, I knew; the desert sucks women dry before they are thirty.

"Beylo." She smiled, showing crooked teeth and a curiously attractive overbite.

"Beylo, will you share your wine with Jemina?" Her hands were on my arms, caressing me through the thin fabric of my burnous. "I can bring you huva and many, many dreams."

"Of that I have no doubt." I glanced past her to the young man she had deserted, marking black hair, blue eyes, the smudge of a new mustache, a rueful expression. He was not angry, and did not appear moved to protest her defection.

He seemed amused by the performance, which was at least a welcome change from bruised male pride, which always demands reparation. (Generally in blood.) "But you are partnered already, bascha, and so am I."

Jemina shrugged a dusky naked shoulder, ignoring the loose neckline that slid lower still, exposing most of one plump breast. "He's a boy, beylo . . . you are a man."

Well, yes, last time I looked. "Bascha, another time," I set her out of my way and saw Del seated at the little table, clearly amused.

Ah, well, too much to hope she might be jealous.

I hooked out a stool and sat down, scowling as the uneven legs rocked me back and forth, threatening to tip me over entirely. I wedged the stool against the wall, settled substantial weight gingerly, looked up again to see the wry twist of Del's mouth. And then she looked past me, and up, to watch the wine-girl who eyed her so assessively.

Back again. I sighed. "Bascha--"

"Wine?" she asked. "Aqivi?" She tossed black curls behind a shoulder. "I work for my living, beylo. I am not a common whore."

Unless, of course, the price was right. I sighed again and fingered my shriveled coin pouch. A few coppers clinked; hardly enough to buy a full meal and all the aqivi I wanted.

My eyes strayed hopefully to Del. She tapped slender fingers on the scarred, sticky tabletop, sighed, waved a hand at the girl. "Stew," she said, "and the cheapest wine you've got."

"Wine!" Aggrievedly, I stared. "A few coppers more will turn up a jug of aqivi."

"Wine," Del said coolly, and the girl turned away with a flounce of layered

skirts that clearly signaled my reduction in her esteem.

I leaned forward, resting my weight on one planted forearm. "Just how do you propose to buy clothing if we haven't enough coin for a proper meal?"

"I propose to buy clothing by forgoing unnecessary expenditures on unnecessary things." She paused, sweeping back a fall of hair. "Like aqivi."

A tendril of huva smoke drifted down from the beamwork. I waved it away. "Aqivi is hardly unnecessary when I've spent the last three or four weeks sucking water on our way across the Punja."

Jemina returned and plunked down two wooden bowls of mutton stew, a half-risen loaf of brown bread, sloshing stoneware bottle, a pair of battered wooden cups bound by greenish copper.

Del smiled sweetly. "Suck wine."

I might have answered, but I was too busy sniffing the stew in my bowl. Mutton is not one of my favorite dishes, although I'm accustomed to it. It's better than dog. Certainly better than roasted sandtiger, which Del had ignobly served me once.

After a moment I drew my knife and hacked off a chunk of hard bread, lifted the bowl and prepared to scoop watery stew into my mouth.

Prepared. I never got any farther. Not when I saw the expression on Del's face as she stared, transfixed, across the crowded cantina.

Shock. Anger. Suspicion. And a cold, rising rage that glittered like ice in her eyes.

By all the nameless gods of valhail, I swear I have never seen a look like that.

On man or woman.

Not even on a sword-dancer.

Three

She rose slowly, so slowly, until the tabletop hit her mid thigh. Shrouded in the burnous, most of her was hidden. But I knew her. I knew how she moved, how she tensed, how she waited. I knew how to judge her intentions simply by reading her eyes.

"Del--"

She did not even glance at me.

I wrenched my head around and stared across the cantina, trying to see what she saw. Trying to see what had set her on edge; what had stripped her of the woman I knew, reducing her to little more than an animal on the stalk.

I saw nothing. Well, not nothing. I saw men. Just men. Bent over tables, hunched on stools, trading stories, jokes, insults. And wine-girls, plying their trades.

And smoke and lamplight and shadows.

"Del--" I turned back, frowning, and saw the color slowly fade from her face.

There isn't much to begin with, what with her Northern complexion, but now there was a decided difference. Now she looked like a woman dead three days.

Slowly, she sank back onto her stool. Her hands still braced her balance against the table, fingers spread, rigid, and trembling. Trembling; I'd never seen Del shake.

"Could I be wrong?" she asked herself in an odd, toneless voice. Then again, more forcefully, and yet still curiously toneless. "Could I be wrong?"

I wrenched my head around yet again to seek out what had affected her so

dramatically. And again, I saw men. I saw one of them rise from his stool and turn away, moving purposefully toward the door. He ducked through the curtain, was gone; I heard Del release a slow, noisy breath.

"What in hoolies--" An upthrust hand cut me off. I waited, still concerned to see the minute trembling of her fingers, and eventually her eyes lost their opaque, blind expression and Del looked at me. This time, I think, she saw me.

"Private," she said only, and scooped up a cup of wine.

Del doesn't drink much. It isn't like her to gulp wine, but now I saw how she held the cup against her mouth as if the liquor might restore her strength. I watched her throat move as she swallowed repeatedly, sucking wine like a man trying to chase away demons.

Or a woman, with her own.

"Privacy's one thing." I caught the cup in one hand, took it away from her, set it firmly on the table. "This is another. Maybe what you need is to talk about it."

"Maybe what I need is a jug of aqivi to shut you up," she said sharply. And then, tight-jawed, she apologized for her tone.

But not for the words. I smiled. "Effective bribery. Shall I call Jemina back?"

"No." Del stared at the cooling mutton stew. "No; we need to save the coin."

"Then let's treat the wine as it should be treated." I refilled her cup. "With slow and deliberate appreciation."

"It's sour."

Her color was returning along with her mettlesome mood. "Yes, it's sour," I said blandly. "So, at the moment, are you."

"But you don't know--" She stopped herself.

"No," I agreed, "I don't. Unless you tell me."

"It's private," Del repeated.

I stirred congealing stew with a piece of bread, making islands out of the meat and channeling the gravy. Mildly, I said: "You know more about me than anyone else alive."

Her glance was sharp, startled; she considered it, then withdrew abruptly, shaking her head. "I can't. Not now."

"That man--"

"Not now."

There are times, with Del, when silence is the best strategy. Accordingly, I turned my attention to sour wine and mutton stew, while Jemina made eyes at me from across the smoky cantina.

In the morning Del roused me out of bed with a fist snugged none too gently against my short ribs. When, aggrievedly, I protested such bad manners, she merely threw me my dhoti, harness and burnous and suggested I put them on as soon as possible, as she had plans for us this morning.

"Plans?" I dressed, slipped into harness, tested the weight of the borrowed blade. "What sort of plans?"

"Supplies," she said succinctly, and yanked aside the curtain.

The motion proved too much for the threadbare cloth that separated our tiny inn room from the corridor outside. Fabric parted and Del was left standing with a handful of faded green cloth. With a tongue-click of irritation she tossed it aside.

"Out of sorts this morning, are we?" I picked up saddle pouches and preceded her out of the musty, low-roofed room. "Maybe if you'd spent more of last night sleeping instead of thinking--"

"You snored."

Ah. My fault, then; I should have known. Accordingly, I possessed myself of silence and went down into the common room to order breakfast.

Del was off her feed, as well; she was too well disciplined to ignore food when it was offered, not knowing when we might have another meal, but clearly she did not enjoy it. Impatiently she chewed hard bread, spooned down spiced kheshi, swallowed pungent goat's milk. And then told me to hurry up as I considered a second bowl of kheshi.

I cast her an exasperated scowl. "Hoolies, Del, we don't need to run across the border."

"We don't need to dawdle here, either. Tiger, you know there is a time limit."

"Time limit, shmime limit," I said testily. "A man's got to eat, Del. Or he won't be any help at all, should you need it."

It shut her up, as I thought it might. She recalled I accompanied her only through personal whim; I could leave any time I felt like it. And by reminding Del intended to render her aid as best I could, I deflated all her righteous indignation.

It's hard to be angry with someone who's lending you a hand. Also bad manners.

I looked at Del's expression. And then, quietly, I sent the girl away with the second bowl of kheshi and stood up, gathering saddle pouches once more.

Silently, I indicated the door. Del turned on her heel and marched out.

It was clear Del recalled more of Harquhal than I did though it had been nearly a year since she had been here. She led me directly to a small shop tucked into the shadows along the wall, and proceeded to spend an untold amount of time examining what appeared to be piles of furry pelts, supple leather, a heavy, dyed fabric. Weary of following along like a bearer waiting attendance on

Southron lady, I dumped the pouches by the door and began to do my own examining.

The shop reeked of tanned leather and pungent fur, as well as other smells I could not begin to name. Accustomed to desert silks and gauzes, I could not comprehend what a man would want with so much weight and bulk. But Del apparently did; eventually she chose the things she wanted and gave the shopkeeper very nearly all of our coin.

"Sulhaya," she said, as he rolled the pelts around soft leather into long, flexible bundles and tied them.

He answered back in Del's indecipherable Northern tongue; I looked at him more sharply. He was old, and therefore white-haired, and the South had baked his flesh, but his eyes were blue as Del's. No Southroner, this; he was clearly a Northerner, which meant Del apparently knew what she was doing. Some consolation, I guess, considering I didn't.

The old man's eyes were on her sword hilt, poking above Del's left shoulder. Boreal's hilt is fashioned in such a way as to fool the eye, to bewitch the beholder into something like a trance if you stare at the hilt too long. The silver is everchanging, one shape melting into another, then another, until you forget about time entirely, thinking only of the moving forms within the metal. Trying to follow, to name at least one, before the blade assumes the aspect of the hilt and dispatches you entirely.

"An-ishtoya?" the old man asked, and Del stopped short.

Her face was frozen, sculpted into a flawless display of rigid beauty. But hard as stone, and equally inflexible.

An-ishtoya. The highest rank a Northerner can know, as student, apprentice, in

the circle. The rank is bestowed by the an-kaidin, the sword-master, higher than the teachers themselves, the kaidin; highest of the high. She had been ishtoya--student--and then an-ishtoya--the paramount--proclaimed so by the an-kaidin himself.

But Del had turned her back on it, naming herself, instead, a sword-dancer, as she was free to do, and bound by no rituals other than those determined by the circle.

The old man had clearly trespassed upon her rigidly guarded privacy. But she did not react as she so often did with me. Perhaps because of his age. Perhaps because he was a Northerner. Perhaps also because he knew better what the word meant, and all its accompanying weight.

"No," she said after a moment. "Sword-dancer."

Something moved briefly in his eyes. But his face--a webbing of lines and creases deeply incised in flesh lighter than my own--did not change. He looked again at Boreal, and then he nodded. Once. "Sing well," he said, in Southron, and turned away to tend another customer.

I shouldered saddle pouches, took on one of the rolled bundles, stepped out of the shop just ahead of Del. As she exited I paused to fall into step beside her.

"Sing well," I said, puzzled. "Didn't he mean 'dance'?"

Del had hitched her sausage of hides under one arm. Her face was expressionless.

"No," she said. "He didn't."

So much for expecting an answer or further explanation. Knowing better, however, than to hound her for it, I let the subject drop.

We tacked and loaded the horses with care, knowing Harquhal was our last settlement before the border. And once out of the dun-colored walls and heading north, I would become a stranger to my environs; Del would be guide, while I was

left to do as she suggested in matters of conduct, not knowing Northern ways.

Our roles would be reversed, and I wasn't certain I liked it.

Though Del undoubtedly would.

She was still locked in silence as we led her coy gelding and my snuffy stud out of the lath-built stable behind the inn. Across broad rumps our mounts now carried the sausage rolls of fur and leather, jutting up and out. The stud wasn't yet certain he approved of such measures; he walked with his massive hindquarters curiously elevated, as if on tiptoe. The frequent and noisy swishing of his tail told me quite eloquently he was considering making comment, as only a horse can.

He snorted, banged my right shoulder--purposely--with his nose, nibbled.

"Knock it off," I suggested, fully aware of the fore-hooves tromping so closely to my own heels.

He did not, and so I thrust a doubled fist noseward as he reached for my shoulder again. Fist and nose connected. He jerked backward instantly, nodding and bobbing his head at the end of braided, blue-dyed reins while one eye rolled in innocent, baffled amazement. But the eye also shrewdly judged; I smiled, wagged a warning finger, saw the tip-tilted ears flick up. Instantly he pinned them back again, but he'd given himself away; he wasn't angry so much as disgruntled that I'd caught him at his tricks, and disgruntlement I could deal with.

Del shook her head. "I don't know why you keep him. He's more trouble than he's worth."

"That depends," I said, recalling the stud had, by all accounts, killed one of my enemies. Unfortunately, I hadn't been present to witness it. "As for why, I

guess it's mostly habit. Like a man who keeps a nagging wife year after year after year."

She cast me a level glance, refusing to enter the debate. "One of these days he's liable to kill you."

"Oh, I don't think so. He might dump me on my head every now and again, but in the long run I think he's rather fond of me." I patted the firm, plate-shaped jaw. "We're a lot alike."

"Thickheaded," Del agreed, and then looked past me to the cantina where we had spent most of the former evening.

I looked with her and saw nothing. But, looking back at her, I saw she did.

And knew she would have to finish it before we left Harquhal.

I sighed. Nodded. Stopped. "Go on," I told her. "Get it over with."

She snapped her head around. "You know?" "I know you'll never let it rest," I said calmly. "Go, bascha. See if he's there. If not, we can ride out of here knowing at least you looked. If he is, well..." I shrugged. "Up to you, bascha."

"But--you don't know why--" She broke it off, shook her head a little.

Silk-bright hair, unbraided, slid across silk-clad shoulders. "You can't."

"Thickheaded I may be, but I am not entirely stupid," I told her bluntly. "You saw a man last night, and until you see him again and satisfy whatever craving kept you awake last night--in a real bed, I might add--you'll be moody as a breeding woman."

She opened her mouth promptly to protest the last part of my comments. Del dislikes me to make fun of women, or otherwise discount them because of their gender. Now, mostly, I do it out of a desire to bait her, hoping for verbal combat; once I did it because, in the South, women count for little. Del had changed much of my attitude, but so had slavery. A man raised a slave suffers

his own humiliation, and quickly learns not to judge others as he is judged.

But Del, after a moment, did not rise to the bait at all. She merely clamped her mouth closed. Her expression was grim. "It is a thing I have to do."

"I know that. I just said that."

"I will be fair," Del told me. "It will be a sword-dance." I nearly laughed; trimmed it to a smile when I saw that however I responded would matter greatly to her. "If he's a sword-dancer, it'll be fair," I agreed. "If he's not, it'll be a joke."

Pale brows knitted. "Tiger--" But she stopped short, locking away whatever words she had meant to say, and left me looking into the face of torment.

"Go," I said gently. "I'll be there, bascha."

We tied the horses and left them, pulling aside the same vermilion curtain we had pulled aside the night before. Huva stink clung to the cantina, but the smoke was barely visible. It was early yet for the place to fill with men seeking dreams in liquor, smoke, women.

But not too early for the man Del sought.

At last he saw her coming. I knew him only by that; by the surprise in his eyes, the admiration; the slow flame of desire. He was clearly Southron, dark of hair and skin, with deep-set, pale brown eyes. The age I could not say, save to mark that he had spent his years in the desert, for the sun had taken its toll. His teeth flashed white against the swarthiness of his face.

Del ignored the others at his table. She merely stepped to the edge, leaned forward a little, to make certain he heard her words, and invited him into the circle.

And the man was clearly astonished. "Circle?" he echoed blankly, in patent

disbelief. And then he recovered himself, and laughed. "Bascha, I will gladly meet you in bed, but never in a circle." He waited out the snickers and laughter, smiling blandly, but I saw the faintest line of puzzled consternation mar the flesh between dark brows.

Fluidly, Del pulled Boreal free of her sheath in a brief, hissing slide, then brought the sword down to rest crosswise in front of her breasts, hilt at waist, wrists cocked; the tip reached at least five inches above Del's head. It was a diagonal slash of steel that focused every eye upon blade and woman. The move was flawlessly executed, obviously well-practiced; the posture--and its intent--was dramatically dominant, and eloquently underscored by Del's gender. Not a man in the cantina was blind to the implications.

One might say it is no great thing to draw a sword from its sheath. But Del, as I, went in harness, with the sheath strapped diagonally across her back. It is far more comfortable when seeking an even distribution of weight, far more balanced than dangling heavy steel to bang against one leg, but the ease of sheathing or unsheathing is reduced immeasurably. It is a mark of pride (or vanity--call it what you will) that a true sword-dancer, thoroughly trained in the art of the dance, always goes in harness.

But it was a sword, and this was the South, and Del was clearly a woman.

He laughed, the Southroner. And then stopped, as the others stopped, abruptly, in shock, as she set the salmon-silver tip against the flesh of his throat.

Easily, in silence, she parted the fabric of his burnous. I saw something move in her face, something almost indefinable, except I had seen the expression once before. When Del had first seen Jamail--and what had been done to him--five years after his disappearance.

She nodded once, but I thought it was mostly to herself. As if it signaled a

hardening of her resolve. "Step into the circle."

I nearly mouthed them with her, so familiar were the words. The eternal challenge of a sword-dancer, to spar, to fight, to dance. For the fun or to the death.

Desire was augmented by irritation. The Southroner's nostrils pinched. "Woman," he said, "go home. Go home and tend your man."

Del's tone was very calm. "You are my man," she told him. "I will tend you in the circle."

He had been dicing with companions. Now supple hands scattered dice and coin and cups, as, in anger, he swept the table clean.

Boreal nicked his throat.

He cursed. Del smiled, but only a little. "Dance with me," she invited, in the siren song of the circle.

Four

I saw the blood at his throat. A few drops only, crimson against browned flesh.

Fresh blood, and free of ice; Del had not keyed the sword.

He spat onto the blade. "I do not fight women."

The tip shifted. Rose. Pressed the underside of his chin, lifting, lifting, so that to escape the promised cut he had to tip the back of his skull against his shoulders.

"No?" Del asked. "But you fought me, nearly six years ago." Her eyes narrowed.

"Fight me again, Southron. Now that I know how."

His friends muttered angrily, obviously unimpressed by Del's attitude. To forestall any efforts on their parts, I moved closer to Del and deliberately fixed them with the stare I knew was disconcerting, for it mimicked the feral stare of a stalking sandtiger, green eyes and all. I made it very plain, if silently, that the fight was to remain between the woman and the man; otherwise, they personally, each of them, would have me to contend with. Now, or later; their choice.

It worked. It works often. I practiced it carefully, when the similarity had first been pointed out to me, knowing better than to ignore an advantage, in or out of the circle.

Del's opponent glared past her at me, made aware that there would be no rescue, none at all. That he was not a sword-dancer, I knew. We are often strangers to one another, but there are ways a man can tell. Certainly with him it was easy; his sword was sheathed at his side.

So, it was to be a joke. Not a sword-dancer. Not Northern. But clearly an enemy. And one she had claimed for nearly six years, which meant he was undoubtedly one of the raiders who had destroyed her family.

I blew out a slow breath of comprehension and compassion. Revenge I understand. Pale brown eyes flicked from side to side, judging the intent of his companions, the tenor of the room. No one laughed now. No one smiled. Neither did anyone look away.

A Southroner myself, I knew what he was feeling. And I knew avoiding the fight would do as much damage to his pride as the thing itself. Del was a woman.

His lips writhed against his teeth. "Yes," he said, "yes."

"Outside," Del said coolly, and turned her back on him to exit the cantina.

In any city or settlement, it takes little time for word of a sword-dance to pass through the populace. In a border town like Harquhal, full to bursting with cutthroats, thieves, raiders and the like, word spills through even faster. And so as the Southroner prepared to face the Northern woman, the others came to watch. From shops and shade and gambling games like sandslugs from under a stone.

Calmly, Del slipped out of her burnous. She dropped the silk to the sand, ignoring the ribald comments. Bare-armed, bare-legged, she was naked in their eyes.

Hardly that, to me. But I've grown accustomed to the soft leather tunic snugged so firmly about her waist. Fitted so tautly at breasts and shoulders because of the harness straps. But seeing her through their eyes I saw merely the woman again. Not Del. Not the sword-dancer. Only the Northern bascha.

And in that moment, for only a moment, I forgot all the truths we had shared and thought only of myself.

But very briefly. And then Del was Del again.

She unhooked her harness, set it atop the silk, slanted me an enigmatic glance.

"Sandtiger, will you draw the circle?"

A nice way of letting all the observers know who I was; plainly, they recognized the name, most of them. Certainly those I was most interested in. The Southerner's friends looked at me sharply, muttered among themselves, observed the sword hilt poking above my shoulder and the scars on my face. And did not look very happy.

I smiled a little and made a slight gesture with my head, acknowledging their unintended tribute. But mostly, I singled them out: one, two, three, four.

Perhaps raiders, perhaps not: perhaps merely men who had fallen in with Del's opponent for the dicing in the cantina. But it did not matter. I marked them out. Then I turned my attention back to Del's request.

In the code of the true dance, the invitation was an honor. But this was little more than a travesty.

I put my hand on the hilt of the Northern sword and heard an echo of eerie laughter. Theron's, maybe. Maybe even the soul of the man in whom he had quenched the blade so long ago.

The sword hissed free of the sheath and gleamed in the sunlight. A second hiss followed on its heels: indrawn breaths from everyone gathered to watch the sword-dance. I set tip against earth and saw the umber-hued sand curl away as if I divided flesh. Another hiss, and murmurs of sorcery. Well, maybe so. The circle was made of itself; I was only the instrument.

Del stepped into the circle and waited.

Ordinarily, there are rituals to be observed. Requirements of the dance to satisfy the honor of the teachings handed down. It didn't matter that she was Northern-born and trained, and he a Southroner; the learning is much the same, with similar rituals. But this was no true sword-dance. The chosen opponent knew little, if anything, of the dance itself, knowing only that he had to fight a woman to salve pride and to save his life.

Reason enough, I knew, to make him dangerous.

He swore a vile Southron oath and stripped out of his burnous. Beneath it he wore the thin baggy jodhpurs and silk-sashed tunic of a desert man, not the brief chamois dhoti of a dancer. Raider he might be, but there was nothing in clothing or appearance that proclaimed him one, unlike a professional sword-dancer.

Del waited. He unbelted his sword, unsheathed it, threw the leather down on top of his burnous. He said something quietly to his four companions; immediately they looked at me, giving themselves away, and I knew he had told them to kill the woman--and me--if he died. Although it was plain he did not expect to die. He stepped into the circle--
--and lunged.

She is so quick, so very fast, is Del. Feet sluffed through the warm sand with the soft, seductive sibilance of bare flesh against fine-grained dust. Wisps rose, drifted; layered our bodies in dull, gritty shrouds: pale umber, ocher-bronze, taupe-gray.

But the shrouds, I thought, were applicable; the woman could kill us all.

I watched her move. I watched the others watch her move. All men. No women, here, at this moment, under such circumstances; never.

Except for Del.

I watched her move: detached appreciation. Admiration, as always. And pride.

Two-edged pride. One: that the woman brought honor to the ritual of the dance within the circle, and two: that she was my right hand, my left hand; companion, swordmate, bedmate.

Edged? Of course. Pride is always a two-edged blade. With Del, the second edge is the sharpest of all, for me, because for the Sandtiger to speak of pride in Del is to speak also of possessiveness. She'd told me once that a man proud of a woman is too often prouder of his possession of her, and not of the woman for being herself.

I saw her point, but... welllll, Del and I don't always agree. But then if we did, life would be truly boring.

I watched-Del and the men who watched her as a matter of course, but I also watched the man she faced in the circle. I saw the untutored pattern of his sword flashing in the sunlight: dip here, feint there, slash, lunge, cut, thrust...and always trying to throw the flashes and glints of sunlight into her eyes. He knew enough to know that; ordinarily, a shrewd ploy. Another opponent might have winced or squinted against the blinding light, giving over the advantage; Del didn't. But then, Del was accustomed to conjuring her own light with Boreal; the Southron sword the man used was hardly a match for her own. I knew she would kill him. But he didn't. He hadn't realized it yet.

Few men do realize it when they enter the circle with Del. They only see her, and hardly notice the sword in her hands. Instead, they smile. They feel tolerant and magnanimous because they must face a woman, and a beautiful woman. But because she is beautiful, they will give her anything, if only to share a moment of her time, and so they give her their lives.

She danced. Long legs, long arms, bared to the Southron sun. Step. Step. Slide. Skip. Miniscule shifting of balance from one hip to the other. Sinews sliding beneath the firm flesh of her arms as she parried and riposted. All in the wrists, with Del. A delicate tracery of blade tip against the brassy afternoon sky, blocking her opponent's weapon with a latticework of steel.

Del never set out to be a killer. Even now she isn't, quite; she's a sword-dancer, like me. But in this line of work, more often than not, the dance--a ritualized exhibition of highly-trained sword-skill--becomes serious, and people die.

I sighed a little, watching her. She didn't play with him, precisely, being too well-trained for such arrogance within the circle, but I could see she had judged and acknowledged her opponent's skill as less than her own. It wouldn't

make her smile; not Del. It wouldn't make her careless. But it would make her examine the limits of his talent with the unlimited repertoire of her own, and show him what it meant to step into the circle with someone of her caliber.

Regardless of her gender.

And I watched the man. The Southron fighter who had so carelessly undervalued the Northern woman. I saw the slack wetness of sweat-soaked black hair hanging lankly against his neck, no longer moving as he moved. I watched the telltale flush of frustration commingled with futile effort darken his features. And I saw the negligent arrogance of the man alter itself in brown eyes into belated acknowledgment; he knew. At last, he knew; knew also there was nothing he could do.

Except die.

Del stripped the blade from him instantly with a subtle flick of her own, slicing fingers before he could blink, and then, as he sucked in a breath to bellow, cut open the naked palms that no longer grasped a sword. In shock, he gaped at her.

She balanced lightly on both feet, clearly poised to strike again. But she did not, at once. She watched him only, and I saw the odd glint in her eyes. "Have you stolen so many Northern women that you cannot remember this one?" Her tone was deceptively mild. "So many Northern baschas?"

"Afreet!" he cried. "Jinni!"

"Human," she mocked, "and woman. Or does that foolish masculine pride forbid you from acknowledging the truth?"

"Del," I said quietly, "that is not the issue."

I saw the subtle start of surprise, the realization in her eyes. No, it was not

the issue. Color touched her face; the line of her mouth hardened. "I want Ajani," she said.

Brown eyes widened in patent astonishment, then narrowed as he frowned. "Ajani," he echoed. "Why?"

"For much the same reason," she told him. "I intend to kill him."

He laughed harshly. "Men have tried that, bascha. And still Ajani thrives."

"Temporarily." She flicked her sword and the blade sliced air, neatly nicking the tip of his nose. "Ajani," she said softly.

He stepped out of the circle at once. But this was not a sword-dance; Del followed smoothly. He halted against the confines of the larger, human circle, was pressed back against his friends, who sought to hold him up--and knew the fight was lost. "North," he said sullenly.

"But you are here, Southron."

He spat to the side. "I no longer ride with Ajani."

"No?" Pale brows rose. "Did it begin to pall at last, this wealth earned by stealing children?"

Nostrils flared. "And did I steal you?"

I thought she might kill him then. But her control was firmly in place. "You tried, Southron. But luck and the gods preserved me."

"Then why hound me now?" He spread bleeding hands. "You are free, bascha. What sense is there in this?"

"None at all," she said gently. "This is merely collection of a blood-debt I am owed."

It was Del's fight, not mine. But I wished she would finish it.

"Blood-debt--"

"Ajani," she said, "and you go free."

Hope flared, was extinguished almost at once. I knew what he was thinking. His life was precious, but so was his pride, especially before friends; spared by a woman, he kept the former and lost the latter. "I am a loyal man."

Del lifted an eloquent shoulder. "Loyal men die as easily as others." She gestured with a jerk of her head. "Step back into the circle. Pick up the sword. I will give you that much; more than you and the others gave me."

Clearly, he wanted to refuse. But he was bound by his own pride and the silence of the others; slowly, he stepped back into the circle and retrieved the sword with bleeding hands. He turned to face the woman, clearly unafraid. If anything, he was angry. Not that he would lose his life, but that a woman would be the instrument of it.

Del smiled. I saw her lips stretch thin, then part, and then the thread of a sound issued forth. Only a little song, but enough to enrage the man.

Enough. No excess. Just the Northern woman stepping to the flaccid curtain of steel, who parted it effortlessly to slide three feet of salmon-silver blade into sweaty, heaving flesh.

They deny it, each and every one of them, even as their blood flows from their bodies to stain the Southron sand. Even when they cannot speak, they mouth the words, denying her the victory as their bodies tell them differently. Bloodied, bitten lips, wet faces powdered with sand, widened eyes full of wonder, dismay, despair.

And always the denial.

She turned away from the sprawled body and looked at me. The Northern sword, blood-painted, hung loosely in her hand. Alien blade, with equally alien runes, dripped a string of wet rubies into umber sand, drop by drop by drop, until the

delicate, deadly necklet lost its shape and became nothing more than a puddle of blood sucked quickly down into the dust.

Del hunched one shoulder almost imperceptibly--a comment; an answer to my unspoken question--and then she nodded, only once; an equally private exchange.

She turned back. Bent over the body. I saw a hand go to his throat, catch something, snap it free. And then carefully, thoroughly, with grave deliberation, she stepped outside the circle and cleaned her blade on his burnous.

She watched his companions as she did so, appraising the men who had so rudely done the same to her. Assessing expressions and intentions. She was not a mind reader but claimed an uncanny understanding of men. This understanding makes even me uncomfortable much of the time; I find myself carrying on conversations within my skull, answering questions and suppositions to test their validity before I give Del the chance to bestow one of her stinging rebukes.

Del straightened. "Ajani," she said quietly, into the waiting silence, ostensibly to all, but paying subtle attention to the four men now bereft of a fifth. "I want him. I will pay."

I looked at Del's face. She hoped someone would give her the information she wanted but didn't really expect it. Certainly not so openly, after what she had done. If anyone really knew Ajani's whereabouts, he was likely to keep it quiet until he could talk to Del in private. Away from the four Southerners who stared at her so malignantly.

She had silenced them all with sword-dance and invitation. But the silence lasted briefly, so briefly; before long, men were talking among themselves and trading their versions of the fight so recently witnessed. I'd seen it and heard it countless times after dances I myself had been in. But this was Del. This was

a woman, a Northerner, who had so easily dispatched one of their own; who now strode calmly through the crowd into the cantina, to wait.

So much for our early start.

The crowd dispersed quickly enough. Most men went into the cantina to buy liquor, to discuss the sword-dance, to sneak glances at the Northern bascha. All of those men I did not detain, but as the dead man's companions bent to remove the body, I stopped them.

"His coin is hers," I told them. "The custom of the circle: winner takes all."

It did not sit well with them. One of them--black-eyed, pock-marked, with gray-flecked dark hair--spat at my feet. The other three were pleased by it, though none of them said a word. They didn't need to; I could see it in their eyes.

When I did nothing, the pock-marked man called me an uncomplimentary name--something to do with having an unnatural affinity for male goats--while I merely nodded affably and bent to cut the dead man's coin-pouch free with my knife. And then I straightened and invited each and every one of them into a circle.

A circle; four against one.

But they knew better. (It isn't simple arrogance; I am that good, because I was taught by a master, and I have worked very hard at my profession for a very long time.) They knew better, and went away as I waited for their answer.

I went in to look for Del and found her at a small table in a corner of the cantina. And not alone; it had taken less time than I had imagined to scare up the information she wanted. Also from an unexpected province: Jemima's young man of the evening before, with the stain of a newborn mustache upon his upper lip.

He wore a silken tunic, bright blue and sashed in jade-green, baggy jodhpurs of brilliant crimson, tucked into high black boots, and a plain saffron burnous hanging loosely open. He came to the table, clearly waiting, and in his hands was a clay jug. As I arrived the boy smiled, turned to set the jug down with a flourish, then swung back.

And I saw beneath the thin fabric of the burnous, tucked into the belt at the small of his back, the outline of bladed, hafted weapons I could not begin to name.

Worth watching, then, this boy.

"Aqivi," he said warmly, gesturing to the jug. "Much better than the house wine."

"Why?" Del asked flatly. "If you have information, don't waste my time with unnecessary courtesies."

It took him completely off-stride. No doubt he was accustomed to his pretty looks winning almost slavish attention from cantina girls and the like; Del's bluntness, so unexpected, was shocking. When coupled with her appearance, it is enough to strip most men of all pride entirely, reducing them to awkward silence or stammered apologies.

The boy did not stammer, nor did he apologize. He made a fluid gesture of acquiescence and sat down. On my stool. I loomed over him pointedly; finally he glanced up at me, affecting surprised innocence. And stood up again.

He was altogether shorter and slighter than I am, and certainly considerably younger. Around Del's age, I thought, which put him at twenty or so. His face was at war with manhood, still showing the undefined blandness of youth while moving inexorably toward adulthood. He was quick, lithe, supple. Possibly a thief. Certainly an opportunist; he was complimenting Del on her sword skill.

She leaned forward, resting forearms on the table. She had not put on the burnous as yet and so the arms were bare. Against the pale-gold skin, sinews twisted. The minute tensing of defined muscles was obvious, to someone who knew how to read her.

"I am a sword-dancer," she said coolly. "What I did to that man is part of my profession; I had better be good." Clearly, the raider's death had put her out of temper. Generally she gives the boys a bit more rope before she snugs the noose taut.

Blue eyes flickered beneath black-lashed lids. The boy smiled, nodded, moistened lips, wiped palms on scarlet jodhpurs. Then he hooked thumbs into his belt and glanced at me. I had not yet seated myself. My bulk, so close, served to intimidate him a little. Not enough, however. I judged him one of those foolish youths too full of life to be much intimidated by anything--or anyone--for very long.

"I heard what you said outside," he told us, "about Ajani. I might be able to help."

"Might you?" Del's tone was icy. "Where is he?"

The boy unhooked his thumbs and spread nimble hands. "I am a stranger to this land and know little of place names. But I could take you there."

"Could you?" Del's question was rhetorical. "For a price, of course."

"You did offer one." I sat down and smiled blandly, helping myself to the aqivi the boy had so thoughtfully provided.

"A small one," he answered. "I want only to accompany you on your travels."

I set the cup down, aqivi untasted. "She has a partner," I said distinctly.

"Both of you!" the boy amended hastily. "With the Sandtiger and his lady."

The Sandtiger and his lady. Sure enough, Del was scowling at him. But before she could say anything, I motioned the boy to sit down on the sole remaining stool. His awareness of my identity put me in a magnanimous frame of mind; as soon as I could get the wine-girl to deliver a third cup, I intended the boy to share some of the aqivi.

"You'll take us to Ajani so long as we allow you to ride with us?" I nodded thoughtfully. "Since the only way you can lead us anywhere is to ride with us, it seems a simple bargain."

He settled the saffron burnous as he pulled up the stool. "I mean after," he said.

"Why?" Del asked.

He shrugged, showed us both a crooked, innocent grin. "I'm a stranger here in the South... to the North, too, if we go there. If I'm to gain any fame at all, I need to know my way around. Riding with you two--"

"Fame?" I undercut his glib explanation. "You want to be a panjandrum?"

That earned me blank stares from both of them.

"Panjandrum," I repeated. "A man of repute."

The boy thought it over. A slow smile spread. "Panjandrum," he echoed. "I like it." He nodded, trying it on for size. "A man of repute."

"That's the polite definition." I scratched the scars on my cheek. "I won't bother to give you the others since you're so taken with the word."

"Panjandrum," he murmured thoughtfully.

I sighed and sucked aqivi. Del scowled.

"Yes," he said. "Bellin the Cat, a panjandrum."

"Bellin the Cat?" I was startled, wondering if his foolish quest for glory and fame had led him to adopt a name similar to my own. Or, more precisely, to my

animal namesake.

"Bellin." He smiled and waved a hand vaguely in a southerly direction. "I've been at sea for most of my life, sailing here and there. I thought it was time I discovered what it meant to be a landlubber."

"And you picked the South?" I could think of more hospitable places.

He shrugged. "Seemed likely enough."

Which meant he'd had little choice in the matter. I nodded and drank more aqivi.

"Bellin the Cat," Del said quietly. "Why do you wish to become a--" she paused, fitting the strange Southron word to her Northern tongue "--panjandrum?"

"Always have." His grin and good spirits were infectious. "A man should make his mark some way... insure his place among other men--and women." He shrugged again, rippling saffron silk. "I figure if I'm going to be here anyway, I may as well do what I can to make sure I'm a somebody."

Her tone was infinitely bland. "A humble man might prefer differently."

"A humble man would," Bellin agreed equably. "But no one of my acquaintance would ever lumber me with that description."

At least he was an honest blowhard. "Then why not go out and earn your fame?" I asked. "Why attach yourselves to us?"

He spread supple hands. "What's the sense in struggling and scraping and suffering if there's no need for it? Riding with the Sandtiger and his lady, I'm almost guaranteed to become a panjandrum long before I would otherwise." His smile was disarming. "Can you blame me for trying to take advantage of an opportunity?"

"I am not the Sandtiger's lady" Del said crossly. "My name is Del. I have business with Ajani. Do you know where he is?"

Bellin chose the diplomatic answer. "It should not be difficult to find him."

"Oh?" Pale brows rose. "Then I suggest you do so. Now." She flicked fingers in eloquent dismissal.

"But--"

"Better go." I raised my cup in tribute. "Thanks for the aqivi."

With grave dignity the boy rose, shook out the folds of his burnous, took himself elsewhere. Again I saw the line of oddly-shaped weapons tucked into his belt.

Del contemplated me across the table. Her expression was pensive as she slowly poured herself a cup of aqivi.

"Think he knows?" I asked.

"No."

"Think we'll see him again?"

Her eyes were limpid. "If he lacks the information I want, we'd better not." She drank, made a moue of distaste. "I have no patience for fools or would-be panjandrums."

I laughed and poured my cup full again of the would-be panjandrum's aqivi.

Five

Without consulting me (of course), Del changed her mind. We would not leave Harquhal, she told me, until the next morning; she wanted to wait a night to see if anyone came forward with genuine information about Ajani.

I agreed readily enough. Del had made up her mind, and I didn't much feel like

arguing it with her. For one, it was nice to sleep in a real bed again, and to drink among men in a Southron cantina, knowing with the dawn I would leave such comforts behind. For another, it wasn't difficult to look at things from Del's point of view. A band of Southron raiders had overrun her family's caravan along the border, brutally killing everyone save Del and her youngest brother. It didn't take much imagination to figure out what the raiders had done to Del or Jamail before she had escaped; in her place, I'd be as dedicated to revenge. She wanted Ajani, the leader, and I wasn't about to try to dissuade her.

The day was not as tedious as it might have been; Del was quiet enough, lost in private thoughts, but now that our names were known--thanks to Del's identification of me and a gregarious Bellin the Cat--men came around to ask me about my exploits. Del they pretty much ignored, being indisposed to give a woman credit for killing one of their own in a circle--which has been, heretofore, a strictly male province--but they were chatty enough with me. Before long I was the center of attention, swilling free aqivi and explaining how it was I'd come to be the best sword-dancer in the South.

(Other Southron sword-dancers might argue the fact, but I wasn't about to so long as these generous individuals felt like buying me drinks. Besides, it probably is true, Del's skill notwithstanding; and anyway, she's a Northerner.)

Come nighttime, nothing much changed, although aqivi and wine flowed more heavily, and the stories got more convoluted even as I told them. And I was aware, very aware, of Bellin's smiling face at the edges of the crowd. He watched me, he watched the others, clearly enjoying vicariously what he wanted to badly to experience himself: fame.

I could have told him fame was not the name of the game. Survival is. I never

knew who I might meet in the circle or when, and I certainly never knew what the outcome might be. I am good, very good, but I am also a realist. Any man can be defeated, depending on myriad circumstances.

Talk eventually turned to Del, in a sideways sort of way. No one wanted to say much about her, although the undertones were quite distinct. They all wanted to know how the Sandtiger had come to be riding with a Northern bascha who called herself a sword-dancer, even though such a thing was tantamount to blasphemy.

I did not tell them everything. I told them enough. Enough to pique their interest and cause them to wonder if indeed the Northern bascha was as good as she appeared. I felt it was self-evident, but no man changes his attitude overnight. Not even me. And the gods knew I had reason enough to know better, with Del sharing both bed and profession, not to mention lifestyle.

And so I gave them a little to chew on, knowing full well they would dream of a blonde-haired, blue-eyed woman when they crawled into bed that night. Thinking of that very thing, I wondered if perhaps it wasn't time I did a little crawling into bed myself.

With Del, of course, which was a whole lot better than being permitted only to dream about her.

Except that it appeared I might be limited to that after all; Del had disappeared. Somewhere between the first jug of aqivi and the last, my Northern bascha had vanished.

I went outside the cantina into the night. Torchlight cast eerie shadows along the wall and made black pockets out of corners, turnings, alleyways. It was not incredibly late. Passersby were frequent. In the distance I heard the watch calling out the time; the ninth hour after midday. And then I heard the step behind me.

"A full life, Sandtiger." Bellin moved to stand at my left. "Maybe someday..."

"Maybe someday you'll be an old man, and die in bed." I didn't smile at him, because the topic wasn't particularly amusing. "A man tells stories to please his audience, and embellishes them as he goes."

"Then none of them are true?"

"True enough." I barely glanced at him. "I don't lie, Bellin. Lies cause trouble."

Somewhat ruefully, he scratched at the smudge of mustache. "I know about that well enough." He grinned. "More aqivi?"

"No more room." I set my right shoulder against the vertical support post nearest me and leaned, squinting at him. "What do you want, Bellin the Cat?"

"I told you. To travel with you."

"Del and I ride alone."

"I wouldn't be in the way."

I grunted. "What we do isn't for fun or fame, boy. It's our profession."

"I know that. I am not without some intelligence." His smile took the delicate rebuke out of his words. "You could give me a chance just to see."

I sighed. "You're not from around these parts. Do you even know what a sword-dancer is?"

Bellin's white teeth flashed. "That all depends," he said lightly. "Some of them, maybe most of them, are honorable folk who take pride in their work. But others, I think, are no better than, say--" His smile broadened, hooked down wryly at one end "--a pirate."

I frowned. "What's a pirate?"

He blinked. Considered the best answer a moment. Then nodded slightly, lifting

one shoulder in an eloquent shrug. "A man who sails the oceans and--" he paused, "--salvages what others neglect to adequately protect."

"Ah." I nodded. "A borjuni, we'd say, in the Punja, depending on the ferocity employed. Up here, so close to the border, the best word might be thief."

Bellin laughed. "Might be," he conceded, not in the least nonplussed by my frankness.

"Sword-dancing is a bit different," I pointed out. "We're not exactly out to steal an opponent's wealth."

"No. Just his life." Bellin sighed and gazed upward at the moon, a blade-sharp crescent setting the walls aglow. "I'm not a pirate anymore."

"But still a thief."

He blinked at me, all innocence. "I'd rather be a panjandrum."

I couldn't help myself; I laughed. Bellin the Cat was about the most engaging and unaffected individual I'd ever met, especially considering what he chased invited affectation. I looked at him sidelong. Young, ages younger than myself, but then I felt downright elderly at times, with Del around.

And that reminded me: she wasn't.

Bellin saw my frowning search of the immediate area. "She said she'd be back soon."

That snapped my head around. "What?"

Obligingly, he repeated the statement.

I scowled. "She told you that?"

He scratched his chin. "You weren't listening."

"That's a load of--" But I broke it off, because basically it was true.

"She said she'd go back to the inn, stable the horses, then come after you."

Come after me. Come after me, like a mother sending her tardy child home.

Balefully, I scowled at him. A very cool young man, was Bellin, so blithe with his information. "Do you know anything about Ajani?"

He was busy rearranging the folds of his saffron robe; delaying tactics.

"Ajani," I said gently.

"The name is familiar."

"Remember what I said about lies, boy. How in the end they can trip you up."

"Only if you're clumsy." He grinned, reached beneath the robe to the small of his back, took from his belt three oddly shaped hand axes, or something like. I'd never seen such things before.

Casually, effortlessly, Bellin the Cat began to toss them into the air, end over end, from one hand to the other, until the weapons were little more than a blur of wood and leather and steel. "On board ship," he told me, "we often get very restless. This is one way to pass the time."

From the other side of the post, having dodged there somewhat more quickly than I intended--and paying the price with my aqivi-addled head--I watched the flying axes. Up. Down. Around. Closer to his head than I liked. And all the movement was beginning to make me dizzy.

Bellin's hands were supple and exceedingly quick. Undoubtedly he was a marvelous pickpocket or cutpurse, except his mastery of the axes indicated action of a higher level altogether.

He caught them one, two, three, stopped throwing. And handed one to me.

I examined it in silence. About a foot and a half in length, altogether, but oddly constructed. One side of the haft boasted a flattened steel blade, quite sharp, much like that of a normal single-bitted hand ax. But the other side was a rounded knob of metal. The wooden haft was leather-wrapped for a truer grip;

for me, the balance was off, but obviously it suited Bellin perfectly.

"Give it a try," he suggested.

"And do what with it? Chop down this post?" I looked at said post. "Right now I think I need it."

"No. No--here. Watch." And threw an ax across the street into a wooden mounting block, where it stuck.

I squinted across the distance and looked at the ax-bedecked block a long moment. Then at the ax in my hand. Lastly, at Bellin himself. "There are people," I told him distinctly, "in the street."

Well, there had been. Most of them had panicked and quitted the street as soon as they figured out what Bellin was throwing. Or fell down to lie in the dirt, cursing him elaborately.

"I know," he said brightly, nodding agreement. "Part of the trick is in the timing, of course; it's the real challenge." His smile was eloquently innocent.

"Once, I even missed."

I gave him back his ax as Del approached from the left, and prepared to step out and meet her. "Maybe we'll talk again some day."

"Do you think there's any chance I might join up with you you?" Bellin asked, following.

I felt the weight of Theron's sword across my shoulders. "Where we're going," I told him, "there isn't room for three. And it's personal."

Bellin stopped. Sighed. Nodded. And sank two more axes into the mounting block, ignoring renewed--and louder--curses.

Del's brows were raised as I fell into step beside her. Reading her face, I shrugged an answer. "Passing time." I stumbled over a shadow, which elicited a brief breathy snort of amusement from her. "He really wants to join us."

"No."

We turned a corner and were funneled into a tighter, deserted street. "So I told him." We bumped elbows twice as we strolled, and I heard Del sigh. Well, I'd had a lot of aqivi. "I told him--"

I was unable to tell her what I'd told him because four shapes detached themselves from the shadows and came at us.

"Ah, hoolies," I muttered, unsheathing Theron's sword, "couldn't they have done this when I was sober?"

It was, of course, a rhetorical question, and Del did not waste time on an answer. (Although undoubtedly she had one.) I heard the whine of Boreal as Del loosed her from the sheath. I also heard a snatch of song, and knew Del wasn't going to waste much unaugmented effort on the Punja-mites. She was keying the sword, which meant they stood less of a chance than ever.

The light was bad, but only for a moment. Del's blade burned salmon-silver in the darkness, and I saw four dark Southron faces suddenly thrown into relief: all planes and hollows and black blots for eyes and mouths. They squinted, swore, then advanced with appreciable determination.

Two of them came at me, two at Del. At least they had learned that much by watching her fight.

They wore baggy robes over equally baggy jodhpurs and tunics. All the excess material makes it more difficult to separate flesh from fabric and stab the part that counts before it can stab back. I shredded one robe, sliced through a silken sash, caught a rib, but little more. He was very fast, or else I had gotten slower. (Possible, in view of the aqivi sloshing in belly and head.)

Something stung my left wrist. Providentially, as it turned out. The pain nagged

me right out of my liquor haze and made me considerably more accurate; I spitted one man through the belly, sliced open the other lower still, so that he dropped his sword altogether and concentrated on keeping his entrails from spilling out to soil his silks.

I caught my balance, turned, saw Del kill one of her assailants. And then, as she spun to dispatch the fourth, we discovered there was no need. The pock-faced Southroner was engaged in falling flat on his face, quite startled to discover himself dead, and landed with nary a protest.

Protruding from his spine was one of Bellin's axes.

Del and I stared at the ax a moment, then looked up. The would-be panjandrum approached quietly, bent over the body, jerked the ax free. The sound was different than that made by a sword withdrawn; I decided the latter was less troubling to a man who had partaken too freely of aqivi.

Bellin inspected the blade, cleaned it on the dead man's robe, looked at us.

"Missed the post again."

I sighed. "You still can't come."

He thought it over, nodded, turned on his heel and marched away. Juggling his three deadly axes.

"Well," Del remarked, "at least the boy's accurate."

"Boy?" I scowled at her. "He's your age, at least."

She looked after Bellin. Then back at me. "Well," she said again, "I guess he looks so young to me because I've been riding with you."

I did not dignify it with an answer.

Del grinned and raised pale brows. "Now, what was it you were telling him?" She cleaned Boreal and slid her home again. "What was it you were saying before we were interrupted?"

I grunted, doing my own clean-up duties. "That life was too short for him to waste it tagging along with us."

"Is that why you're coming with me?"

"You know why I'm coming."

"No," she said as we headed down the street again, "you never told me. You just caught up to me that day, and you've been with me ever since."

"And I suppose you're sorry."

She slanted me an eloquent sidelong glance, examining me at great length. "Have you ever given me reason to be sorry?"

I scratched ferociously at an itching armpit and tried to recapture a belch.

"Not me, bascha. You need me."

Del did not answer, which I took to be answer enough. The woman can be tricky, but not incomprehensible.

"Here," she said. "The inn."

"Watch the step," I warned.

Del said nothing. She just went inside and let the curtain slap me in the face. Again.

Later, much later, I snapped out of sleep into wakefulness, fully alert, as Del slipped out of bed. Sword-dancers who desire to stay alive in the midst of enemies learn very quickly how to snatch sleep whenever possible; how also to wake with alacrity, with nothing lost in the transition.

I thought, at first, she meant to relieve herself in the nightpot left for that purpose. But instead she retrieved her sword from the floor next to mine, unsheathed it, took two steps to the middle of the room. And there she knelt down, naked, with pale hair tumble around her breasts and the sword blade

pressed between them.

There was no lamp, but the crescent moon slanted dim illumination through lath-slatted windows. The woman knelt on the floor, wrapped in shadows and silver moonlight. And I heard her begin to sing.

It was such a little song. Barely more than a whisper of sound, threaded through with a hiss of withheld volume. She meant not to waken me, then, although Del knew my sleeping habits, now, as well as her own.

I have a tin ear. To me, music is little more than noise; loud, soft, pitched high or low. I have heard her sing before, preparing to enter the circle, but it had meant nothing to me. Just--noise. Some personal petition to her gods or to her sword. Lifesong, deathsong; one and the same, to me. Little more than a Northern idiosyncrasy. Theron had done it also.

But still Del sang, and the sword came alive in her hands.

At first, I did not believe it. Moonlight is often fickle; clouds, I thought, moving across the crescent to alter the intensity of its light. But if anything, the moon paid homage to the sword. Its light was clearly diluted by the luminance of the blade.

It started at the tip. First, the merest speck of light. A spark, steadfast and unflagging, welling like a drop of blood on a thorn-pricked fingertip. It pulsed, as if it lived, as if it breathed. And then it crept ever upward, finger by finger, bead by bead, slowly, like a necklet of Punja crystals. Frowning, I watched one become some become many, until the double-edged blade was ablaze with light, sparks joining to form a whole.

Pulsing. Bright--brighter--brilliant... then dimming nearly to absence, until it renewed itself.

Del sang on, and the blade burst into flame.

"Hoolies, Del--" I was upright, awkward in my haste, meaning to knock the sword from her hands and succeeding only in nearly falling flat on my face. Tangled in bedclothes (and fuddled by too much aqivi), I staggered; in the flames, her face was stark.

I fully expected to see her hair catch fire, but it did not. Neither did the flames touch her flesh. They clung to the blade, infatuated with double edges, flirting coyly with the runes. And then died, snuffed out, as her song wavered; her eyes were fixed on the runes.

I reached out, but something in her face kept me from touching the sword. I knew I could, with impunity, because knowing the jivatma's name allowed me some degree of familiarity: an ability to touch a portion of the power that Del knew in full measure. Once, in ignorance, before I had known the name, I grasped the silvered hilt with its everchanging shapes and lost layers of skin off my palm.

I had been ice-marked for weeks. Now, the brand was gone but not the feelings it had engendered.

Because of them, and Del's eyes, I forbore to touch the sword.

The last of the sparks winked out. The pulsing was vanquished by moonlight. The sword was a sword again, with nothing of magic divulged.

I drew in a breath and wet my lips. "I've never seen it do that before."

"I took care to make sure you did not." The blade, quiescent, was obscured by the twin falls of pale hair, hanging over her shoulders.

I sighed, aware that too much aqivi had dulled my senses. The first startled response had faded, leaving me tasting the sourness of reaction and sensing the first twinges of a headache. "What in hoolies were you doing?"

"Asking advice." Del rose, took the sheath I retrieved for her, slid Boreal

home. "I am--twisted."

"Twisted?" I raised brows. Her limbs were straight as ever.

She frowned, shrugging one shoulder. "Twisted... bound up... divided--" She stopped, sensing her words altered intended meaning. Though she speaks Southron well, if curiously accented, there are times our decidedly diverse heritage makes communication difficult, if not downright impossible.

"Mixed-up," I translated. "Confused."

"Confused," she echoed. "Yes." She put the sheathed sword back on the floor next to mine, so close to the bed, then climbed onto the cot and dragged the bedclothes around her shoulders. "What am I to do?"

It is not often Del offers me the chance to even suggest what she might do. But an outright question underscored the magnitude of the confusion she now admitted.

I sat down on the edge of the cot. "Has this anything to do with the man you killed tonight?" I looked at the moon. "Last night?"

Del sighed. Her expression was pensive. "Nothing and everything, and all at once."

"He was one of the raiders--"

"Oh, yes. I recall him. I recall them all." She shook her head in negligent dismissal. "At first I thought not, because I could not believe it... but I could not forget their faces if I wished to... too often I see them in my sleep."

"Yes, well, even dogs dream."

A poor attempt at offhanded empathy; she didn't even smile. "I don't wish, Tiger. I wish never to forget them, until the blood-debt is collected."

"Even then, you may not forget them."

One slender arm departed the protection of the bedclothes. She smoothed folds rucked up over knees doubled beneath her chin. After a moment, in an oddly vulnerable appeal, she touched my shoulder, found an old scar, traced it. Over and over.

"It felt good to kill him," she said.

Her tone belied the words. "But not good enough."

The fingers halted a moment, then resumed their idle movement. "I am sworn."

"I know. To many things, bascha... and that is why you're twisted." I caught her hand and stilled it. "What did you ask the sword?"

"Which risk I should assume."

I frowned. "What risk?"

Del hooked her hair behind her left ear. "If I put myself on Ajani's trail, the searching may take weeks. Months. Even years." Her mouth twisted. "Longer than the time I have left before my sentence is levied."

"And yet if you go North to face the judgment of your peers and teachers, you may lose Ajani's trail." I nodded. "Not an easy choice."

"Oh, it is. Too easy." She took her hand away and reached both up behind her neck. Unclasped something. Held it out into the moonlight. A string of lumpy amber, red-brown in the slanted light. "I made this," she said quietly. "Ten years ago, I made this, as a birth-gift for my mother."

I recalled how she had taken something from the neck of the Southroner she had killed. How she had knotted it up in one fist without saying a word about it.

"Risk," I said quietly. "Hunt Ajani--yesterday, today, tomorrow--while others are hunting you."

Her hand shut away the necklet. "I owe my an-kaidin so much."

"And so you asked him his advice." I heard her song again, in the confines of my head; saw again the flaming sword. "What did he say, bascha?"

"Nothing," Delilah whispered at last, and a tear ran down her cheek.

We have been companions. Swordmates. Bedmates. But in many things we are strangers to one another, afraid to trespass where emotions may not be wanted.

Having been locked so long in service to oneself, each of us, it is difficult to turn the key and unlock ourselves, saying the things we desire to say, to share the things that should be shared. And so the Northern woman and the Southron man, born of violence, shaped by an angry determination to overcome those who had beaten us, had learned to say nothing of fears, knowing the admission might make those fears come true.

Del crying was enough to clear my head of aqivi befuddlement for good. And to know myself plunged into a divisive confusion; did I offer comfort? Or did I retreat to give her the privacy she demanded from me so often?

Hoolies, how did other men deal with this?

Well... women had cried in front of me before. But they were Southron women, with completely different outlooks and intentions. I had learned to take tears as a warning sign of an involvement no longer beneficial to my lifestyle.

But this was Del. This was a woman who demanded equality, requiring and desiring no particular favors or consideration because of her sex.

At least she didn't sob. Neither did she hastily wipe away the tears as another woman might--and had; a woman apparently afraid I might discover that somehow, beneath all the mess, she had become another person entirely, and not worthy of my interest.

Del just--cried. Silently. Without fuss. She simply sat and let the tears run down her face.

Oh, hoolies... why me?

Well, there was one thing...

She stirred as I touched her, showing her the best way I knew how that, regardless of her circumstances--and tears--I still wanted her. But, apparently, it wasn't what she wanted.

"Not now," she said crossly, shifting away.

"I just thought--"

"I know what you thought." Her face was wet, but no more tears wound their way down her cheeks. Instead, she scowled at me. That expression I understood well enough. "That isn't always the answer, Tiger... though it may be hard for you--or any other man--to understand."

I'll give her this much, she knows how and where to hit. And my pride, as always, smarted. My sense of helplessness increased in direct proportion to the sudden shrinkage of desire.

"Hoolies, Del, what do you want from me? I try to help you out--"

"Help me? Help yourself, you mean." She got up, ripping the thin blanket from the bed to wind around her body; paced to the lath-slatted window and glared out.

I was left with no blanket and very little patience. I plumped the single lumpy pillow across my lap, glad of some coverage, and did my own share of glaring.

"What in hoolies is a man supposed to do, Del? Guess? Especially with you.

You're so prickly, I never know when you plan to stick me."

"I never plan it," she said. "It just happens. You ask for it, sometimes."

"Like now?" I nodded. "Fine. Next time I'll leave you alone."

She sighed heavily. "Sometimes a woman just wants to be held."

"And sometimes a man is more than willing just to hold," I threw back, "but you've got to give him some sort of clue."

She said nothing.

"Especially you," I pointed out. "I never know if I'm in bed with the sword-dancer or the woman. Good as you are in the circle, Del, you're more male than female. I know it has to be that way, and I know why. But in bed I want you, not the an-ishtoya."

She closed her eyes for a long moment. When she opened them she was dry-eyed, but curiously wounded. "You've had more of me than any other man," she said softly, "except for Ajani."

I could not look away. After a moment I rose, tossed aside the pillow, crossed the room to the woman. Remembered that the self-possessed an-ishtoya, the deadly Northern sword-dancer, had had her girlhood stolen from her. And so I held her, only held her, and it was enough for us both.

Six

Sand gave way to dirt, scrub grass to thick-meshed turf, creosote to spearlike trees and spreading shrubs I couldn't name. Even the smell altered; I sniffed, disliking it, tasting it on my tongue, and realized it came from the trees. A pungent, clinging odor, not so different from huva weed, though lacking the same results.

The land itself changed also. The scattered hills of Harquhal merged here to form a family, touching hands and heads and shoulders. And promising more to

come; in the distance I could see mountains rearing skyward out of the earth.

We beat our way northward, following the Traders' Road out of Harquhal. With each stride the stud took me farther away from the South, farther from what I knew, thrusting me into a foreign land like a sword through a man's belly. I didn't much like the picture, but I didn't say so to Del.

Well, I doubt she would have paid much attention anyway. She was locked up in silence, unusually quiet even for her. And yet I sensed expectancy, an anticipation that had nothing to do with fear or trepidation, or the discomfort I was feeling. Del was locked away, but not because she retreated. Because what she felt was intensely private: Delilah was coming home.

I knew it at once, though she herself said nothing. It was a change in posture.

A subtle straightening of backbone, a squaring of the shoulders, a lifting of the chin. And a slow, glorious smile that set her face alight.

It was a remarkable transformation, but it only made me surly.

Del stopped her speckled gelding by a small stone cairn. She swung a leg over and slid off, burnous tangling briefly on the stirrup. She jerked it free absently and walked away from the horse, ignoring him as he tried to follow.

After a moment he quit and turned away, dropping his head to forage in hummocky, turfy grass. Del paid no mind. She merely climbed up past the cairn and drew Boreal from her sheath.

She faced north. Behind and below her, I could see nothing but Del's back, all swathed in creamy silk. She lifted the jivatma, held it crosswise to the sun so that light danced off the blade, then brought it down and kissed the steel once, twice, thrice, in a gesture of homage and dedication.

"Sulhaya," she said aloud, thanking her Northern gods.

I shivered. In the sun, it was warm, but I was cold to the bone. And then it passed and I was warm again, left with a nagging memory of something I could not explain.

Sunlight glinted off Boreal's naked blade. Del had not keyed the jivatma, and yet I saw the palest bloom of salmon-silver. As if the sword as well as Del knew she had come home at last.

Uneasily, I shifted my rump in the saddle. "Bascha--"

Del turned. Her face and posture were transfigured. I did not speak again.

She slid the sword home. The moment had passed; she was Del again, but with a new smile on her lips. A smile I had never seen, and wished it was meant for me.

"So," she said, "I am home. Now it is your decision."

"My decision?"

She gestured at the cairn. "There lies the border."

I had figured as much. But I glared at the cairn anyway; it represented a vast unknown. A place where sandtigers never roamed.

Her voice was very quiet. "I would understand."

I looked at her. I saw comprehension and compassion in her eyes. She was not quite twenty-one, significantly younger than I in years, far older than I in insight. Sometimes, I hated her for it; now I hated myself. "Would you?"

Judiciously, after a moment, she suggested, "Perhaps not."

Hoolies. Yes she did. As much as I myself did.

And so, perversely, if only to prove her wrong, I rode across the border.

And wished at once I hadn't; there was something wrong here.

Del, apparently oblivious, walked down to catch her grazing gelding. She turned him, led him up to the stud, mounted silently. And then she looked at me and thanked me, using the Northern word.

"What?" I was distracted.

"Thank you," she repeated, this time in Southron.

Something clammy ran down my spine. "You don't need me." Born of belligerence and discomfort, it came out rather more curtly than I'd intended. (Sometimes the truth, all tangled in unnamed feelings, makes me a tad bit sullen.) "You don't need me. Not really. We both know that. You don't need anyone. Not while you carry that sword."

Del frowned a little. And then a corner of her mouth twitched. "In your own special way, you are as invaluable as my sword."

"Uh-huh." I kneed the stud into a walk. "Tell me another one, bascha."

"No," she answered readily. "Because you are fishing, Tiger, and we are nowhere near a lake."

"Doing what?"

She opened her mouth, shut it, considered me a moment, then opened her mouth again, and told me what fishing was. And what fish were, for that matter.

"You eat them?" I was aghast; fish sounded like revolting creatures, all scales and fins and gills.

A line drew her brows together. "In all your travels from Harquhal to Julah, surely you must have tasted fish. Julah, I think, is not so far from the ocean... and Harquhal is not so far from the North. Don't men go fishing?"

I scowled. "I've never spent much time in Harquhal... and as for Julah, how should I know how close it is to an ocean? I've never gone past the mountains."

Astonishment parted pale brows and sent them arching toward her hairline. "Have you never looked at maps?"

"Of course I've looked at maps. I know the Punja, don't I? I know where all the

domains are, don't I?--and the permanent villages, and all the waterholes. I

know--"

Del raised a hand. "Yes. I see. Indeed, forgive me; I do not doubt your wisdom."

So bland her tone, so serene her expression. Which meant she didn't mean any of what she said, and said it merely for effect. (Or to shut me up.) "I only meant it seemed odd you are so uncertain of the borders and what lies beyond them."

"And I suppose you are certain."

"I was taught," she said calmly. "It was a part of my apprenticeship, to know the land I meant to traverse. I have put it all up here." She tapped her head.

"In addition to learning the sword-dance, we must also learn mathematics, languages and geography."

Well, it explained why Del and one or two other Northern sword-dancers I'd met spoke my language so well. Southron is easy to learn, but Desert--the idiom of the Punja--is not. Del had required me to translate. She knew a little now, having picked it up from me, but mostly we conversed in Southron. It had seemed natural enough to me.

As for mathematics and geography, the words were completely foreign, nothing more than sounds. My apprenticeship had been given over to the sword-dance only, to the physical forms and rituals that made sword-dancing so complete. I had spent my years learning how to move, how to fight, how to kill; there had been room for nothing else.

I shrugged. "We're different people, bascha... born of different customs."

After a moment, she nodded pensively. "Sometimes, I forget. There is always the circle for us, and the dance... it is difficult to recall there is more to us than swords and circles and dancing. In those ways, we are so alike... in others, so very different."

Downright voluble, was Del. Crossing the border into the North apparently unlocked a lot of the privacy she hoarded so carefully, freeing her to speak of things we neither of us usually brought up.

"Yes, well, you're a woman and I'm a man," I pointed out affably. "There are bound to be differences."

Del's face was expressionless. "Bound to be," she agreed, "even when there should be none."

"Oh, Del--now, let's not start that. You know I'm the first one to give you credit for what you've accomplished. Hoolies, bascha, I'm the one who spars with you, remember? I know what you're capable of. Do I hold back? Do I give way? Do I treat you differently because you're a woman?"

She considered it a moment. "Not as much as you used to."

"Sulhaya," I said sourly, and subsided into silence.

Del didn't say much, either, the rest of the day. She seemed to cherish every step of the gelding that took her farther away from the South, while I caught myself, every now and then, looking back over my shoulder. Soon, too soon, the vastness of the desert was replaced with the immediacy of the North; there was no longer anything I could claim familiarity with. I was truly a stranger, cut off from the things I knew.

I hunched on the stud and lost myself to thought, so accustomed to his rhythms that I could ignore him with impunity, except when he chose otherwise. For the moment, he didn't; he plodded onward, upward, ears flicking in all directions, brass bridle ornamentation jangling with every bob of his head.

All around us the ground swelled like boils on a butt. Above us crouched the mountains, waiting to hem us in.

I shivered once. Shifted in the saddle. Shifted again, scowling northward toward the mountains. Opened my mouth to say something to Del but shut it again, with a snap, and disliked myself intensely for nearly speaking aloud.

But something here was wrong.

It lifted the hairs on my body. Something stirred against my scalp. It itched in response and I scratched viciously, knowing perfectly well it wasn't a nagging pest but something unknown. Something undefinable. And something that might, in Del's eyes, make me an utter fool.

I drew in a deep breath, trying to shake off the increasing sensation of wrongness. I meant only to blow air out again, but words spilled free instead.

"I just don't like it."

It surprised even me, slipping out that way, so clipped and definitive. Del snapped her head around and stared at me, upper body moving with the subtle rhythms of her mount. "Don't like what?"

I scowled down at the clipped mane of the stud. My fingers, of their own volition, picked at the loose weave of braided cotton reins. I saw wide fingernails, some curiously ridged, others squashed, and scarred, ore-pocked knuckles. The weight I'd lost in captivity had returned with a decent diet, but the scars were reminders of a more permanent sort. It hadn't been all that long since Del and I had escaped the tanzeer Aladar's imprisonment: me, from his gold mine; Del from unwanted attentions. A matter of months, only.

"Tiger--what don't you like?"

There it was again. And I had no better answer. "I don't know," I said grudgingly. "It."

"It," she echoed blankly, after a startled consideration.

I lifted shoulders and rolled them, testing the fit of the harness and the

weight of my sword. No, not mine; Theron's. "Bascha--don't you feel something?"

"Oh, yes," she answered readily.

It relieved me immeasurably. "There. See? I'm not crazy. There is something odd... something uncanny--"

"Odd?" she asked. "I think not. What I feel is home."

Yes, well, she would. But me, I didn't. I felt decidedly discomfited. "Del--"

She halted her speckled gelding. Accordingly, the stud also stopped. Del set the flat of her hands against the low pommel of her saddle and leaned forward on stiffened arms, shifting weight from rump to wrists. "What you feel," she said, "is frightened."

"Fri--"

"Frightened," she repeated, overriding my startled protest. "You have never been out of the South before. You have never left home before."

"Del, I'm not a child--"

"Children adapt to change more easily than adults." Her face was serious. "I know what you feel. I felt it myself, when I went south to find Jamail. Once I crossed the border from my land into yours, I knew I could not go back again until the job was finished. I knew myself cut off, denied my former life; that what I had to do was more important than anything else in my life--"

"But I don't have a job." Rudely, I interrupted. "I'm just here because I felt like coming along."

Del sighed and tucked a fallen lock of hair behind an ear.

I set my teeth and tried to be patient, "There's something else," I told her.

"Something more. Tell me I'm crazy if you want, but I feel it. I know it's here."

Del looked around. Each step took us a little higher, rising steadily out of the vast flatness of the South. Here, spangled with hills and rises and hollows, it was hard to believe the Punja even existed. "It might rain," she offered at last. "Perhaps that's what you feel."

"Hooiies, bascha, we're not talking rain, here--we're talking something else entirely, something serious." I glared at her. "And if you don't feel it, you're deaf, dumb and blind."

Her jaw tautened. "Am I?"

I drew in a deep breath. Shoved silken sleeve to elbow and bared a muscled forearm. Sure enough, the dark hairs were standing on end. "Well?" I asked.

Del looked at my arm. Looked at me. Something was in her face, some form of inner turmoil that she fought to keep from showing itself too freely. I watched how carefully she considered the words she intended to use, and I saw her decide on them. "I think perhaps you have convinced yourself there is something odd--"

"Convinced myself?" I didn't let her finish. "Oh, no, bascha, this took no convincing. This is real. I'm not imagining anything."

Del sighed a little. "You yourself have told me you don't believe in magic, that for you, it doesn't exist--"

"What I've told you is that I don't like it," I said clearly. "Oh, it exists, all right. How, why or in what forms, I can't explain. All I know is that most people don't understand how to use it, and so they use it wrong." I shook my head, glancing around uneasily. "There is something about the North--"

"There is nothing about the North," she interrupted curtly. "It is about you.

About the Sandtiger, who puts no stock in what others may believe, ridiculing their emotions. And now he can't deal with his own." She unhooked a foot and threw a leg over the saddle, sliding down to wait for me on the ground. "Come

down, Tiger, and I will show you what you feel are superstitions."

"What?"

She stared up at me. "We will settle this, Tiger, once and for all, so I don't have to listen to your muttering." She stabbed a finger at the ground. "Come down here."

I considered pointing out that her tone left something to be desired--she might have asked, instead of commanding--but I decided arguing wasn't worth it. So I stepped off the stud and waited.

Del walked away from the horses and gestured for me to follow. I did, grudgingly, and halted as she did, in a hollow between two hummocky little mounds.

"Well?" I asked.

"Unsheathe the sword and plant it in the ground." She didn't smile. "Pretend it's a man's belly."

I looked warily at the ground, then at her. "What's supposed to happen?"

"Nothing," Del said, between set teeth. "Nothing at all will happen, and then you'll see you're spouting nonsense."

I sighed. "Fine. Just fine, bascha... take a man at his word."

"I'll take the sword's word."

I scowled at her. She was being purposely obscure simply to irritate me. (It nearly always does, too.) But this time I refused to let Del win; I unsheathed Theron's dead sword and plunged the blade into the earth.

Nothing happened.

"There," Del said, "you see--"

Indeed, I did see, for as long as I was able. And then the ground around us

exploded.

For a single insane moment, I wanted to laugh out loud. I wanted to rub her face in it, to shout aloud that I was right.

But I didn't. I was too busy trying to breathe.

Eventually, my eyes stopped tearing, my ears ceased ringing, my chest halted its heaving. I sat up. Spat out dirt. Sneezed. Picked grass out of my hair. Peered through the acrid smoke and saw Del doing much the same. She was all right, then; it meant I could gloat with impunity.

Except I wasn't so sure I wanted to, anymore.

The sword stood upright between us, untouched by the blast that had thrown us both to the ground. The earth around it was scorched, but the blade was clean of ash or charring. It glowed a pale, luminescent purple.

I stood up slowly and slapped dirt and ash from my burnous. "Well," I said lightly, "time to get a new sword."

Del remained seated. She contemplated the glowing blade. I saw astonishment and disbelief. Careful consideration. The line deepened between her brows as she scowled at Theron's sword. To herself, she said, "It isn't supposed to do that. Theron is dead."

"Now do you believe me?"

She didn't even glance up. "Touch it, Tiger."

I nearly gaped. "Touch it? Touch that? After what it did before? You're sandsick, bascha. We're leaving that thing stuck here in the ground for the next fool who comes along, and welcome to it!"

She shook her head. "We can't. It's a jivatma--made for a particular person. It would dishonor the sword to leave it. We should take it to Staal-Ysta, for proper burial at Staal-Kithra."

She was rattling off strange names, but I was too upset to ask her about either of them. "Hoolies, Del, it might have killed us both."

"No," she said calmly, "I don't think so." She chewed her bottom lip and looked from the sword to me. Twice, then once more. Thoughtfully. Deeply. As if she considered something new and wholly unexpected. And then she smiled slowly, so slowly, as if she realized something, and she laughed, as if what she considered was also an answer to a question. "The child goes where the man may not..." The phrase trailed off, but the light in her eyes did not. "Perhaps, after all, I can win."

"Del--"

But she thrust herself up from the ground abruptly, ignoring the beginnings of my question. She pointed to the sword. "I swear, you can touch it. You can use it. It's nothing but a sword."

Wariness made me curt. "You said that once before."

She pursed her lips and nodded. "Yes. I did. It was. And it is again; I promise."

"Then why is it glowing?"

"Because, somehow, you keyed it. Not properly--you don't know the rituals--but somehow you touched the soul within the blade." Del shrugged. "There is too much I cannot tell you, because you are not ishtoya. There are secrets, Tiger, that only the an-kaidin know."

"You know."

"Yes," she said, "I know. But I am sword-dancer, not an-kaidin; it is not for me to tell you."

"Then you pull it out of the ground."

Del sighed. "I can't. You've keyed it, Tiger. Only a little--not enough to make it serve you as it served Theron--but enough to make it aware of the differences between us." She tilted her head left, toward the hilt of Boreal. "Before you knew her name, you couldn't touch my sword without feeling her warding power. Well, I can't touch Theron's sword."

"Then neither can I. I don't know that thrice-cursed blade's name any more than you do."

Blandly, Del smiled. "Apparently, he or she doesn't care."

"He or she," I muttered blackly, and turned my back on them both.

Del waited until I had caught the stud, who had retreated from the explosion, and was in the saddle again. "You are the Sandtiger," she said calmly. "How will you live without a sword?"

She knew, did Delilah, so very well how to appeal to pride in addition to masculinity. But I decided it wouldn't work. "I'll get another sword."

"Where?" With eloquent exaggeration, Del spread empty hands and looked around.

"Is there a tree of them nearby? Are they sown and reaped like crops?"

I set my teeth and forced a benign smile. "I can buy one in the next village."

"And if we are accosted before we reach one, what will you do then?"

My smile died; the question made sense. "I can go back to Harquhal, where there are swords aplenty."

Del's hands slapped down. "Then do it," she said curtly. "And why not stay there, too?"

I smiled smugly, certain of my victory. "Because you don't want me to."

I had expected a reaction, but not the one I got. At my words she looked at Theron's sword, still planted in the ground. Then switched her gaze to me. Considered something briefly; didn't like the result. She opened her mouth,

clamped it shut, muttered something to herself as she scowled toward the mountains, as if they were to blame.

"I am enough," she said in a grim determination. "I will be enough, no matter what they say." And then she subsided once more into bitter silence, and shut me out again.

Not at all what I'd expected. Something was bothering her, and it was serious. Certainly more than I thought our squabbling was worth, considering it was mostly an excuse to work off tension.

She made up her mind. In silence I watched Del catch and mount her gelding. She pulled his questing nose away from the stud's curling lip and aimed him northward, planting sandaled heels against the flesh of his flanks. Naturally the stud tried to follow, to regain the lead and put the gelding in his place, but I held him back. He snorted, stomped, jerked at tautened reins. Noisily swished his tail and tried to sidle his way of the hill, as if I might not notice.

I noticed. I let him sidle. Over to the sword, still stuck in the ground. I scowled down at it, hating the pale purple glow. It reminded me of Theron, who had painted the night alive with the sword during our final dance. Now it was only the merest shadow of its former self, but that shadow was more than I wished to acknowledge.

Del's gelding snorted. I glanced after her and saw she was not waiting. She rode steadily north, steadily upward, intent on her destination. Willing to leave me behind.

Ah, hoolies.

I sighed. Glanced around. No, swords do not grow on trees, nor like crops are

sown and reaped. And only the gods knew when I'd be able to get another.

Hoolies. I hate it when Del is right.

I leaned down and grabbed the hilt, noting absently that the hairs were stilled on my body and the itching had gone away. The feeling of wrongness abated, leaving me in relief, as if I had punctured the boil.

Gritting my teeth, I jerked. The glow dimmed, then died. The blade slid free of the earth. It was only a sword again.

And I was a fool. Again.

Seven

At sunset we turned off the road and made camp against the shoulder of a hill, avoiding established campsites, in a wind-smoothed hollow carved out of thick turf. We settled in like ticks into a dog, staking out the horses, laying a fire, dragging dinner from saddle-pouches: dried cumfa, sticky dates, a loaf of pressed bread, a bota of sour wine. None of it was particularly appetizing, but it served. And it was Southron; I felt a strange urgency to keep myself to what I knew for as long as I possibly could. Soon, too soon, I would know nothing at all.

I ate, drank, sat huddled on my blanket as the last shred of sunlight faded out of the sky. Decided to make conversation; it was better than Northern silence.

"A bumpy place, the North."

Del stopped squirting wine into her mouth. She frowned, bemused. "Bumpy?"

I lifted a single shoulder. "Bumpy. Hilly." I made an undulating gesture with

one hand. "No level ground."

"Here, no," she agreed. "We are in the foothills, the downlands. Soon we will be in the uplands... after that, the mountains. But there are meadows, and valleys... enough level ground on which to build and dwell." She wiped a trickle from her chin, sighing, straying from me even as she spoke, though physically she went nowhere. "To see the forests again, and the grass, and know the whiteness of the snow--"

"Snow?" I turned my head to look at her. "We're going into snow?"

"Yes, of course... we are bound for the mountains beyond Reiver's Pass."

She was incredibly matter-of-fact. Uplands, downlands, mountains and Reiver's Pass... I debated pointing out to her that I knew nothing of her Northern geography, nor of Northern snow.

I took the bota as she handed it over, sucked down wine, handed it back. Del accepted it but did nothing--with it, watching me instead. "You're still upset, aren't you?"

Upset. Well, that was one way of putting it. All I knew was that something yet again was causing my hairs to stand on end.

I sighed in annoyance and stabbed a foot at turf, thrusting sandal into soil. "I swear, there's something here."

"I thought you were feeling better."

"I was. It's come back." It had, about the time we'd spread our blankets. Unease built steadily. I'd tried to shake it off, but all it did was intensify. "Look, Del, I know how it sounds--how do you think I like it?--but I don't know what to tell you. I just sense something, feel something ..." I shook my head, breaking it off. "It's like being in the circle with a dangerous opponent. You don't know

what he'll do, but you know he's going to do it."

"Superstitious Southroner." Del grinned and shook her head. "I don't mean to make fun of you, Tiger--not really. But you have said much the same to me a time or two, when I have spoken of something I can't properly explain. You used to call me witch, remember? Northern sorceress." She tilted her head a little. "But what am I to call you?"

"A fool," I said irritably. "Why not? I begin to think I am one."

"Not a fool," Del mused. "No, something more, I think. Something entirely different."

I snapped my head around. "What?"

She shrugged a little, plugging and unplugging the bota. "What you did with Theron's sword..." Her voice trailed off.

"Well?" I sat upright. "Yes?"

Del was frowning again. "I could lie, and say it was nothing. But it was something, Tiger."

I swore with distinct succinctness. "And do you plan on telling me what it was?"

She shook her head. "I can't. I don't know myself. Just that--well . . . you say you feel something here, and obviously you tapped it."

"Tapped it." I nodded. "I see--I tapped it. With that sword."

"I don't know how--"

"Hoolies, Del, seems like there's a lot you don't know." I flopped down on my blanket.

She sighed. "Always, it comes to stories... tales of this and that. Who knows what is truth or falsehood, or if there is a difference?"

I scowled. "Stories have their uses. Just look at that boy, Bellin, wanting to travel with us... and who are you to deny their effectiveness? I don't doubt men

are always talking about the blonde, blue-eyed bascha who wields a sword like a man."

"I wield it because of a man." Del stared down at the bota, hunching one shoulder, "By now, probably--had the raiders never found us--I would be married, bearing babies, tending a household, tending a man... doing all the things a woman usually does." She raised her head and stared across the fire into the blackness beyond. "But who is to say I would be happier in that life, instead of the one I have?"

"But this life was born of tragedy."

"Yes. And if giving up this life was a way to bring all my kinfolk back, I would. Like this." She snapped her fingers. "But it would not; I am what I am and have what I have. There is no turning back."

I propped myself up on one elbow. "What if there is, Del? What if your blood-guilt is pardoned? You left Jamail behind. There is no more kin-debt facing you. What would you do then?"

Her face was hidden by hair. "I am a sword-dancer, Tiger. It is my life; I chose it."

"For a purpose," I said quietly, "and that purpose is nearly over."

She turned her head to look at me. "And if I said the same to you?"

I shook my head. "It doesn't apply, Del. I became a sword-dancer--"

"--out of a desire for revenge," she finished evenly.

"Don't lie to yourself, Tiger, any more than to me. You are what you are because you hated enough to survive, to acknowledge that hatred, and to use it." She frowned intently, trying to find the words. "What the raiders did to me was not so different from what slavery did to you. It broke us, warped us, remade us,

shaping dedication out of destruction... defiance out of despair." She drew in a breath, released it. "I thought I would never say this--it is not a thing of which to be proud, in the face of kin-blood spilled--but I will say it plainly, to you, who should understand: I am the better for it, regardless of the cause." I thought, briefly, of all the years of slavery. It was so easily done. I had been free longer, now, than I had ever been a slave, but the memories remained. I would never forget them.

I am whatever I am, I said. I am what I have made me, regardless of the reasons. But I could not say it to her.

I rose, rearranged the fit of my burnous, snicked the sword against its sheath.

"Think I'll take a look around."

Del looked after me but made no move to follow. I turned and started the climb to the top of the hill.

The downlands, she had called them. Mere foothills, insignificant in comparison to the mountains. But already I was aware of an oppression bearing down upon my spirit. I was accustomed to the vast reaches of the Southron desert, the wasteland of sand and sun. Here there was vegetation in abundance, rich, aromatic earth that sang with the promise of a life I'd never known, even air that smelled and tasted different. All around me the downlands rose in perverse opposition to their name.

I looked out across the distances, disliking the thickness of the night. In the South, even full dark seems bright enough. It is because the moon, spilling illumination across the miles of flattened sand, knows no obstacles. Light, unhindered, runs forever along the ground. But here, where there are hills and mountains and trees, the moonlight contests for dominance, and nearly always loses.

I shivered. "I don't like it," I said quietly. "And yes, I have a reason... I just don't know it, yet."

Below me, the stud whickered. Talking to me, or to the gelding, or maybe to himself. The sound carried clearly, sounding closer than it was. Looking down, I could see the fire, and the black blot of Del's silhouette, hunched contentedly before the flames.

Well, she would be content. She was, at last, home, after too many years.

Something goosed me in the spine. I swore. Swung around. Lost myself in the sudden shadows and stumbled over a stone. Swore again against the pain in my big toe. The stone rolled, clacked, stopped against another. There it rested. I saw it clearly, cheek-by-jowl with the second. And a third, and a fourth... I stopped counting at twenty-seven.

Rocks. Just rocks. But oddly rounded, smooth, as if they had been shaped and carefully polished. One after another poured out in a long curving line, like a necklet of Punja crystals. Black in the light of a waning moon; by daylight, by sunlight, perhaps a different color. I followed them around until the last met the first--or would have, had I not knocked it out of its bed.

The symmetry was pleasing. I was a sword-dancer, born of a Southron circle, and here I faced another. Northern instead of Southron, made of rocks instead of a line drawn in the sand, but nonetheless a circle. It made me feel better.

Considerably better.

It made me feel intensely good.

Grinning, I bent and scooped up the displaced stone. It was cool, silky, soothing, nestled into the palm of my hand. Its touch sucked away the last residue of unease and put pleasure in its place, an intense, abiding pleasure

that made me fondle the stone. Reluctantly, I bent and put it back into the nakedness of the pocket I had uncovered. Satisfied, I nodded; the symmetry was repaired.

A surge of well-being filled me. No longer was I oppressed or depressed but filled with a virulent satisfaction.

And a need for sharing it.

I straightened. "Hey, Del!" Echoes abounded. "Feel like sparring? There's just enough light to make it interesting--and someone kindly left us a circle." I entered, stepping over the stone I had handled, and unsheathed Theron's sword. The pale purple glow was gone, but the moonlight set the silver afire. In the glint I saw the runes etched into the blade and sensed again a strangeness working. But the discomfort was gone entirely; what I felt was complacent joy, an anticipation of true pleasure. It was almost sexual. "Come on, Del...you could use the exercise!"

She topped the hill slowly, a shadow amid other shadows. "Why are you shouting?" she asked crossly. "I was enjoying the peace of the night, and you are destroying it with your noise."

I gestured. "See the circle? I thought we could spar a little."

Del frowned. "What circle--" And then she shut up, abruptly, biting off the inflection of her question. "Come out," she said plainly. "Come out of there now!"

"What in hoolies for?"

She ignored my question entirely. "Did you touch anything? Anything in or of the circle?"

"I moved a rock back after I accidentally kicked it aside. Why?"

Del swore. Pale hair was aglow in the wan moonlight. Her eyes were hidden in

pockets of shadow. "It's a loki ring, Tiger. I can't come in, not now--but you can still come out. Do it now, before they are awakened."

"Bascha, you're being ridiculous. There's nothing here--"

There was now. And I felt it coming.

Something jerked me to my knees. The sword fell out of my hands as I flopped forward, splaying fingers against the turf. Something had me, and yet I could feel nothing at all. No fingers, no ropes, no traps. Merely a power, and that power was dragging me down into an obscene intercourse with the earth.

I lay flat, stretched out, belly-down, and pinned. My face, turned sideways, ground into the turf and through it, into dirt, into a cold, clammy darkness that invaded eyes and nose and mouth.

I meant to cry out, but all I did was swallow dirt and turf.

Writhing, I tried to pull free. Tried to wrench myself from the grip that held me with unrelenting strength. Dimly I heard Del shouting, but her words made no sense. My ears were stopped up with turf.

I hacked and coughed, trying to breathe, trying to spit out choking dirt and dampness. I was aware of an almost obscene urgency in my body, a need to release myself into the earth, like a man into a woman. It made me want to vomit.

The turf was alive. It made way for my body, then linked roots and blades with hair, fingers, toes. It tickled mouth and nostrils, tried to invade my eyes as it wove itself into my lashes. I squeezed lids shut and tried to shout again, but the opened mouth merely made way for encroaching grass. I gagged as coy blades caressed the back of my throat.

Hoolies, bascha, do something!

She did. She snatched off the necklet she wore and threw it into the circle.

"Take that instead!" she shouted. "Take it and leave me the man!"

I was, I knew, little more than a man-shaped mound against the earth, half consumed by soil and turf. A moment longer, there would be nothing left of me at all. But something contemplated the choice. Considered Del's words. Assessed the gift she offered.

And accepted.

I wrenched free in a gout of dirt and turf, hearing the protests of ripping roots and shredded grass. I staggered, fell, thrust myself up again, trying to throw myself over the ring of rocks.

"The sword," Del shouted. "Don't leave them a jivatma."

Somehow I caught it, clutched it, carried it out of the circle, where Del grabbed my wrist, I was weak and disoriented, wool-witted; she began to haul me away.

"Bascha--"

"We must repack and resaddle as quickly as we can, and pray the necklet will be enough for now," she said firmly. "Later, I can speak to the gods and ask their intervention."

I dropped the sword, which I hadn't managed to put back into the sheath, bent to pick it up. "Del--"

"There's no time to waste, Tiger. The loki are capricious as well as insatiable."

"But what are they?" I tried to shake off the after-effects, couldn't. Rage and horror made me want to empty my belly entirely. "What in hoolies had me?"

She let go of me as we reached camp and began stuffing objects back into the saddlepouches. "I'll explain later." And when I did not move quickly enough to suit her, she straightened and fixed me with an angry, unblinking glare. "In the

South, I was expected to do whatever you said when you said it, because you knew the land better than I. This is now the North--will you not do the same for me?"

Point well taken. I nodded woozily and went off to ready the horses.

At least, I tried to ready the horses. The stud, perverse animal that he is, decided he had done his work for the day and now was the time to rest. I couldn't really blame him; like me, he had eaten, drunk, relaxed--he was ready to contemplate whatever it is horses contemplate when they have nothing better to do. And now I was interrupting.

My mind was on Del's urgency and whatever additional threat the now-awakened loki ring presented, I was unwilling to fuss with the stud, even though he was more than willing to fuss with me.

"Tiger--are you coming?"

I slapped the pad and blanket on the stud's back, saw both start to slip as he sashayed sideways, caught them, held them, deftly avoided a head butt, grabbed the saddle, swung it up and over. The stud, well-versed in this sort of dance, tried to sidestep the descending saddle. I persevered, plopped it down, dodged a tentative hoof. "Not now," I suggested firmly; to the stud, not to Del, who was too busy to hear me anyway.

He stomped, snorted, caught an elbow with the hard bone of his face, and shoved.

With equine emphasis.

"Tiger--" Anxious and impatient.

"Del, I'm coming--" I swore, stuffed an elbow into his ribs, shoved back. Then repeated the move as the head swung around to protest.

Nose met elbow. Elbow won.

"This is not a game, Tiger."

"No, it certainly isn't--" I snugged girth with malicious dedication and buckled buckles, then swung around to bridle him, "--but sometimes I have to convince him of that."

She sounded distracted, urgent, impatient. "Convince him another time."

A hoof came down on my foot. I wear sandals; it hurt. "You son of a--" But I stopped speaking abruptly as the crest of the hill caught fire. "What in hoolies is that?"

"The loki still want us," Del said grimly. "The necklet wasn't enough."

One bright-glazed rock tumbled over the crest of the hill. In its wake was flame.

"Hoolies--" But I never finished it. Del's giddy gelding decided to cut and run.

Picket stake parted company with the ground. Now free, though dragging rope and stake, the speckled horse stampeded by the stud and headed down the hillside at a plunging run.

My horse, being a competitive sort, decided to go with him. And would have, somewhat abruptly, had I not snatched Del's blanket from the ground and flung it over his head.

Blinded, he stopped his flight and stood there, quivering, snorting, sweating.

"Not now," I reminded him, and swung myself up into the saddle, "Del, if you're coming, come on."

She came, dragging a saddle-pouch behind her. She handed it up as best she could without excess dramatics, but the stud, feeling the unexpected scrape of leather against his shoulders as I draped pouches in front of the pommel, lunged sideways. The blanket slid off his head; the glare of burning rocks was reflected in bulging eyes.

I swore, hauled in reins and pouches, sorted them out, spun him around to face Del. Behind her reared the hillside with its unearthly crown of flames.

"He's going to run," I warned. "Be ready to jump--I'll swing you up behind--"

The stud fought me, I fought him; Del waited on the ground. I spun him, spun him again, setting him back on his hocks. And then, as I let him run, I leaned down to thrust out an arm.

Del braced, reached, stretched; I caught, swung her up at a run; she slung a leg up and over, clamping onto the stud with legs and me with both her arms.

I shouted, and we were running.

One glance back showed me runnels of melting stone dripping over the crest of the hill. Which crept, with alarming accuracy, toward the tumbled remains of our campsite.

Del was pressed against my spine. "Don't stop, Tiger. Don't even think about stopping."

I didn't, because I couldn't; the stud had the bit in his teeth.

Eight

I was not happy. With each plunging stride, the stud--heading across, over, down and around hills I could barely see--humped and hopped, ducking his head in eloquent promise of his intent to shed both riders. The only thing that kept him from thrusting head between knees and really working at it was the terrain; he could see no better than we, and--thank valhail--wasn't much interested in trying anything too hazardous in the darkness.

But I still wasn't happy. Because each leap and lunge either sucked the saddle

out from under me entirely (not a nice sensation), or thrust it skyward awkwardly, bashing thighs and buttocks and other more tender portions of my anatomy.

Hoolies, I'd be lucky if I could speak at all by the time he was done, let alone in a tone approaching masculinity.

Del clung to me with both arms locked around my midsection. The ride for her must have been even more precarious; she lacked stirrups, pommel, cantle--anything even remotely resembling a seat--and was reduced to bouncing up and down on the stud's solid rump. He is slick and she wore silk; I knew she was in danger with every stride he took.

"Don't stop!" she repeated. "Not for anything!"

"Hoolies, bascha, I can't just let him run! He's liable to trip and break a leg, or his neck, or ours--" I broke off, swore, tried to recover my breath as the saddle slammed against netherparts.

She clutched more tightly. "If the loki catch us, we'll wish our necks were broken. Don't stop, Tiger. Not yet."

For the moment, the stud decided it for us. The bit was firmly gripped in large, strong teeth, and until I could wrench it back down into the tender, toothless bars of his mouth, my control was negligible. All I could do was try to aim him away from the worst terrain.

Down and down we went, heading south. Maybe the stud realized it and intended to go home. The thought crossed my mind that maybe I could sort of encourage him to continue his runaway all the way back across the border, but I knew it wouldn't be fair. (To the stud, that is; undoubtedly Del would complain, but mostly I was concerned with my horse's welfare.)

And then, abruptly, he veered, turning west. No more a straight shot home, but a

diagonal slash across the foothills Del called downlands. He slowed, breathing hard, trying to negotiate treacherous ups and downs. I took the opportunity to pop the bit free of teeth and began to apply my will, which was to stop entirely.

"Tiger--"

"I don't want to kill him, Del! Whatever those loki-things are, I'll deal with them if I have to... right now, I need to rest this horse."

"All I meant--"

"Later." I said it more sharply than I'd intended, too tied up with the stud to moderate my tone. I felt her stiffen against my back, but couldn't spare the time to placate bruised feelings. "Easy, old man... go easy... give it a rest, now, all right? Easy, now--easy... let's keep all four legs in one piece--I think we'll need them later."

He slowed, blowing hard. In the poor moonlight I saw sweat on neck and shoulders. Grimly I shook my head; he was too good a horse to burn out in futile flights.

Del dropped off as the pace was eased. I walked the stud out, circled back, saw her standing in moonglow. Boreal was in her hands.

"You going to cut me, or the stud?"

"Neither," she said, "for the moment." Her face was grim. "What I was trying to tell you was to stop... there is something I must do."

I snorted inelegantly. "Fight invisible beings?"

"Not yet," she said coolly. "First I will try other methods."

I circled the stud around her. "Do what you want, bascha--I've got a horse to tend."

"I don't need you for this." Pointedly. "The ritual requires things you cannot offer, being a Southroner ignorant of such things, and wholly unblooded, lacking even a sword of your own." Moonlight glinted off her rune-worked blade. "Forgive my bluntness, Tiger, but you are not a man who would find much favor with the gods. They prefer believers, not skeptics."

"I'm skeptical for a reason." I stopped the stud, slid off, undid buckles and stripped him clean of everything save bridle. I checked legs and hooves. "As I have said before, religion is a crutch. It's used by people who don't know how to take responsibility for their own lives, and abused by those who have a perverse need to enforce their wills upon the weak." I braced myself as the stud pressed his head against my shoulder and began to rub violently, soaking through my burnous to dampen bare skin. "Hoolies, Del--don't you think I did my own share of talking to the gods when I was a slave with the Salset? You think I didn't ask for my freedom?"

"And you got it, Tiger."

"Because I made it happen myself, not through any appeal to capricious gods." She sighed, shrugged, shook her head. "For now, this must wait. But I promise you, whatever you may have known in the South is different in the North. You will face power you have never dreamed of, even in the depths of aqivi fog. I promise, Tiger, that here you will see unbelievable things. Things that may even prove fatal."

"Uh-huh. Like these loki-creatures."

Del shook her head. "Have you forgotten what nearly happened to you? How the loki sought to take you?"

"I've forgotten nothing," I threw back. "I don't know what exactly happened back there, Del, but I do know it had nothing to do with creatures. What I sensed was

sorcery."

She sighed. "Tend your horse, Tiger. I will tend our futures."

I soothed and settled the stud as he steamed in the coolness of the night. Under a blanket I walked him out, around and around, doing my best to avoid the playful head threatening to knock me down. He was tired, but not exhausted; too often he sought out the little ways of making my life miserable.

Del walked away from us, climbed a swell of turf-cloaked hill to pause at the jagged crest. Boreal was a slash of silver in her hands, throwing back the moonlight. And then, as I circled with the stud plodding along behind me, I saw her slowly sheathe the upright sword in the flesh of the earth, and kneel.

Softly, Del began to sing.

I had heard it before in the room in Harquhal. I had seen it before, as well; slowly, bead by bead, droplet by droplet, the blade began to bleed luminescence, flooding the hilltop with a salmon-silver glow.

It ran up the sword, not down. Filled the runes, jumped along double edges, reached up to caress hilt and cross-pieces. Twisted, writhed, pulsed, changed shape against the shadows.

I drew in a breath that jumped in my chest. I thought again of the circle of stones, called a loki ring, where grass had come alive and tried to swallow a man. The memory made me shudder, which in turn made me angry; abruptly irritable, I shook it off. Northern sorcery, I knew, no more. Not power of itself, undirected and free. What I'd felt required a man to use it, or a woman, in order to make it work. Power required a source, and someone to control it. I looked at Del, singing to her sword. And what, I wondered, was the difference? Here there was a sword set afire by a song, by a woman. There, I had touched a

rock, walked into a circle, had nearly been consumed.

Was there really a difference?

Uneasily, I looked at Del. She was silhouetted against the blade-glow, still singing her soft little song. So easily she keyed the sword and summoned forth the power.

Power. Just as she had promised.

"Hoolies," I muttered aloud. "What am I doing here?"

The stud whickered, walked on, nudged my right shoulder as I circled him back again.

Del came down from the hill a little later. The stud was dry, quiet, contentedly foraging at the end of his picket line, seemingly unconcerned that his equine partner was missing. For that matter, maybe he was glad; Del's silly gelding had continually indicated amorous interest in the stud, who had not returned the favor. All he had returned was an occasional nip or kick; I'd forcibly prevented anything worse.

I sat hunched on a blanket with a bota of wine, waiting for her to explain the who, the how, the why.

"How is the stud?"

"Fine. He'll probably be a bit sore in the morning, but nothing much to worry about." I looked up at her. "I didn't lay a fire because I thought we might be running again."

She sighed and dropped into a squat. "Not yet. Not for now. Maybe later."

"Then we can go back in the morning and pick up the rest of our things."

"No." She shook her head. "Too large a risk, and there will be nothing left anyway. Nothing worth salvaging. The loki are--destructive."

I sighed. "Burning rocks and illusion don't seem to be that much of a threat." I

shrugged, scratching scars and rattling the string of claws around my neck. "Not if you can run fast."

"Illusion?"

"What I felt," I answered. "You know as well as I do none of it was real."

Del snagged the bota from me and drank. "You are a fool," she said pleasantly when she had finished swallowing. "How often did you warn me against the dangers of the South, saying I should never trust to what I did not know, nor make of myself a target?" Her gaze was level as she tossed the bota back. "I give you warning of similar things here, in the North, my home, and you will not give me--or the dangers--credence." She tilted her head. "Why, I wonder? Because I am a woman?"

I sprawled back and plopped the bota across my ribs, staring up at the star-pocked heavens. "Why do you always reduce it to gender, Del? I admit that Southron women aren't accorded the same respect as men--I admit it!--but must we always lay the blame for everything in this world on what shape our bodies are? Hoolies, bascha, there are other things to worry about!"

"Then perhaps you will listen to me as I tell you what they are."

I rolled my head and looked at her. She was serious. "Such as burning rocks and illusion."

"It was not illusion," she said coolly. "What happened, happened. The loki are powerful and tenacious, working in ways no one may fully understand. Using the soil and turf against you was merely a facet of their power. A game, Tiger; the loki enjoy such things."

I nodded sagely, humoring her. "So, you're saying they're real beings, these loki. Not merely a manifestation of some sorcerer's power."

"They are spirits, demons, devils... apply whatever term you like. They are evil, Tiger, and their only goal in life is to drive mortals into death--or insanity... sometimes, the latter precedes the former."

"Why?"

"Why?" I stopped her dead. She stared at me, plainly baffled. "Why?"

"Why?" I shrugged. "Don't they have a reason?"

"Do demons need a reason?"

I spread my hands. "Something I've always wondered about. Here all these stories abound about evil taking on human form to niggle at mortal people--and yet no one ever seems to know why. These beings just seem to exist for no particular reason... which makes me wonder if they aren't simply little pieces of a storyteller's tale that have somehow escaped the magical words: 'the end.'" I smiled. "You called me a skeptic earlier. Well, I won't deny it. I'm not certain I believe in your evil demons any more than I believe in your Northern gods." Del nearly gaped. "Tiger, that was you up there! That was you the loki so nearly took! How can you be so stupid?"

I recalled the things I'd felt while pinned against the earth. But admitting it was real--no, I couldn't do it. Call it safety in ignorance if you like, but I was convinced that so long as I refused to believe in such things as loki, they'd hold no power over me. "I'm not stupid. I'm just not the kind of man overwhelmed by tricks and illusion." I sighed as she shook her head in disbelief. "Did you ever stop and think that just because we can't explain things doesn't mean there isn't an explanation? A reason other than magic or gods or evil?" I patted the bota. "I don't know where wine comes from, bascha, but there must be an explanation. I don't think wine is magic."

Her tone was peculiar. "Wine is from grapes, Tiger. Didn't you know that?"

I shrugged, unconcerned. "There are many things I don't know, Del. Call me ignorant, stupid, crazy... I just figure there are more important things to think about, like how to stay alive."

"Yes," she agreed. "And it might be just as well, in the face of awakened loki."

She sighed, dropped out of her squat, hugged drawn-up knees. "I swear, Tiger, loki are real. And I swear, they can be dangerous."

"So you threw your mother's necklace into the circle of stones in order to appease them, and then sang through your sword to your gods." I nodded. "Sounds fair enough."

"The necklace was of heartwood blood, Tiger... blood that flows from a wounded tree and, later, hardens. Heartwood possesses power; the man or woman who possesses the stone formed of its blood shares in that power, that protection. I gave it to the loki as a bribe. Surely you have done the same with men and women."

I grunted.

"It might be enough," she said, "but maybe not. The loki don't play fair. So I petitioned the gods to intervene on our behalf, to convince the loki to return to their circle."

I frowned, diverted, and chewed thoughtfully at my bottom lip. "In the South, a circle represents power. That's why a sword-dance always takes place in one."

"There is power in a circle; it is the line that knows no ending, only continuance. It is life, Tiger... the cycle personified." She lay back on the ground as I did, crossing ankles casually and threading fingers across her flat belly. "I have always found it odd that the sword-dance, which brings death to many, is played out in a circle."

"Because while one dies, the other lives." I shrugged. "I don't know, bascha...

I never thought about it." I rolled over, reached out, caught a wrist. "And I can think of other things that might prove more diverting."

The wrist remained limp in my hand. "Not so close to the loki."

I froze. "What?"

She rolled her head and looked at me earnestly. "Loki are attracted to strong emotions, like flies to rotting meat. Coupling is the strongest emotion of

all... it is well known that a man and woman, in congress, draw the loki near.

They invite the loki to take possession of them." She shook her head. "Better to avoid the risk."

I recalled the urgency I had felt, the need to find release, as if the earth had been a woman. Loki? No. I thrust it firmly aside; how could manifestations of evil have influences over such an incredibly human drive? "Are you telling me that we can't--"

"Not tonight," she said, "Maybe next week."

"Next week--"

"Loki like to lie with men and woman," Del told me plainly, "for the emotions they can experience through flesh instead of vicariously. Often, they trick you into it. It is the easiest way to gain control, to gain a human body--"

"I'd like to gain a human body ..." I glared. "Hoolies, Del, you're human and I'm human, and---so far as I can tell--there aren't any loki around. So why don't we just forget about them and think about us."

"I am thinking about us, Tiger." She sounded infinitely patient, as if I were a child. "I'm thinking about us staying alive--and sane--so that when the time is right we can enjoy being bedmates again, without concern for loki."

I thrust myself off the ground, hooking the bota beneath one arm. "Hoolies,

woman... you're sandsick."

Del levered herself up on one elbow. "Where are you going?"

"To sit with the stud. I think he'll be better company."

"Or the loki will."

"Loki, shmoki," I muttered. "Right now, just about anything would be welcome.

Even an amorous female loki... at least I'd be getting something out of it."

"Maybe the last thing you'd ever get, Tiger."

I hadn't thought she could hear me. "Yes, well... I've always thought it might be an interesting way to die. If I had to, I mean."

"You'd have to," she called. "That's the way it works with loki."

I sighed. "Great." I stopped, patted the stud, sat down, shoved away a curious nose as I unplugged the bota. "Well, old man, how's it going with you?"

Del, rudely, laughed.

Nine

I woke up at sunrise, because I was cold. No, not cold--freezing; somehow, during the night, I'd lost my blanket to Del, who now slept wrapped in two. The theft was nothing particularly new, although familiarity did not make me any happier. Ordinarily I'd have simply retrieved my blanket and tried to go back to sleep, but the rising sun prevented me.

It didn't really do anything, the sun, but I couldn't ignore it anyway, not even to recapture a stolen blanket. Its passage into the sky was something to behold,

so I beheld it. Shivering, freezing, all abump from morning chill, I watched it climb above the horizon and set the world afire.

And what a world it was... all uplands and downlands and everything in between, high and low, sloped and flat, aslant from grassy floor to distant sawtoothed mountaintops. In the South, the colors are predominantly browns and golds and oranges; here it was blue and gray and lavender, gilded with silver and gold.

Del and I, thanks to the stud, were cradled in a soft bowl of a valley, crushed green velvet, all aglow from morning light. We were, however briefly, swathed in Southron silks begemmed with Northern dew.

I have seen dew once or twice, in the borderlands by Harquhal. But I'd told Del the truth; my experience did not extend so far north as the border town or anything beyond. The Punja was my domain, and all the encampments, oases and walled city-states that made up the puddle of sand that had birthed me. To sit and watch while the sun climbed into the sky above Northern mountains was nothing short of amazing.

Or discomfiting.

I looked at Del. She was the meat in a sausage-casing of woven goathair blankets, corners sucked down somewhere beneath determined hips and shoulders. Pale hair straggled free, hiding much of her face, but I saw the cut of her browbone above closed eyes, the sunbleached, feathery brows, the tiny tracery of sunlines at the corners of blue-veined lids. In the South, women go veiled for vanity as well as modesty; Del, so free and easy, subjected herself to the same sort of damage Southron men did, and suffered for it more than any of us could. Northern flesh does not thrive beneath our angry sun.

Except it was no longer Southron sun and Northern flesh, but the other way around. We had changed places, Del and I, and now I suffered for it, shivering

in the chill.

I rose, swore softly; cracked, rolled and popped stiffened joints and sinews. It is a hazard of any professional sword-dancer--bones do take a beating, and after awhile they protest with great regularity--but I'd never experienced quite the same degree of stiffness. It made me feel downright old.

I scowled down at Del, still sleeping. Then I leaned over to scoop up harness and sword.

Just as well I did--with a bloodcurdling scream that echoed all over the valley, a noisy group of riders came pouring over the nearest hill.

Bent on murder, certainly. All their swords were out.

It was a bizarre beginning to the morning. Here was I, here was Del (she awakens quickly, thank valhail, when our lives are on the line), spine to spine, swords drawn, feet spread, teasing the air with blade tips, and all the while trying to figure out what was going on, and why. We were afoot and outnumbered--it was four to two--but we'd fought worse odds and won, and under worse conditions, too.

But they did not, at first, attack. They came running and yelling, all swathed in bright silks and shiny brass ornamentation, blades bared and glinting, but they did not move to kill us. Instead, they circled, hemming us in, tying us up in a living knot of horseflesh. And then they slowed. And stopped.

Dark Southron faces. Black hair, brown eyes, white teeth. Lots of white teeth; they grinned down at us from atop snorting horses, patently pleased with themselves.

Borjuni, pure and simple, lacking a conscience of any sort. Why they were north of the border I didn't know, but I had a feeling they'd tell me.

Hoolies, I said to myself, they'll want to play with us first.

Del began to tremble. It was not fear, I knew, but an emotion far more powerful than that. "They are," she whispered. "Oh, yes, they are... I remember their ugly faces."

The only way to win this game was to take it away from them. But I couldn't if Del's desire for revenge got in the way. "Bascha," I said, "wait. Please be patient; I promise, you will have your chance."

"Tiger--"

"Just wait." But I didn't. Instead, I smiled up at the Southron scavengers in a friendly fashion. "Out of Harquhal?" I asked casually. "Hunting anyone in particular?"

One of them nodded. He had a mashed nose and a scar across one cheek. "The female killed a comrade."

"In the street, or in the circle?"

He twisted his head, spat.

My turn to nod. "In the circle," I said lightly. "Sits in your throat, doesn't it--that a woman could beat a man? That this woman defeated your friend?"

"Tiger--"

"Wait, Del. For the moment, this is between Southron men." I felt her stiffen, but she held her silence. I smiled back at the mash-nosed spokesman. "Well? Are you here on business? Or personal pleasure?"

Four men exchanged glances.

"More to the point," I said, "did Ajani send you?"

The scar-faced borjuni leader spat again. "Ajani need not trouble himself with a son of a goat like you. We will take care of you."

"Think again," I suggested. "Would Ajani thank you for stealing a fight from the

Sandtiger?"

This time they exchanged longer, startled glances. All four began to frown. I had touched borjuni pride, which might be my only weapon.

I tilted my head in Del's direction. "It was a fair dance, in the circle, between your friend and this woman. He knew it, I knew it, and so did everyone else. She is a sword-dancer, as am I; our dances are always fair."

They were displeased. Dark faces scowled down at us. Horses stomped and fidgeted, clattering bright brasses.

"Isn't Ajani a fair man?" I heard Del's gasp of outrage. "Doesn't he savor an honorable fight?" I knew as long as I kept them talking, any action would be delayed. I wanted to catch them offstride so we would stand a better chance. "I have heard he admires courage no matter what form it takes."

They could hardly disagree. Flattery has its uses.

Scowls deepened. The leader muttered something to the others, then kneed his mount forward a single step. "Ajani is fair. Ajani is courageous. He likes nothing better than an honorable fight--"

"Even between men and women?"

He glared at Del. "Ajani does not fight women--"

"No... he only steals them." I smiled, tapping a signaling heel against Del's foot. "So much for Ajani's honor."

"Ajani's honor is no better now than it was six years ago," Del said curtly, on cue, "nor is any of yours." She took a single step forward, away from me, and glared at them over her blade. "Don't you remember the young girl who got away almost six years ago? The innocent Northern bascha Ajani selected for himself, and later lost because he grew complacent, thinking she was cowed?"

They said nothing, staring. I could see their memories working.

"You should." Her voice was thick with hatred. "You fought over me, each one of you, after the others were dead, until Ajani overruled you and kept me for himself." Del's turn to spit; in the South, a decided insult. "Because of you, I am here. Because of you, your friend is dead. Lay no blame for his death--or your own--on anyone but yourselves."

In five years, a girl becomes a woman. She changes mightily. Del too had altered, of course, but in ways beyond those of a normal woman, forced to it by adversity, shaped by determination. By rage and hatred. As well as by memory.

Now that memory had stepped forward and slapped her in the face. Slapped them in the face, as well; to a man, they knew her.

The years spilled away.

"Where is Ajani?" she asked softly. "He is the one I want. You are goat dung to me."

Faces darkened. Eyes flashed. Southron insults spilled from lips. But when they did not answer, as I did not expect them to, Del began to sing.

A small song, a soft song; a deadly, crooning song, full of significance. I had heard it before, in dreams and not-dreams, knowing it for what it was.

Deathsong. Lifesong. The promise of beginning and ending, all at once, for the one who faced the woman.

She sang, and they moved, as she intended them to. But they were slow. Too slow.

Boreal was alive in Del's hands, and it was too late for men with normal swords.

For men with normal hatreds. Much too late for men who had never faced a jivatma.

Too late, even, for me. Because Del and her sword set fire to the valley and split the air apart, calling down a raging banshee-storm from out of deadly

Northern heights where winter holds dominance.

--cold-No, Del, I said, not me, I am not enemy.

But if she heard me, if she knew me, she gave no indication. Her world was Boreal.

My world was pain. Pain and stiffness, and fire in the bones, running through all my joints and every muscle, even rigid flesh. I was so hot I shook, and shivered, and spasmed, biting through bottom lip to teeth, not caring that blood spilled into mouth, down my chin, dripped against my neck. It was hot, the blood, so hot--

"Tiger."

I jerked. Bones rattled, teeth clenched, blood spilled afresh.

"Tiger, please... it's over. I'm finished. I promise."

Familiar voice. Familiar hand on my brow, pushing back hair, wiping away sweat, smoothing out deep-carved lines. A second hand, touching mine, touching both of them; working the skin to relax upstanding tendons and rigid flesh. Soothing, soothing, sending the spasms away, gentling the unpredictability of my fingers, locked so tightly around the hilt of Theron's sword.

"Let it go," she said. "They are dead. There is no more need. You may release the sword."

Not yet.

"Tiger--" She stopped. Tried again. "It was my fault. I forgot--forgot everything but what they had done to my kinfolk, those men; seeing only the deaths, the rapes, the mutilations--" She stopped again. And began, again. "I thought of my kin, and of me, and of them. I did not think of you."

I was so hot--

"Tiger, I swear, I did not mean to harm you... not with her. You know that. You know I would never use Boreal against you. Not intentionally."

I cracked burning eyelids. "I don't much care if you kill me intentionally or unintentionally. The end result is the same."

She leaned down to brush lips against my forehead. "Sulhaya," she said, but she said it to someone else.

Hair tickled my nose. I shivered from head to toe, and finally let go of the sword. "What in hoolies happened?"

Del sighed and sat upright again, hooking hair behind her ears. "I keyed the sword. Completely. I held nothing back, allowing Boreal her freedom, the chance to show her true power. And she did. She killed them all, and nearly you."

"Why is it so hot?"

"It's not. You're cold... it's part of the jivatma's power."

"To freeze people?"

"To use all the power at her disposal." Del's face showed strain; so, she had been worried. "There are many things I can't tell you about my bleeding-blade; too many things are sacred, all part of the rituals and training, but you know each one taps a very specific power. Boreal is--special. The rituals were demanding and difficult--I might have failed at any time, and died. But I didn't fail, and she didn't break, and when the bleeding was done, Boreal was whole. She was awake..." Her voice trailed off. She shrugged. "She is of the North, my jivatma. More so than I am, or any other human. She is the North, Tiger... and she can use any facet of her strength at my bidding."

"Your bidding." I didn't try to move, other than to work fingers still cramped from gripping the hilt. "Your bidding, bascha."

"Yes. Of course. She will do the bidding of no other."

"But I know her name."

Del nodded. "It is something. A little. More than any other knows. But you do not know her." She frowned, trying to find the words. "It matters, the knowing. It does matter, Tiger."

"I guess so." I wiped my chin and lip gently with the back of one hand, tasting blood. "Don't ever introduce me, bascha. Not formally. I don't think we'd get along, your angry sword and I."

Del's expression was troubled. "Now is not the time, perhaps... it could be better, I think, at another, but I can't set it aside any longer... not when you deserve better, as you do, for all you have done... and will do, I hope."

An odd, twisty little speech, and mostly incomprehensible. I frowned, "What?"

Del sucked in a deep breath, held it, let it out all at once. "Will you come with me?"

I blinked, "I thought I was sort of doing that already."

"I mean--come with me. To the far North. To the uplands, and beyond... all the way to the roof of the world. Where it is very cold, and very dangerous."

"It's already cold, and already dangerous." I scrubbed at a sore face. "What in hoolies did you do to me?"

Del looked away. "Nearly killed you. The same way I killed the others."

I tried to sit up, decided lying still was just as good an option. Maybe even better. I stifled a groan and settled down again. "Am I in one piece?"

"Yes. But--" She shut up.

I didn't much like that. "But? You said 'but'? But what, Del?"

"The stud ran away."

I sat upright, wished I hadn't. Swore softly. Stared out at where the stud had

been staked.

She was right. He was gone.

So were the borjuni.

Well, no. They weren't gone, precisely. Not altogether. Parts of them remained.

Maybe all of them, for that matter, but Del and Boreal had done a decisive job in dividing them up. I didn't bother to count the limbs or try to put them back with the proper heads and torsos. It would have taken too much time. All of the parts were frozen solid, rimed with glittering ice. The ground was white with frost, though it had begun to melt in the sun.

Del had moved me or made me move myself apart from the bits and pieces. All I could see were lumps in the distance. "What happened to their mounts?"

"They ran off."

I lay back down again and thought about what I'd seen.

"Tiger--I'm sorry about the stud."

But was she sorry about the men? Probably not; I wasn't sure I was, either.

"Tell me that again after we've been walking a few days."

"I know he meant a lot to you--"

"Mashed toes, bitten fingers, bashed head, bumps, bruises." I shrugged. "I can survive quite nicely without any of those."

"But--"

"Forget it, Del. He's gone. At least, for now. Who's to say he won't show up again later? He's done it before."

She nodded, but didn't look particularly happy. "I must have an answer, Tiger.

Before we go any farther, I must know."

"Know if I'll go with you to the roof of the world?"

"Yes. To be my sponsor."

I frowned. "What for?"

"I must face my accusers and be judged. If I have a sponsor, someone who speaks on my behalf, it might help. And someone of the Sandtiger's stature--"

"Save it, Del. Empty flattery isn't your style, and up here I doubt they even know my name." I winced. "Why am I so stiff?"

"Because you were very nearly frozen," she snapped impatiently. "It was a storm I called, and a bad one. A banshee-storm... Tiger--will you come?"

"Right now I'm not going anywhere."

"Tiger--"

I sighed. "Yes. Yes. I'll come. If it makes you happy. Hoolies, I haven't anything better to do."

"I need you, Tiger."

She was oddly intent. I glared. "I just said I'd come. Did you freeze your ears in addition to me?"

"There are--things you will have to do."

The latter portion of her sentence came out very fast, as if she were afraid I might undeclare myself if she said them plainly. But at the moment all I wanted to do was sleep, not debate where I was going, who with, and why.

Still, something nagged at me. And I'd learned to pay attention to that kind of nagging, particularly when Del was involved. "Bascha--"

"If I take no one with me, no one to speak for me, they will not favor my explanation," she said quietly, face averted. "I killed an honored and honorable man, a man well-loved by every student and teacher, regardless of status. I deserve to be executed... but I would prefer to live." She drew in a harsh breath through a constricted throat, no longer avoiding my gaze. "Am I wrong to

want that, Tiger? Wrong to ask your help?"

She never had before. By that alone, I knew how serious it was.

"I'll go," I agreed. "I'll do whatever they want me to do. But not yet. Not now.

Not today. In the morning." I yawned. "All right, bascha?"

She touched my forehead and stroked back a lock of dark hair. "Sulhaya, Sandtiger. You are a worthy sword-mate."

I grunted. "But not a worthy bedmate. At least--not while there are loki lurking."

Del sighed. "It's only a week, Tiger. Can't you wait that long?"

"A week here, a week there... pretty soon you're celibate and I'm frustrated." I cracked one lid. "Think it can't happen? Just think back on that journey across the Punja, while hunting for Jamail."

"I hired a guide, not a bedmate."

"And promised the bedding in order to get me in the circle," I retorted, "after your bout with sandsickness. I remember, Del, even if you don't... or say you don't. Typical woman, bascha--promising whatever you have to in order to make a man dance to your tune."

"And you danced quite nicely, as I recall--" there was laughter in her tone

--in the circle."

I opened both eyes. "What about now?" I asked. "Am I dancing again if I go with you? Are you singing a song for me in addition to your sword?"

Color spilled out of her face. And then flowed back again, angrily. "I do what I have to do," she snapped, "and so, by the gods, do you."

I shut my eyes again. "Already, I think I regret this."

Del got up and strode away. "Regret whatever you like."

But she came back to put a folded blanket under my head and spread the other one

over my body.

Women: they tend you or terrorize you.

Ten

"Tiger," she said, "it's time to go."

Maybe so, but I wasn't ready to. I stayed right where I was.

Del turned back a flap of blanket. "We have to go," she told me solemnly.

"They're all starting to thaw."

I frowned beneath the blanket. "Who's starting--oh." I flipped back the blanket, sat up, glowered out at the afternoon. Purposely, I did not look at the borjuni remains.

"If you're hungry, we can eat on the way," Del said. "I don't want to stay here any longer."

Something in her voice got my attention fast. Del had killed before, and often, and undoubtedly would kill again. She had learned to deal with it, as a sword-dancer must, taking no joy, no satisfaction, no abnormal pleasure in the death. She was matter-of-fact and wholly professional, keeping private what she felt, yet now she sounded odd. Odd and strangely shaken.

I looked at my competent swordmate and saw she was afraid.

"Del." I pushed up onto knees and toes. "Bascha, what is it?"

She rose even as I moved, stepping away from me. The set of her shoulders was different, sort of sucked in, rolled forward, as if she were feeling intensely

vulnerable. Del is not incapable of normal emotions--I have seen her frightened, angry, pleased, and wholly exhilarated--but generally she locks away the deepest feelings, for fear of sharing too much. She carries a shield, does Del, and employs it even with me.

Now the shield was down. Del was clearly spooked.

She moved away again as I rose to stand. Boreal was in one hand. "We have to go," she said.

"Hoolies, Del, what's wrong?"

"This place!" she cried suddenly, and the echoes reverberated. "It was here... it was here--"

She was incapable of continuing. But even as I moved to touch her, Del turned away, turning her back on me. She walked away across the tuff, bypassing frozen borjuni, and stopped on the other side of the tiny valley. Hugging the sword, she stopped, and fell down upon her knees.

"Here--" she said, "--it was here--"

I could hardly hear her. Slowly I approached, not wanting to disturb her, yet knowing it might be for the best. Del had lost control.

Back and forth, she rocked, hugging the naked blade. She pressed the hilt against her mouth, winding fingers around the crosspieces. She clutched Boreal to her, as if the sword could offer comfort.

Well, it had before. While exacting a terrible retribution.

"I didn't know," she whispered. "I didn't know it--I didn't recognize it. I went to relieve myself, and then I knew it again." She sucked in an unsteady breath.

"How could I not have known?"

I glanced around the flattened cleft between the foothills. Ocher-gold and lavender, sunlight glittering off swordborn frost and dampness. Such a pretty

little valley, with such an ugly history. "Easy enough to forget, I think, considering what happened."

"What happened," she echoed faintly. "Do you know what happened?"

I did not, specifically. Del had never told me.

"So many of them," she said, "all aswirl in Southron silks... shouting and yelling and laughing... daring us to defy them--" She wavered, clutched the blade more tightly; breath hissed against the hilt. "We would have given them welcome, not knowing what they intended. But they took it, they took it and reviled us for our courtesy, not caring whom they killed, or how." Her eyes were tightly shut. "The infants they killed outright, not wishing to deal with them... the men they hacked to pieces... the women they kept for themselves and used them until they died. Those of us who were left--those of us not too young or too old--they intended for the slaveblock."

"Del."

"There were only two of us left...Jamail and myself. The others were all dead."

"Del."

"He was male, and so they watched him. But I was female, and I was Ajani's. His concern, once he had made me so." Her eyes were open again, staring at nothingness. "But Ajani grew careless... and so I was able to flee. To leave my brother behind."

"Bascha--"

"I left him!" she cried. "And you saw what he became--what he was made to be!"

It was not a shout of fear or pain, but of rage and realization. An angry, throttled shout that rose to a wailing cry of blind self-hatred. She was beyond herself, was Del; she had stepped outside herself.

And I had an idea why.

I reached down, caught her shoulders, dragged her up from the ground. I ignored the blade in her hands, even as it fell to thud on bumpy, hummocky turf. I caught her and I held her and I made her look at me. "Don't ever blame yourself!"

"I left him--"

"--because you had to. Because there was no choice. Because you intended to help him escape as well, once you could find a way."

"They took him South--"

"--and they sold him, as they intended to do with you." I wanted to shake her; all I did was grip her arms. "You have done more to yourself in the name of kinship and duty than anyone I know. But it ends, Del--it has to! You can't gut yourself with it forever. Haven't you suffered enough?"

Her voice was toneless, "Not as much as Jamail."

"He is what he is!" I hissed. "Mute. Castrated, No more the boy you knew. But he never can be, Del... he never will be, now--and you have to realize it."

"He was ten--"

"--and you were fifteen. You lost as much as he did, if in a different way." I sucked in an uneven breath. "Oh, bascha, bascha, do you think I don't know? I sleep with you, remember? I know your dreams are troubled."

She was shaking in my hands. "I want him," she said, "I want Ajani."

"I know. I know, Del. But you've already made your decision."

"Have I?" Her tone was bitter.

"Well, you certainly gave a good imitation of it earlier--asking me to sponsor you and speak for you and do whatever else I have to do to convince them you should live." I let her go. "If you'd rather go after Ajani--"

"It isn't fair, Tiger!"

"Tell me something new." I reached down, retrieved Boreal--I could do that, now--and handed her to Del. "You'd better decide now, bascha. If we're going after Ajani, our best bet is to head back to Harquhal and see if we can scare up anyone who knows where he is. Obviously, he may soon know where we are; he seems to have loyal men."

"And dead ones," she said flatly.

"And how many does that leave?"

Del shrugged. "Ten. Fifteen. There were twenty or so. I couldn't count them all... I wasn't conscious all of the time." She shrugged again, more violently, as if to ward off additional recollections. "I have killed five, but that is not enough. Not till I have Ajani."

"Your decision, Del."

She looked at me in raw appeal. "What would you do, Tiger?"

"Your decision, bascha."

"But don't you have an opinion? You always have an opinion."

"I have one, yes. I know better than to state it." I smiled crookedly. "If I told you what I'd do, and you decided to do it, too, you might decide later that it wasn't a good idea. And then I'd get the blame for suggesting it in the first place."

She opened her mouth to disagree, reconsidered, shut it. Glumly, she nodded.

"You can go after him now," I said quietly. "You can track him, catch him, kill him. It's what you want to do. But it might take more than two months--by then you would be fair game as well... as much as Ajani is."

Del stared at her sword.

"Or you can go home and face your accusers, accept whatever punishment they levy--and then go after Ajani."

"If they let me live."

"If they let both of us live." I smiled as she looked at me in shock. "You got me this far, Del. I'll see it through."

"But if they sentence me to death, as is their right--"

"Right schmight," I retorted. "If they're stupid enough to try it, they'll have to fight both of us."

Del continued to stare. And then she smiled a little, laughed a little, nodded.

"Wouldn't that be a tale to tell."

"No doubt Bellin would enjoy it." I turned to head back toward the blankets.

"Let's go, bascha. We've got a long walk ahead of us no matter which way we go."

The sunlight beat down upon us, sucking us dry of fluids. My lungs were empty of breath, stripped by heat of moisture, so that I rasped and rattled as I walked.

Scorched within and without, I knew only that if we did not find a cistern soon, we would die, as the Hanjii intended us to die, the violent tribe that had left us in the Punja. No horses, no water, only weapons, because we were a sacrifice to the Sun. A hungry deity.

"Tiger?"

The flesh peeled back from Del's bones, exposing muscle and viscera. Gone was the Northern bascha, banished by Southron sun. And now, it was my turn.

"Tiger."

I flinched away from her touch. It hurt too much. Her flesh would debride my own.

"Tiger--stop."

I stopped. Blinked. Stared. And recalled we were North, not South... there was

no desert here.

It was a soft day and softer afternoon, full of misting rain and bits of fog, damp enough to drown me. The road was muddy because of it, and the turf exceedingly slippery. No matter which way I went, I found myself laboring.

And cursing the missing stud, absent three days now.

I'll admit it, I'm fond of the fellow. We'd been together seven years... and over those years had come to a companionable, armed truce. He was tough, strong, resilient--as well as mean-tempered and sly. But we'd learned one another's habits and got along tolerably well, especially in tough situations.

And now I was without him.

Men say horses are stupid. I say they've just figured out a way of making men believe the lie so their kind can get the upper hand when a body climbs into the saddle.

Or tries to climb into the saddle.

"Tiger," she said, "are you all right?"

"Rest," I mumbled and dropped my bundle down. I bent over, bracing hands on knees, and tried to clear my chest. My head felt full of cloth. My eyes were dry and gritty, then teared as I blinked.

"Water?" she asked quietly, reaching for the bota slung diagonally across her chest.

I shook my head. Coughed. Wished my headache would go away. Coughed again; my chest was tight and painful.

Del frowned. "Are you lightheaded? Sometimes it takes people that way when they first begin to climb."

"Not lightheaded. Rock-headed ..." I sneezed, and wished I hadn't. "Hoolies, I

feel terrible."

The frown deepened. "Why do you feel wrong-headed?"

"Not 'wrong'--rock" I reached up to tap my head with a sore knuckle. "My head feels like a rock."

She sighed, brow furrowed in concern. "I think you have caught cold."

Caught cold. A moment before, lost in memories of the South, I'd been scorched by heat.

I stood upright, trying to clear my lungs. Something wailed deep in my chest every time I drew in a breath or moved. "What exactly is that?"

Del blinked. "A cold?" She paused. "Don't you know?"

"Some sort of disease?"

"Not--disease." Clearly, she was taken aback by my ignorance, which didn't please me much. "Sickness, yes... have you never heard of it?"

With infinite patience, I asked, "How can a man 'catch cold' when he lives in a blazing desert?"

She shrugged. "People do. North, South--it doesn't matter. Have you never been sick before?" Del paused. "Sick sick, not hung over from too much aqivi. That I've seen myself."

I scowled, shook my head. "Wound fever a few times. Nothing else." I sniffed and felt it reverberate inside my skull. "Did catching cold--or whatever--have anything to do with that sword? With that storm?" I frowned. "It was cold as hoolies in the middle of that mess... did you make me get sick?" Balefully, I glared. "Is this your fault, bascha?"

She raised a defiant chin. "If you had put on the leathers like I told you, and the furs--"

I shook my head. "Too much weight."

"Then when you freeze your geheeties off, don't complain to me." Crossly, she gestured toward my bundle on the ground. "Come on, then... we're wasting time."

I looked back the way we had come, toward the way we would go. "Where are we, bascha? I've lost track,"

"Still on the Traders' Road. We have a long way to go." She paused. "You've slowed us down."

"Sorry." But I wasn't. I coughed and peered through cloying mist. "Does it ever get dry here?"

"Midwinter rains," she answered. "It will get worse, not better, at least until we reach the uplands. Then we'll be in snow."

I shivered as a breath of wind caressed my flesh. Silk was plastered against my body, "Hoolies, bascha--I wish you were a Southroner."

"I don't." Emphatically. "I'm not about to give up my freedom."

I sighed. "I only meant then we could be doing this where it's warm."

Del's mouth twisted wryly. "We'll go a little farther, Tiger. There is bound to be a roadhouse soon. We can eat there, and change into dry clothing--warmer clothing--and wait until morning to go on."

I bent and pulled my bundle from the ground. "I hate rain." I said it with profound clarity, just to make sure she knew.

Apparently, she did. She turned her back and began to climb.

We did not find a roadhouse. We found a worsening rainstorm, which beat me down into a large lump of sodden silk and misery. I plodded through mud, slipped on wet turf, wheezed, coughed, sniffed and labored my way up one hill and down another, knowing better than to complain and give Del fodder. I fixed my attention on taking one step after another, and managed to accomplish it.

Right into the tip of a sword.

I realized, dimly, that Del had been shouting at me to stop. I hadn't heard her.

Or else her noise had joined the racket in my chest, merging sniffs and coughs and rumbles one into the other, until all I'd heard was my own wheezes, ignoring everything else. Including whatever warning might have been given.

It didn't please me at all. But I was too tired to care.

I peered down at the sword tip. It rested against my wet, silk-swathed belly.

And it trembled, the sword, because the hands that held it were too small, too scared, lacking skill.

He was, I thought, maybe ten.

"Stop," he said fiercely.

"Yes," I agreed, "I have."

"Don't move." A new voice. Female. Young. Equally fierce and adamant.

I frowned. Shifted my gaze from the boy to the girl, who stood three paces behind the boy and held a pale white staff at the ready position, though I doubted she had the training to wield it properly. It takes years to master a quarterstaff, even for a man, and she, most clearly, was female, if still girl rather than woman.

Del had put down the saddle pouches. Her hands hung at her sides. She made no attempt to unsheathe her sword, or to knock away the girl's staff.

I blinked. Tried to clear my vision. For the moment, the rain had let up. But the day was gray, blue and gray, shadowed with slate and steel.

Beyond the girl and boy stood a wagon, halfway off the road and leaning away from the hillside. An elderly piebald mare drooped dispiritedly between the shafts, ears flopped, neck low, head hanging between her knees. The wagon, I thought, was as old, as well as incapacitated. One rear wheel, the right, lay

flat in the mud. The tilt of the wagon would make it almost impossible for anyone other than a strong man to lift it; two children could not, nor could the woman who stood by it, wrapped in an oiled blanket. Clearly she was apprehensive, staring fearfully at Del and me and the children, and I realized they were her own.

Such brave souls, the children. And very fortunate. Del and I were friendly; anyone else could have killed them outright for their folly. Easily. Without a second thought.

I sighed; it wailed deep in my chest. "No harm," I told them. "We're travelers, like you."

"So they said!" the girl snapped. "We gave them welcome, and they robbed us."

"Anyone hurt?" I asked mildly.

"Only our pride," the woman answered stiffly. "We trusted too easily. But we learned. Now we do not trust."

I gestured toward the wagon. "You'll have to trust someone, eventually. I don't think you can repair that, otherwise."

"We will do it ourselves!" A fierce, proud young lady. Fifteen or sixteen, I thought. Blonde, like Del. Blue-eyed And, like Del, determined to prove she was as good as any man.

I almost smiled. But I didn't, because I thought she was worth better.

Del was staring at the boy. Her face was pale. She drew in a noisy breath, released it, spoke softly. "There's no need for the sword," she said, "or the staff. We'll help you with the wagon."

The girl jerked the staff northward. "Just go on," she said strongly. "Just go on your way and leave us."

"And let someone else come along behind us... someone not so friendly as us?" I shook my head. "To prove our good faith let us shed our harnesses. Unarmed, what threat could we offer?"

"Just go on," the girl repeated.

"Cipriana." The woman's voice was gently reproving.

"How do we know they wouldn't cut our throats?" the daughter demanded. "What makes them better than the others?"

"You are wise," Del said, "to be careful. I respect your determination. But Tiger is right: unarmed, we could help you."

The sword wavered against my belly. "Cipriana?" The boy was clearly the shier of the two and well accustomed to deferring to his older sister.

She shrugged, jaw tight. And then, abruptly, she jerked the staff away. "I am not stupid," she said fiercely, eyes filled with angry tears. "I know if you want to harm us, you can. What good are Massou and I against you?"

"Good enough," Del said gently. "And before we are done, I will teach you to be better."

The woman came down from the wagon, clutching closed the folds of her blanket. She was neither young nor in middle years, being somewhere in between; a tall, handsome woman with red hair, firm jaw, green eyes. The dampness caused loosened strands of hair to curl; the rest was fastened to her head in a thick, coiled rope deepened to bronze by the rain.

She stopped by the girl, touching her shoulder gently. "Cipriana, Massou, you have done well. I am proud. But now, let these people have their freedom again. They have offered us help; the least we can do is accept it with good grace."

The boy relaxed his grip on the sword too abruptly; overbalanced, it fell out of his hand and thudded against the turf. He stared up at me in anguished shame.

"Massou?" I asked. He nodded. "One day, I promise, you will be big enough to carry your father's sword. For now, you might do better with a knife."

"Like this one?" The woman showed me the blade she had hidden in the blanket. At my blink of surprise, she smiled. "Do you think I will stand by and let my children do my fighting for me?"

"Or a man; we make do on our own." The girl flicked a glance at Del. "Does he do the fighting for you?"

Del smiled slowly. "Little ishtoya" she said, "your courage is laudable. But first you must learn better manners."

Color flared in the girl's face, then spilled away. Ashamed, she bowed her head.

She had a slender, childish neck. "I'm sorry," she said quietly. "But without my father ..." Her voice trailed off. She looked at the boy, at her mother, then lifted her head and squared shoulders. "There is no one left to do a man's work for us, and so--"

"--and so it falls to you." Del nodded. "I know. Better than you think." She looked across at the wagon. "We will repair it, if we can. If not, perhaps I might ride ahead to a roadhouse and see if a new wheel can be bought, if I can have the loan of your mare."

Instantly suspicion flashed in the girl's eyes. And then died. "Will he stay with us?" She looked directly at me.

I sneezed, and regretted it at once.

"Have you caught cold?" the woman asked. "Poor man, and here we stand in this wet, nattering on about wheels and wagons." She cast a glance at Del. "We are grateful for whatever help you can give us. But what can we do for you?"

Noisily, I sniffed. "Make it warm again."

Eleven

The woman's name was Adara. Massou was ten. Cipriana fifteen. They were Borderers, Adara said, who had left the tiny settlement but a day's ride from Harquhal to go north. Adara's husband had been a Northerner, though she herself was half Southron--a typical Borderer, with a language bora of both cultures--and he had wanted the children reared as he had been reared, knowing something solid of heritage as opposed to a Borderer's piecemeal lifestyle. Unfortunately, he would now never see it: the journey this far had been fraught with difficulties and he had died but a week before. Of the strain, Adara said quietly; his heart had given out.

We huddled around a tiny fire beneath the rainbreak Adara stretched out from the end of the wagon and staked, sipping gritty effang tea and getting to know one another before the repair work was begun. (Effang is not one of my favorite drinks, but they didn't have any aqivi and beggars can't be choosers. Our wine was nearly gone. And at least effang is Southron.) Massou and Cipriana sat with their mother between them, clearly protecting her as much as she protected them. Del and I gave them room, not wanting to trespass any more than was necessary. "A week?" I was surprised they had continued on so soon after the man's death. Also that they had continued at all.

Adara drew in a deep breath. "We considered turning back, of course. But Kesar had worked so hard to bring us this far that we couldn't dishonor him so." I looked at the girl, at the boy, at the woman, "It isn't an easy journey," I

said quietly, "not for anyone. Even Del and I recognize the risks."

"And we don't?" Adara was not a meek-tongued woman, though her tone was unrelentingly courteous. "We have been robbed twice, Sandtiger--once unknowing, at night, the other in full daylight. Our food supplies dwindle daily, our mare is old and tired, our wagon now lacks a wheel. Do you think we're blind to these risks?"

"No," Del said quietly. "What he means is, there are those who are more able to accept the risks than others."

Cipriana scraped fair hair back from her face. "Just because I don't wear a sword doesn't mean I can't do my part."

Del didn't smile. "Then why did you leave it to Massou?"

Cipriana opened her mouth, clamped it shut. It was Adara who answered for her.

"I made her give it to him," she said calmly. "A sword is a man's weapon."

Her children looked at Del, hilt poking over a shoulder, who merely sighed a little and nodded. "Southron, without a doubt, regardless of Border habits.

Well, I compliment Kesar on desiring freedom of choice for his children."

Color flared in Adara's face. "You have accepted our hospitality--"

"--and I am grateful, but it doesn't mean I have to believe as you believe," Del spoke gently. "Woman, tend your children as you see fit; they are yours, not mine. But you should know that when a woman undertakes to do things a man ordinarily does, she should be prepared to act as a man when she must." Del looked at the girl. "Cipriana, you have courage and spirit. But if you mean to use the staff, you had best learn how to do it."

Next she looked at the mother. "You, Adara, should hide a knife in your boot as well as behind your blanket; men expect panic from a woman, not forethought. As

for Massou and the sword--" she shook her head, "--a boy would do better with a sling. He can hide, and strike in secret; a much more effective defense."

They stared at her, all three of them, struck dumb by her quiet and competent summation. I sipped effang, coughed, turned aside to sneeze. Tears ran down my face.

Adara, diverted, smiled. "Poor Tiger," she said. "You are in misery."

"And will be, until I'm South again." I scowled at Del. "The sun'll be down behind the mountains soon, bascha. If we're going to see to this wagon, let's get at it before I start feeling worse."

"Thanks to me."

"Thanks to you." I rose, stretched, cursed inwardly as all my joints protested.

Massou's curiosity asserted itself. "Why is she to blame?"

"Because it was her fault." I scowled at the unblemished serenity of Del's expression. Thought about explaining how she had made me catch cold, knowing how it would sound. "Never mind, Massou... let's just go fix the wagon."

The problem was simple enough to repair. It was a matter of fashioning a new linchpin, lifting the wagon high enough to slip the wheel back on, then driving the linchpin through the wooden axle and pegging it in place. Unfortunately, I was the one who got to do most of the heavy work; even with leverage, numbers and willingness, most of the operation called for brute strength.

Which naturally meant me, according to Del; the sardonic observation made Cipriana and Adara laugh, while Massou merely looked at me in perplexity.

I sighed. "Look at your hands and feet, boy. One day you'll be as big as I am, and then they'll call you brute."

Grinning at Massou's immediate inspection of hands and feet, Del examined the mare. Gently she checked legs, hooves--fingering splints and bog spavins,

setting fingernails between cracks in the hoof walls, ticking off infirmities--yet speaking softly all the while. The mare nosed Del's hair briefly, then returned to her stupor between the shafts.

Del turned to Adara, brows pulling downward. "How far are you bound?"

"To Kisiri," the woman answered. "My husband's kin are there."

Del tilted her head in consideration, mouth twisted doubtfully. "Too far, I think, for this mare. All the way over Reiver's Pass." She shook her head, patting the mare's shoulder. Even a passing glance at the animal underscored Del's concern; in addition to the weaknesses Del had found, she was swaybacked, knock-kneed, too thin--clearly worn down from a journey still in its infancy.

"The Heights will suck the wind out of her and leave her with nothing to breathe."

"She has to last the journey! How else are we to go?" Adara moved rapidly to the mare's head, neatly forcing Del to step away. The woman stroked the age-faded piebald face and whispered words of encouragement. "She is tired, that is all.

In the morning she will be better."

"In the morning she might be dead."

Adara turned to Del. "Have you no kind words in your mouth? Must you strip away our hope?" She flicked a glance at Cipriana and her brother, both white-faced and wide-eyed with a sudden comprehension of the possibility of failure, and what it might mean for them. "Do you forget I have children to tend?"

Del's tone was gentle, but underneath lay the subtle edge of true-honed steel.

"Hiding the truth from them helps no one. Suckle them on dreams and falsehood to the exclusion of reality and they'll be unprepared for life."

Adara's green eyes narrowed. She was a tall, strong woman, more substantial than

Del, and with as much determination. Beneath wool skirts and long belted tunic was a firm body accustomed to hardship. It was hardship of a different sort than Del's, but equally valid.

Uneasily, I looked from one to the other. I hate it when women fight... unless, as has occasionally happened, they're two cantina girls fighting over me. This, however, was different.

Adara opened her mouth to answer sharply, paused, glanced briefly at me. Reconsidered her words. She modified her tone, but the intent remained quite clear. "Cipriana will one day be a wife, not a warrior. And the man she tends will be her husband, a settled man, who has no need of a sword, nor of a wife who wears one."

"Hoolies." I muttered wearily. I found a stump--wet, of course--and sat on it, shivering in the dampness. The rain had faded to mist, but the sun had yet to shine. Everything was soot-gray and slate-blue; even the turf, ordinarily a rich, lively green, was dull and blotchy, channeled by runnels pouring off mounds and hummocks and terraces.

Obscurely, Del asked, "How old were you when she was born?"

Adara stared. And then answered politely enough, "Fifteen, even as Cipriana herself is now," She glanced at the girl, a mother's quiet pride evident in her smile and the softening of her face. "I had been wed but a nine-month, so clearly the gods blessed the union."

"Fifteen." Del's expression was masked, but I knew her too well to miss the odd note in her voice. One of weariness and recollection. "At fifteen, I too dreamed of a husband and daughter... and a softer sort of life." Her eyes flicked a glance at me, at Cipriana, at the woman. Her tone hardened. "But the gods saw fit to give me a different road."

The Border woman was neither vindictive nor cruel, and did not, thank valhail, display the quick-striking dagger of a jealous female's tongue. Plainly she heard the peculiar note in Del's tone, and it touched her. Hostility spilled away; her question was very soft. "Is it too late to take another?"

In a clipped, harsh tone, Del answered. "Much later than you know." And then, abruptly, as if she regretted saying anything at all, she was asking questions about the remaining food supplies.

Adara sighed. Lines crept back into her face, aging her beyond her thirty years.

"We have what the thieves left us: a little flour, dates, dried meat, grain for the mare in case foraging isn't enough... some tea and water..." Her head dipped briefly, then snapped back up. The Border woman would not acknowledge how bad the telling sounded. "We had a nanny in kid, and another just weaned--"

--and two hens," Cipriana said hollowly, "with a rooster. In crates." Her face was solemn. "They took them all except the mare; they said she wasn't worth it."

As one, we looked at the mare. No, to thieves, she was not. Unless they meant to eat her, but she was too old and too thin to offer much other than tasteless sinew and bone.

Del nodded. "Have you coin?"

Even Massou, young as he was, understood the possibilities in the question. And misunderstood, even as his sister and mother did. I didn't really blame them; they had been hard-used by thieves. There was no reason to trust anyone else until we gave it to them.

"Nothing left," Adara said sharply. "Will you take the mare, now?"

Del's tone didn't change, only the end of the question did. "Have you coin to buy supplies when you reach a settlement?"

The Borderer's color deepened. Ashamed, she looked at me, still sitting huddled on the stump. "No," she said very softly. "I thought to sell the mare."

Del shook her head. "She will bring nothing; would a man pay coin for a horse no one else will steal?" She didn't wait for a protest. "For now, what you need is fresh meat. It won't last, but it will fill the belly tonight and tomorrow morning." She looked at Massou. "Do you know how to set a snare?"

His pinched face brightened. "Oh, yes! My father taught me," The brightness fell out of his face as memory replaced it. Grief renewed, he stared hard at the ground.

Del's tone was brusquely sympathetic. "Fetch the makings, then, and you and I will snare us a meal." She paused. "If your mother doesn't mind."

That Adara wanted to was plain. But she made no protest, being a realistic woman: food had to come from somewhere and someone; Kesar was cold in the ground. Instead, she merely nodded.

Massou stared at Del. "But--you're a woman. Shouldn't he set the snares?" A finger jutted in my direction.

Del's expression didn't change. "Tiger is ill and needs to rest."

"Will you take me as well?" Cipriana asked eagerly, and then shot a stricken glance at her mother. "May I?"

The corner of Del's mouth twitched.

Adara's firm jaw was tight, stretching flesh over bone. I knew what she would say, and why; she would not lose son and daughter to Del. "It would be best if you stayed here, Cipriana. A woman prepares the meal." Swiftly, before Cipriana could express disappointment, Adara added, "Perhaps you might ask Tiger to tell you about the Punja and all of the places he has seen."

"But what about me?" Massou demanded promptly. "I want to listen, too."

Del's tone was dry. "Don't fret, Massou. He has stories enough for us all, and for all the days of forever. And he's a hero in every one."

I sniffed pointedly. "Not much of one at the moment."

Adara smiled; Cipriana giggled. Massou looked merely confused.

I nodded thoughtfully. "Now, there was a time..."

Del turned on her heel and left.

Adara prevailed upon me to change clothes, since what I wore was thoroughly soaked. She unwrapped the remaining bundle I had lugged up and down Del's "foothills" and handed me various pieces of alien clothing, then quietly took herself and her daughter around the side of the wagon while I shinnied out of wet silk, dhoti and harness.

Unfortunately, cold as I was, I couldn't replace wet clothes with new immediately. There was the problem of figuring out how to put them on.

Eventually, muttering violent but indecipherable curses through chattering teeth (and coughing), I did sort things out, thanks to Adara's quiet explanations from the other side of the wagon.

Of something called wool, there were baggy trews that reached to ankles; gaiters cross-gartered with leather thongs stretching from knee to ankle; a long-sleeved undertunic. The sleeveless overtunic was of leather decorated with silver-tipped fringe. Low boots replaced my sandals.

The woolens were blue, every last bit, though none was the same blue, but a tangle of brights and darks. The leather was a uniform bloody brown. I felt like a patchwork man.

I looked down at the pile of sodden silk and damp dhoti. On top of both lay my sword and harness. I scooped it up and realized that for the first time in many

years, the harness leather would no longer come in contact with my flesh. The Northern clothes were too confining.

Del, I recalled, wore her harness strapped over her leather tunic. Time for me to do the same.

Undoing buckles, I came out from behind the wagon. Cipriana peeped around the corner, saw I was clothed, giggled and said something to her mother mostly in Northern. Color stood high in her cheeks.

Adara did not look at me, but at the massive sword hilt jutting from the sheath.

"Is that a jivatma?" she asked.

I stopped undoing and moving buckles. Her face was pale. Even Cipriana was taken aback, looking from my face to the sword and back.

"What do you know of jivatmas?" I shifted buckles again, deftly lengthening straps. The sword-weighted sheath swung.

"I--my husband was Northern. He told me a little about the swords, and the people who wield them." She touched her throat in a betraying gesture of vulnerability. "Is that a bleeding-blade?"

I settled buckles into new places, snapped the straps, hooked arms through, head and neck, adjusted the fit with a rolling motion of both shoulders. "For another man, it was a jivatma," I said quietly. "For me, it's merely a sword. And only temporarily, until I can get another."

Adara did not move her head. I saw the pulsebeat in her throat. "Then--you are not a sword-dancer?"

A tug here, pull there... it would take time for the leather to settle, and for me to adjust to it over layers of fabric instead of flesh. "I am a sword-dancer," I said, "but a Southron one. There is a difference. I don't know what your husband told you, but in the South a man with a sword is a man with a

sword, not some sorcerer who claims a blade that comes to life when you sing a song."

"Sword-singer," Cipriana said clearly, with more than a little awe.

I frowned. "Well, I suppose the term applies, in a way--at least, when it comes to a jivatma." I shrugged, dismissing it; reached over my left shoulder to snick the blade in its sheath. "But Del and I are sword-dancers."

There was a moment of icy silence. "Del, too?" Adara was clearly shocked.

Slowly, I smiled. "What did you think she was? A woman who plays with a sword merely for effect?"

It was a question Del had asked me once, when I was still blithely convinced she wasn't what she claimed, but merely a foolish woman on a foolish, futile mission to find a young brother stolen by Southron raiders and sold to Southron slavers.

Of course, I had come to know better.

Eventually.

Though she might argue otherwise.

Adara shook her head slowly. "I thought--I thought--" She broke off. "I don't know what I thought." So numbly. "But I know what sword-dancers are, what they do..." Her green eyes were dilated dark. "Do you mean to say she has killed people?"

It would do no good to deny it. "In the circle and out of it."

"And you?"

"And me."

Even her lips were white. Dazedly, she asked, "What have I brought among us?"

I sneezed. Sneezed again. Pressed the heel of a hand against my heavy head. "For the moment," I mumbled thickly, "nothing more than a miserable excuse for a

man." I sniffed loudly and lengthily, "Gods--if you exist--could you just send me a little sun--?"

It made Cipriana smile.

The girl's mother did not.

Twelve

Adara swung around stiffly and marched across the muddy little campsite to where I'd left dhoti and burnous piled on the ground. She picked them up, folded them neatly even though they were wet, and brought them back to me.

Her tone was awkwardly proper, "We are grateful for the help you've given us with the wagon. But I must ask you to go."

"Go?"

"Go," she repeated firmly. "I will not have my children witnessing violence and murder."

Oh, hoolies. "Adara--"

"Just go." Her face--and mind--were closed.

I sighed, knowing argument and explanation would accomplish nothing. I'd met her kind before. "Do you mind if I wait for Del?"

She heard the dryness in my voice, but kept herself from responding in kind.

"Until then, yes." Her own words were clipped.

"You should let them stay until morning." Cipriana's quiet suggestion startled us both. "They have helped with the wagon, and Del is bringing food. The least we can do is let them share our fire for the night."

The girl's mother stared at her. Convictions warred with courtesy. Abruptly, she thrust the clothing into my hands. "Cipriana--you don't know what they are."

"Sword-dancers." The girl was matter-of-fact. "I'm not blind or deaf, and we are Borderers. We've all been to Harquhal. I've seen sword-dancers before, and so has Massou." She shrugged. "I've even seen a sword-dance."

"Cipriana!"

"I have." Her eyes were steady. "It wasn't so bad."

I smiled. "Most of the time, it isn't. Not much more than an exhibition."

Cipriana nodded. "They were good, those men. Father even said they were, but not good enough to be ishtoya or an-ishtoya." Pale brows interlocked. "What do the words mean? I asked, but he never told me."

I looked at Adara, expecting her to cut off the conversation. But she said nothing at all, merely turned away with a rigid spine and knelt down to tend the fire. Loosened hair, red as copper, fell forward to hide her face. Impatiently she thrust it back, mouth set in a thin, hard line.

Cipriana waited. Her face was solemn, yet expectant, similar in bone and expression to Del's. Both were blonde, blue-eyed, fair-skinned. But there was innocence in the younger girl's eyes, even as there was experience in Del's.

I bent down and tucked dhoti and burnous into the bundle and rolled it up again.

"They are Northern words," I said, tying thongs. "Both mean the same thing, basically, which is 'student'--but an-ishtoya is of a higher level than ishtoya."

A lock of loose, pale hair, fine as floss, fell forward over a shoulder.

Cipriana hooked it behind one ear in a gesture habitual to Del. "What are you?" she asked.

"Me? I'm Southron." I grinned as I rose. "In the South, things are done differently."

"And Del?"

"Del is--Del." I shrugged. "It's for her to say."

"Kaidin, is she not?" Adara's voice was muffled. "She carries a jivatma."

I let that sink in a moment. "For a woman so opposed to sword-dancers," I said lightly, "you sure know a lot about us."

She cast me a sharp, bright look of resentment, as if I'd offended her by doubting her intelligence. "I'm a Borderer," she said curtly. "We learn many things out of necessity."

"And survival is one of them." I ducked beneath the rainbreak, squatting by the fire. "And have you also learned--"

But I was never able to finish my question because Massou came running down the nearest slope with something clutched in his hands. Adara rose and turned at once, slipping out from under ropes and rainbreak to tend her son.

"Look!" he cried. "Look! See what nearly got me?" Stretched between both hands was a thick, dark rope of a snake. It was a pearly, indigo color, slicked with grayish speckles. "It tried to bite me, tried to kill me, but Del took out her sword and cut its head right off!" He displayed the headless end enthusiastically, oblivious to the gore. "It tried to bite me on the arm as I bent to lay a snare, but she cut the head off even as it struck!"

The she lie indicated came quietly down the slope behind him, empty-handed.

Boreal was in her sheath. "The snares are set. By morning, we should have meat."

"She says we can eat this." Diffidently, Massou held the bluish body out to his mother. But Adara ignored him--and the snake--altogether; instead, she stared at the woman who had saved the life of her son.

"Bluesnake." Del said briefly. "Better by far than cumfa." She ducked beneath the rainbreak, squatted to pour tea, glanced at me over the rim. Her brows climbed slowly up. "A Northerner has joined us."

I sighed. "Yes, well, everything else was wet."

"It's why I bought them," Del agreed blandly. "The farther north we go, the colder it gets. You'll be glad of the furs, too, once we reach Reiver's Pass."

Massou was still full to bubbling over of his experience, wanting to share it with everyone, but particularly with his mother. "You should have seen me!" he exclaimed. "I was all bent down to set the snare--just like this--" He bent, flopping the dead snake in the mud "--and there it was, just waiting, all coiled up and reared back. It would've bit me, too, but Del saw it and zlipp! --cut its head right off!"

Cipriana, having inspected the kill, made a face of bored distaste.

"You didn't look beforehand, Massou." Del was quietly reproving. "The world is treacherous if you don't pay attention."

Briefly chastened, he nodded, though deaf to the nuances in her tone. And he was too excited to pay mind to the words for long. Clearly he no longer judged Del unfit to set snares or anything else that was ordinarily a man's concern; in his eyes, she had earned her place in a masculine world. "After it was dead, Del said we could eat it. I wanted to keep the head, but she said it wasn't a trophy. She said a man should never be proud of his failures." Blue eyes were fixed on me. "She said you wear a string of claws around your neck, but it's a proper keepsake because you saved your people from a sandtiger who was eating all the children,"

I looked at Del. Her expression was sanguine. "Well, yes--so I did." I reached

beneath all the leather and wool and pulled the string of claws free, hearing the familiar click and rattle. Somehow, before the boy's disconcertingly direct gaze, I couldn't embellish the story. But neither could I entirely ignore an opportunity. "Someone had to do it, and there I was."

"Was it hard?"

I tapped my cheek. "Hard enough, and dangerous. See these scars?"

"The sandtiger did that?"

"It's where I got my name." Said casually enough, and regretted almost immediately.

"Got your name?" Cipriana frowned. "Didn't you have a name?"

I glanced at Del, who clearly was sorry she'd said anything at all. We'd both been alone too long, or only with one another; we had forgotten how direct children can be. How demanding--and deserving--of simple honesty.

I drew in a breath. "You're a Borderer," I said evenly, "What do you call slaves?"

"Chula," she answered promptly. And then covered her mouth with her hand.

Massou's blue eyes were huge. "You were a slave once?"

Even Adara waited. Del sipped tea.

"Once," I answered quietly, "a very long time ago."

They stared, all three of them. Just stared. I found it discomfiting and otherwise irritating, although I knew they didn't do it to offend me. And I suppose I even understood it: here I was, professional sword-dancer, freely admitting I had been a chula. In the South, slaves are less than chattel, less than human, and to illustrate it slaves are never named. So, when I had killed the cat, I'd taken on his name, to illustrate my new-found and hard-won freedom. Adara's green eyes had the unfocused look of someone lost in recollections.

Then, slowly, she turned from me to Del. "And you?" she asked. "Were -you also a--"

"--chula?" Del shook her head. "Northerners don't keep slaves."

"Then..." Adara's glance flicked down to the fire and held. "I should not ask."

"No, you shouldn't." Del's tone was quiet. "But you have, and so I will tell you this much: I chose my life just as you chose yours... and I make no judgments when others take a different road than mine."

Adara's head snapped up. "I have children to protect!"

A muscle ticked in Del's left cheek. "Yes. Of course."

"If you had children--"

Del overrode her smoothly. "If I had children," she said with quiet clarity, "I would teach them to think for themselves."

White-faced, Adara looked at her children. First at Cipriana, clothed in gray wool, no longer a girl but not quite a woman; at Massou, a boy, in brown, still clutching his thick-bodied snake. Towheaded, blue-eyed children, showing their father's heritage. I knew she balanced Del's words against her own convictions, weighing past behaviors, past pronouncements. Of her children, neither said a word, not unaware of the tension singing between the two women, but also not knowing how to respond.

And then the tension faded out of Adara, replaced with resignation. "I will prepare the snake."

"I can do it." Del's offer was meant to help settle ruffled feathers.

Adara understood. She smiled crookedly. "No. Your task was to catch the meal; mine is to prepare it." There was dryness in the Border woman's tone, as if she regretted the ordering of the tasks, but no hostility. She took the snake from

her son. "Cipriana, will you help me?"

The girl opened her mouth, clearly torn; there were things she wanted to ask the two strangers with swords on their backs. But she said nothing at all to either of us, merely nodded and went to her mother.

Adara did not turn away at once. Obscurely, she asked, "Do you understand?"

"Yes," Del said, "but you should understand that we are not the enemy."

Adara shoved fallen hair away from her face with the back of a callused right hand. "Sometimes," she said softly, "it's so very hard to tell."

We ate Massou's snake, talked a little, went to bed. Adara and the children slept in the little wagon, while Del and I bedded down outside, a little apart from the wagon. The night air made me cough; I buried my head in goathair and tried to still my lungs.

Del stirred against me. "Your cough is getting worse."

I freed my mouth from goathair. "Am I keeping you awake?"

"Well, I'm not asleep... what do you think?" And then she sighed, heavily, and hitched a hip higher on my thigh, pressing her spine against my belly. "No. It isn't you. It's me. I'm doing something I swore I'd never do."

I waited. She didn't answer at once. Eventually, I gave in and asked what it was.

Pale hair was silver in the darkness. I could see little of her face. "I'm thinking," she said wearily. "Thinking about--"

"--how things might have been," I finished. "Wondering what kind of person you would be, and what you might be doing."

She was silent a moment. Then, "Don't you?"

"Wonder about you, or me?"

"Both."

I smiled into her hair. "Never."

Del stiffened, then thrust herself up and over, settling back down beneath

blankets to face me this time. Blue eyes bored into mine. "Never?"

"I know what I'd be, bascha. A chula, or maybe dead. Probably dead; I'd have killed someone for my freedom, and the Salset would have killed me."

"If they'd caught you."

"They might have. Although Sula probably would have given me food and water and helped me to escape... and paid for it eventually, if they'd found out."

Del sighed. "A strong woman, Sula. She would have risked her life for you."

Sula. I hadn't thought of her in months, although it had been only six or so since I'd seen her. Del and I had been left for dead in the Punja, intended as Sun Sacrifices, but the Salset had rescued us. An odd thing, that; half a lifetime before they had tried to kill me. But then I'd been a chula, and unworthy of a name.

Except Sula had given me one. She had given me dignity.

Old memories hurt. I shoved them away and resorted to my customary tone. "I inspire that kind of loyalty. Look at you, Delilah."

Del said something obscene. I laughed, then had to stifle another round of coughing.

Her fingers were cool on my wrist. "Am I wrong to do what I do?"

"Just because Adara thinks you are doesn't mean you are."

"I'm not asking Adara. I know what she thinks. I'm asking the Sandtiger."

I snorted. "I'm a fine one to ask. We share a profession, bascha... and other things as well." I paused significantly. "Sometimes, that is. When loki aren't around."

Del sighed and shut her eyes. "Can't you ever be serious?"

"I'm serious most of the time. As for you--"

"What do you want in a woman, Tiger?"

I froze. "What?"

"What do you want in a woman?" She hitched herself up on an elbow. "A soft, helpless thing, requiring your protection? Or a woman like Elamain was, hungry for constant bedding?" She sighed a little, looking over my shoulder toward the wagon. "Do you want a woman who cooks for you, cleans for you, bears you countless children... do you want a woman like Adara?"

"Yes," I answered promptly.

Her eyes came back to me. "Which? Like Adara?" Surprise flickered in her tone.

"No. Like all of them."

Del's mouth twisted. "You want three women. Why am I not surprised?"

I grinned. "You don't understand men, bascha."

"No," she agreed dryly, "I have met few examples worth the trouble of learning."

I ignored that. "There are times when softness in a woman appeals to me. There are times when an appetite like Elamain's rouses me. There are times when I think about raising a family. And there you are, bascha--all three women, but preferably in one body. I really don't want a harem... too much trouble when you move."

She was not in the mood for flippancy. "Have you any children?"

"Probably somewhere; I haven't been celibate. But none that I'm certain about."

"And does it bother you, that you may have sired sons and daughters but don't know who--or what--they are?"

I groaned and rolled onto my back, scratching at my forehead. "I don't know, Del. I never think about it."

Her voice was soft. "Never?"

I scowled into the darkness. "If I worried about all the children I may or may not have sired, I'd have time for nothing else."

"But if you died, Tiger... if you died with no son or daughter, there would be no one left to sing the songs of you."

"Songs?" I cast her a suspicious scowl. "What songs, bascha?"

Del tightened the blankets around her shoulders. "In the North, it is family custom to sing songs of those who have gone before. When an old one dies--or even a newborn baby--kinfolk gather to honor that person with songs and feasting."

I frowned. "You sure sing a lot in the North. Sing to your sword, sing to your dead ..." I shook my head and stared up at the stars. "I'm a Southroner, Del. There is no one to sing for me."

"Yet," she said distinctly, as if it made a difference.

I smiled, laughed, gave in. "Yet," I agreed. "Now may I go to sleep?"

Thirteen

I felt it before I knew it. An itch and tickle all over my body, teasing arms and legs, my scalp, even across my belly. I sat up, swearing, and tore the blankets off.

"Tiger--?" Del, blurry-toned; I was on my feet.

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know--"

And then, abruptly, I did. I recalled the sensation too well.

I scooped up my sword and drew it, scraping it out of the sheath.

Del knew better than to question me again. She was on her feet, like me; wide awake, like me, unsheathing her own blade.

I pointed toward the saddle slung between two slanting hills. The track was hard to see. "There," I said clearly.

"I see nothing, Tiger."

"It's there. It's there." And it was; I could feel it. Creeping relentlessly over the saddle. Dribbling down the track, heading unerringly for the wagon.

"Wake them up," I told her, "but have them stay in the wagon. I want them in one place, not scattered to the winds."

The old piebald mare nickered uneasily, testing the weight of her line. I recalled the flight of Del's speckled gelding and the loss of my own stud. Del went to the wagon in silence, parted the woven hangings, said something quietly. I heard Adara's stifled outcry, Cipriana's rising tone, Massou's excited voice. And then I was by the wagon, near the shafts, waiting for the arrival.

Something fluttered deep in my belly. Fear, a little, but mostly an odd, frustrated anger, that something could offer such threat and I didn't know what it was.

I could see nothing at all, save the silhouette of the saddle. Beyond it lay the sky and stars, and blacker shadows yet. "Hoolies ..." I muttered uneasily, "I wish we were in the desert."

"They'll stay." Del slipped into place beside me. "What can you tell me, Tiger?"

"Don't you feel it, bascha?"

"No. Nothing."

It made me feel even worse. How could something so strong go unmarked by Del?

"Right there," I said sharply, and suddenly there it was.

There they were: four men on horseback, riding down the track. Little more than shapeless shadows, blackest black, shrouded in cloaks or burnouses. The horses they rode were soundless.

"I don't like it, bascha."

"Tiger--look!"

I squinted, even as she did, using a hand to shield my eyes, for the sudden firelight was blinding. It exploded behind each of the riders, crowning the saddleback, and made them silhouettes instead of men.

"Ah, booties," I growled, disgusted, as each of them bared a sword.

Horses are afraid of fire. It makes them crazy. It makes them stupid. It makes them do silly things. But these four horses were untouched by the blaze behind them or the flames dancing on each of the blades held so precariously near their heads. They just kept coming, in an eerie, uncanny silence.

And then they began to run.

"Del," I said lightly, "now might be a good time for you to start singing. We'll need every advantage we can get."

Del sang, and the horses came on, exhaling smoke. Swords blazed like brands in the night.

The riders split up, driving in four directions. Two dropped back, outflanked the others, circled the wagon. The swords were torches in their hands, lighting four familiar faces.

Four dead faces; we had already killed them once. But somehow they lived again.

Del's song wavered. Breath caught in her throat, then ran raggedly out of her

mouth. "Tiger--do you see--?"

"I see, bascha. Keep singing."

She didn't. "How is it possible?"

"It's not. At least, not without using magic." I swallowed heavily. "You beat them once, Del. I know you can do it again."

"But I cut them to pieces, Tiger! These are whole men!"

Whole men, each of them, coming down from the Northern sky. Swathed again in Southron silks, baring blazing Southron blades, mouthing Southron words. But everything was soundless.

How is it possible?

"Never mind," I said grimly. "The trick is to win again."

"Loki," Del breathed. "It has to be the loki. They are powerful enough."

"To stitch them together again?" I drew in a deep breath. "Then let's take them apart--again."

"Last time they were men."

This time they were not.

"Sing," I said fervently. "Sing for all you're worth."

Loki, men, whatever, they knew how to handle swords. And did so very well, whipping in, whipping out, playing with us on the run. Del and I were forced back against the wagon, then cut away from it, herded like mindless sheep. But we fought back with all our skill, tantalizing the mounted men, until their game became less than a game and more like an execution.

I heard the old mare scream. I snatched a glance out of the corner of my eye and saw a flaming sword cut her rope. She spun awkwardly, staggered two steps, went down heavily. She did not move again.

My world was little more than noise and flame. I smelled fire and the stink of

decaying flesh, the tang of sweat-soaked wool, the salt of sweat-caked leather.

Blades rang on blades, filling the air with swordsong; the sweetest sound I know, and by far the deadliest.

I gasped, sucked air, wheezed, coughed, spat mucus out of my mouth. Tried to turn back the two swords that came at me time and time again. Looked for Del, saw her engaging two flaming swords, and knew that no matter who--or what--our opponents were, living or resurrected, they also were more than a little deadly.

I never touched flesh with my sword. Not even horseflesh. I couldn't get close enough, beat off by blazing steel. And then one of them made a mistake; he came a little too close. I swung, cut, tore through, and the horse disappeared into smoke.

"Del!" I cried. "They're not real!"

"--real enough," she panted.

"Duck the swords and go for the horses. None of the mounts are real, just specters made out of smoke."

I'll give the girl this much, she does know how to listen. In a moment another was unhorsed, left to ride nothing but smoke, which left us with two still mounted. The men on foot approached, but now they were vulnerable.

More than that, in the end; the men on foot were falling apart.

Piece by piece, things dropped away. An arm, a head, a hand. The stink of them nearly choked me.

Two were whole, and mounted. One came for me, the other targeted Del. Whatever else they were, they weren't fazed by the behavior of their comrades. Their minds were fixed on us.

One came riding. I ducked, spun, swung back, trying to notch a hock. But the

rider set the horse back on his heels and rolled left, swinging his flaming sword. I ducked, but not enough; something bathed my left arm in pain.

I don't know what I shouted. Undoubtedly something obscene. But for the moment I was one-armed, handling the sword with only one hand as well. It was made for a two-handed grip and that's what I'm accustomed to. The balance was off, I was off, my arm was nearly off.

I heard Del's grunt of effort, followed by an outcry, I tried to look, could not; the rider was on me again.

I slipped. Went to one knee. Tried to scabble up, to lurch aside, but the footing was treacherous. I saw the blade swing down at my head, tried to block it with my useless left arm, heard someone scream behind me.

Hoolies, bascha, not you--

Not Del. Cipriana.

I flattened, rolled, came up in time to see her jam the end of her quarterstaff into the horse's chest, then brace the butt against the wagon to support the staff as well as she could. The horse spitted himself, bled smoke instead of blood. Then wisped into nothingness.

The rider landed, grinned, fell down, broke into pieces on the ground. The sword no longer blazed, but was dead, cold steel.

Four feet away, Del severed the last horse's throat. And then we were alone, waving off smoke, except for Cipriana.

She sucked in harsh, gasping breaths. There was blood spattered on her face, but none of it was hers. What she wore was mine.

"Cipriana." I grunted, heaved myself up, staggered over to her. "Cipriana, it's over. Over." I wrenched the staff out of rigid hands. "No more need for this."

Empty hands clawed for the staff, found air, then masked her face from me. In

the wagon, I heard sobbing. Not Massou's: Adara's.

It made me oddly angry. The woman cried for a daughter who had acquitted herself quite well. Better than crying, she might come outside instead and see what that daughter had done.

"Tiger." It was Del, at my side, touching a charred sleeve. "Tiger, let me see."

"What? That?" I tried to shrug the arm away, hissed and wished I hadn't.

"Hoolies, bascha, what are you doing?"

"Looking," she said firmly. "Hold still--" She tore wool; her face was grim.

"Well, one thing for burning swords--the wound is cauterized. About all we need to do is clean it, bandage it... it ought to heal well enough."

My mind was on Cipriana, still hidden behind her hands. "Cipriana, you did well.

You saved my life. No sense in shutting it out."

"She'll be fine," Del said flatly. "Can we get this taken care of?"

"I'll be fine." I touched Cipriana's shoulder. "Bascha, it's all right--" And then I stopped short, because Del had gone quite still.

Oh, hoolies, why the slip of the tongue?

I started to say something, anything, but coughing got in the way. I bent over, braced myself against the wagon, brought up gouts of mucus. My chest was tearing apart.

Through the hacking and retching, I heard Massou say the mare was dead. Somehow it didn't surprise me. And I hurt too much to care.

"Adara," Del said quietly, "can you make him tea?"

I stopped coughing. Whispered. "No more of that stuff. I'd rather have aqivi."

Del put a hand on my brow. "You're hot."

"Best put him in the wagon." Adara's voice. "He'll be warmer in there."

"Don't need warmth," I protested in a croak. "Bascha, can you whistle up a storm? One of those Northern snowstorms?"

"No," Del said firmly, and steered me toward the back of the wagon.

"Is he all right?" Cipriana asked, forgetting her own ordeal.

"He will be," Del remarked, "once he's had some sleep. First the cold and now a wound... even sandtigers need time to recover."

"Hoolies, Del--I'm fine."

"Your lungs roar like a bellows, you croak like you've eaten steel, your arm was carved open and burned. You are not fine, Tiger... and you'll thank us in the morning."

I knew better. But I also knew that I hurt inside and out. Shutting my teeth on curses, I crawled into the wagon and stretched out my bulk on the pallet. The interior was hardly large enough for all of me; I wondered how in hoolies Adara and her children managed to get any sleep.

Painfully, I turned over onto my back. Blinked dazedly at the opening with its woven cloth curtain pulled back. I saw blonde hair, blue eyes, concern.

"Bascha--?"

"Maybe," Del said dryly. "Which one of us did you want?"

Silence, I decided hastily, was the better part of valor.

Fourteen

I was in the Punja. In a hyort. Bathed in heat and sweat and stink.

I stirred. Tried to talk. A cool, callused hand touched my mouth gently,

quieting my mumbles, and I subsided into silence.

I knew I had killed the sandtiger. But he had also nearly killed me. My face was alive with pain; venom ran through my veins and set my flesh afire.

But I was still alive. And now I was free as well.

I stirred. Surely the shukar would see his way clear to giving me freedom now.

How could he deny it? I had killed the beast that had killed so many of us--no, not us; I am not a Salset, being merely chula--and now the tribe would have to reward me for it. They would have to, and the reward I craved was freedom.

The reward I demanded was freedom.

Gods of valhail, hounds of hoolies--would they give it to me at last?

My lips were parched; I licked them. Tried to wet them and found my mouth too dry. All of me was too dry, until a cool hand with a dampened cloth bathed my face, my neck, my chest, dipped to belly and paused. I heard an indrawn breath.

Sula?

Through closed eyes, I summoned her before me. A young Salset woman with characteristic coloring: lustrous black hair, golden skin, liquid, dark brown eyes. Sula was still unmarried but of an age to take a husband; that she hadn't yet was attributable to me. And a definite breach of custom. I was a chula, she was not; yet another reason the shukar hated me. He might have taken her for himself, although Sula herself would have denied him.

The vision-Sula wavered, faded, renewed itself. Only this time it wasn't the Sula who had given me manhood and dignity; who had argued for my freedom; who had told me to go when I had fairly won it. This time it was the Sula who had rescued Del and me from the Punja and brought us back among the living. An older, fatter Sula: broad of face, graying of hair, now a widow. But still a

woman of enduring strength and courage.

Del.

And I realized I was dreaming.

"Bascha?" It came out on a broken croak.

The hand with the damp cloth spasmed against my flesh, withdrew itself hastily.

"No," she said, "it's Adara."

Adara. I opened my eyes. And realized how far I'd gone in my dreams.

I was in the wagon, the little horseless wagon, stuffed full of Borderer

belongings. Adara knelt next to me, though there was hardly room, and held a

dampened cloth in both hands. Fingers twisted and knotted it, then smoothed it

out to begin again. Bits of red hair straggled down the sides of her neck,

caught in sweat against flesh. Her face was sheened with it. She wiped her brow

with the back of an arm.

A handsome woman, Adara. And strong, in her own way, though a bit blind about swords and dancing. "Here," she said, "I have water."

It was tepid, tasting of goatskin bota. But I sucked it down, savoring the

wetness, and felt my throat come alive again. I thanked her and pushed it away.

"I have apologies to make," she said quietly.

I raised both brows.

"I have been too harsh with the children. I have been rude to you and Del."

I drew in a deep breath. "I just figured you had your reasons."

"I do. I did." She sighed and shredded the cloth again. "My husband was a sword-dancer."

Part of me was surprised. Part of me wasn't at all.

Adara, avoiding my eyes, stared at rigid hands. "He came down from the North to the border, to our settlement; a strong blond giant, and my heart was lost at

once. I was barely fifteen--he was older by twenty years, but somehow that didn't matter. I wanted him for my husband. But he was a man who lived by the sword, and I feared he would die by it also." Her mouth was thin and flattened, hardening the set of her jaw. "I made him give it up."

"How?"

"By giving him a choice: the woman or the circle. Kesar chose the woman."

"And you've raised your children accordingly."

"Yes." Her gaze, now raised, was unflinching. Green as my own; as a sandtiger's.

"I wanted Cipriana to have a softer life than I, and I wanted Massou never to take up the sword."

"Wanted," I said clearly. "Now you've changed your mind?"

Adara drew in a deep, noisy breath. "What Del has said is true. I can't hide my children from life, and life is rarely kind. So I've told Massou and Cipriana, if she wants, to learn what they can from you and Del, because one day they may need it."

And maybe sooner than she'd like. But at least she'd give them a chance.

"Water," I croaked.

Adara passed me the bota. "Your fever has broken. With sleep and food and rest, you should recover soon."

I grunted, handing back the bota. "I'll be up in the morning."

"No, probably not." Adara tucked the bota away. Her manner was oddly hesitant, yet also distinctly determined. "You and Del are--bonded?"

"Not formally." Bonding was a Border marriage custom. "Not even informally, really... we just ride together."

"And--sleep together."

"Well, yes. Usually." I sighed and scratched my scars, thinking about my arm, which felt strangely numb. "At the moment, it might be difficult . . . and Del's afraid of loki."

"I am not," Adara said. Clearly and distinctly.

Thoughtfully, I looked at her. Didn't say a word.

She lifted her chin and met my gaze. "My husband was often unable, once his heart weakened. So--it has been a long time."

I knew what it had taken her to say the words. In the South, women never initiate such things; it's for the man to do. Adara was a Borderer and therefore somewhat freer, and undoubtedly a Northern husband had also contributed, but all the same it was an interesting--and courageous--proposition.

And one I didn't particularly desire, Del being more than enough.

But how in hoolies do you tell a woman no?

In the end, I didn't have to. Adara knew it instinctively. For a moment she shut her eyes, then opened them again. Color bathed her cheeks, but she wasn't humiliated. "I know," she said quietly, without excess emotion. "I am only a Borderer. A woman who bears and raises children and lives in a single place. The sun has sucked the softness from my flesh and puts spots on my face. I have no gift with weapons, and I cry when I should fight back, and I couldn't wield a sword if my life depended on it. I'm not the woman for you."

"You were the woman for Kesar."

"But I made him change." She hated herself for it, now.

I thought about what Del had said. How she had wondered if I wanted a softer woman, a woman with different appetites, with different needs in life. A woman like Adara. And now another woman asked the same question, although the words--and who said them--were different.

I wondered if every woman alive wanted the life she didn't live.

The life she couldn't live.

Hoolies, what a curse.

"I'll get Del," Adara said, and slipped quietly out of the wagon.

Del came. She leaned against the wagon and peered in at me, hair hooked behind her ears. She was beginning to lose her tan, turning creamy pale again. "So," she said, "it lives."

"More or less." My throat hurt, and my chest, but at least my head was clearing.

"How long have I been asleep?"

"Off and on, for four days."

"Four days!" I frowned. "It was only a little cut, and burned closed, like you said."

"Was," she agreed. "But those were loki-touched swords, and the wound turned bad. I opened it and drained it."

I twisted my head and inspected the arm, pressing chin into shoulder. It was all wrapped up in cloth, but smelled clean enough. "Four more days lost, then."

Del shrugged. "Four more, six more... what does it matter? If I count each day as a notch on my funeral stick, I'll die of senseless worry."

She sounded calm enough. "But, bascha--time is running out."

"Time does that." Del leaned in, snagged the bota, unplugged it and drank deeply. "When you're fit, we'll have to portion out the food and necessary belongings, then go ahead on foot."

"Belongings?" I frowned. "We've been lugging ours along well enough. Why change now?"

"Not ours. Theirs." She shrugged. "They no longer have a horse."

I blinked. "You mean--you want the five of us to travel together?"

Del tossed the bota back. "It's been nearly six years since I came down the Traders' Road. Roadhouses and settlements move even as we move; I don't know them anymore. But I do know if we leave the Borderers here without protection, telling them help lies over the hill, they could all wind up dead."

I suppose I'd known that ever since we'd met up with them. But somehow I'd assumed we'd go on after helping them with the wagon. Now that help was pointless; without a horse to pull it, they couldn't take the wagon.

"I told them to pack up what they need, once you're out of the way," Del said.

"I told them they can buy a horse at the next settlement, and another wagon, but to consider this one gone." She stroked the wooden frame. "And it will be, by the time they have another. Thieves will strip this one clean, like carrion, and use the wood for burning."

"They don't have money for a horse and wagon."

"We do." Her tone was level. "I took the coin off the borjuni."

I contemplated her expression. I knew Massou reminded her of her brother, just as Cipriana reminded me of a younger, more innocent Del. And I suppose, in the back of my mind, I hadn't ever really considered leaving them behind... at least, not seriously.

"What's the matter, Del?"

Her face was stark. "I brought them, Tiger. The loki. When I got so upset in the valley... remembering my family--" She shrugged, oddly vulnerable. "It's what draws them: strong emotion. If I hadn't lost control--"

"It doesn't matter," I told her. "We defeated them, didn't we? We drove the loki away."

"Maybe." She didn't sound convinced.

"And now we must deal with the Borderers." I nodded. "More delay, bascha."

"Yes," Del agreed, "but what else can we do?"

Which had also been my answer, the times I'd thought about it.

Fifteen

"First, there is the circle." Del pointed at the curving line drawn so carefully in the turf. "And then there is the sword." She unsheathed Boreal. "Lastly, there is the dancer." She stepped over the line and into the circle, to stand in the very center. "This is the sword-dancer's world."

I looked at two fierce, solemn faces. Northern faces, both, cream-fair and smooth, unmarred by a Southron sun. They'd left before it could bake them.

Massou and Cipriana had taken to Del's lessons with a vengeance, sucking up everything she told them and locking it away. For a purpose, too; Del had a habit of asking them, always when least expected, to repeat what she had taught them. Willingly they would: Massou so quick and eager, Cipriana more reserved. But she remembered everything, while Massou sometimes forgot.

We had left the wagon behind and headed north on foot. My fever was gone, my head unstuffed, most of the coughing abated, but I felt the stiffness in my bones. Surrounded by four who were younger than I, unappreciative of the weather, I was feeling distinctly old and generally abused.

In five days, we had developed a routine. Everyone carried his share without complaint, up the hills and down them, winding around the track, quietly

accepting the burdens of the journey no matter how much he wanted to speak.

Adara was accustomed to hardship and adapted very well; her children, though used to having a father do things for them, nonetheless were young enough to look on it as an adventure. Massou had the boundless energy and enthusiasm of all boys his age. His sister wanted to please the adults, needing our approval.

In late afternoons, we halted, and then the lessons began.

Adara said nothing as, day by day, her children learned the arts of the dance.

Much of it was ritual, not an exercise of death; Del was careful in her phrasing and cut short Massou's occasional lapses into bloodthirsty discussions. She was honest with them, answering all their questions, but she taught them to honor the dance and not glory in violence.

They had only their father's sword, and so they took turns. Del could not loan them Boreal, and I didn't extend them the opportunity to try Theron's sword.

Ever since I'd stuck it in the ground, only to have that ground explode, I'd been careful to keep it away from everyone. Del had said it wasn't truly keyed, not like Boreal, but I didn't want to take a chance on injuring boy or girl.

One by one, they had their lesson. And then Massou, stepping out of the circle, looked with bright eyes to me. "Why don't you dance with Del?"

I was sitting on a hump of ground, observing their education. "I dance all the time with Del."

Cipriana's smile was sly. "We mean--with a sword."

I slanted her a baleful glance. She reddened, giggled, then drew herself up straight. Fifteen years old, was Cipriana; not a girl, but neither a woman.

Caught somewhere in between, yet fighting the constraints.

Hoolies, that's all I needed.

Del's smile was hooked down one corner of her mouth. "Why don't you, Tiger? You

could use the conditioning."

Yes, well, I could. The cold and arm wound had laid me low and I hadn't danced in too long. It was past time I put in some practice, no matter how good I was.

So I sighed, heaved myself up, and pulled Theron's sword out of the sheath.

Massou's grin split his face as he spoke the traditional invitation. "Step into the circle."

"I'm going, I'm going." I went, stepping over the curving line, and saw Del's peculiar expression. "Bascha?"

It faded almost at once. "Nothing," she said, "are you ready?"

Probably not. I wore too many clothes and my joints were too stiff. The day was damp, though not rainy, but I'd found it didn't matter. My bones hated the North.

"Spar or dance?" I asked. There is a decided difference.

"Spar," she said. "I don't think you're up to dancing."

The turf was damp but not slick, knotted with sprigs and tufts that offered better footing. Northern boots helped; I'd have slipped easily in my sandals.

"Then let's get to it, bascha."

I'll admit it, I was lazy. Lazy and out of shape. Sword-dancing requires daily physical and mental work, and I'd done neither lately. So when Del came at me, supple and strong, I wasn't ready for her.

Two quick engagements, and she'd forced me out of the circle.

Massou's eyes were huge. "Oh, Tiger!"

Hoolies, you'd think he'd bet money on me! Cipriana said nothing at all.

"We're sparring," I pointed out. "Practice isn't for real."

Del was instantly ablaze with indignation. "Have you heard nothing I've said?"

she asked. "Have you sat here for five days listening to me tell my ishtoya how to honor the rituals of the circle, and then ignore them yourself?"

I cleared my throat. "Del--"

"How can you claim yourself a sword-dancer if you don't take it seriously?" Her hostility was inspiring. "How can you dishonor your an-kaidin so easily?"

"Shodo," I said coolly. "In the South, the master's a shodo."

"Shodo, kaidin, an-kaidin--do you think I care for names?" She stepped to the edge of the circle. "I care about living and dying, Tiger, and how to uphold the honor of my an-kaidin."

"The same an-kaidin you killed."

It stopped her cold, of course; I'd expected it to. Color washed out of her face so fast I thought she might faint. But she held her ground, staring rigidly, though I think she was blind to me.

Massou was open-mouthed, Cipriana pale. Neither said a word.

"Yes," she said finally, "but at least he was worth the dance."

That did it. With pointed deliberation, I stepped over the muddy line and back into the circle. "Fine," I said, "let's do it."

No more sparring. We danced, Delilah and I. On a damp, turf-soaked hillside in the downlands of the North. I forgot the children watched. I forgot Adara watched. I forgot I was out of shape. I remembered only the habits I'd been taught so long ago.

Swordsong filled the campsite, the clash and clangor of magicked steel. Del didn't key and I couldn't, so the blades remained unlit, but silver was more than enough. It threw up a blinding curtain in the setting of the sun.

Beneath the noise of the swords was a contrapuntal sound. I wheezed a little, sucking in air, and Del muttered to herself. It was a constant racket from both:

gasps, grunts, in- and exhalations, the low-voiced undertone of the woman.

As the dance progressed, Del's noise gained volume. And I realized she wasn't really muttering, instead she was instructing. She was commenting on my style, on my techniques, grudgingly approving or broadly disapproving.

"What in hoolies--" I gasped, "--are you doing?"

"You're slow... you're slow... your style is too sluggish--"

"Hoolies, woman--I've been sick--"

"And you could be dead--"

Step, skip, jump.

"--I thought this was only practice--"

"--it is--"

"--I thought we were only sparring--"

"--we are--"

Feint, slash, withdraw.

"--you never did this before--"

"--you never needed it, Tiger--"

"--and now I do?--"

"--you do. You've gotten sloppy, Tiger."

Sloppy. Sloppy.

Take this for sloppy, bascha.

"--better, Tiger--better--"

And this, too.

"--much better, Tiger. Don't stop now--"

Hoolies, the woman would kill me. And it would have nothing to do with her sword.

"--if you hadn't unleashed that banshee-storm, I'd never have gotten sick--"

Duck, skip, twist.

"--oh, I see--we're going to blame me for this--"

"--if it weren't so thrice-cursed cold--"

"--this is not cold, Tiger--"

Boreal kissed my throat.

"--hoolies, Del, that's close--"

"--and I shouldn't have gotten through... blame only yourself, Tiger--"

Blame this, bascha.

Except I missed. And Del, as usual, didn't.

Ah, hoolies... it hurt.

"Tiger?" Del knelt in boot-torn turf as I slowly sat up. "Tiger--is it bad?"

Carefully, I felt the slice on my jaw. Not a lot of blood. Mostly injured pride.

"My arm hurts worse." Grudgingly admitting I was fine.

Del's brow smoothed. "I said you were too slow."

"Too slow, too stiff, too old." I turned my head, spat; the dance had dug deep in my chest.

Something flickered in blue eyes. Something akin to realization and apprehension. "Do you want to go back, then?"

"Yes." It was apprehension; I saw it. "But not until we're done."

Her tone was uneven. "Done with what?"

"With whatever you have to do."

Relief was a tangible thing, though she fought hard to hide it. "I'm sorry. I was angry. I forgot about your arm."

I stood up slowly, feeling my chest. "Maybe it's what I needed."

Del stood too, turning to face her students. "I was wrong," she told them

plainly. "I was angry. Anger is bad in the circle."

Massou's face was pale. "Could you have killed him?"

"Yes," Del answered honestly, "or Tiger could have killed me."

Well, it was nice of her to say so.

"Could you?" Cipriana obviously missed nothing.

I bent down and retrieved the sword. "Not today," I told her. "Probably not tomorrow. But maybe the day after that... if I live long enough."

Within two days, I'd joined the lessons as well. I felt the better for it, even if Del did occasionally forget that I pretty much knew everything she was teaching. Admittedly our styles are very different, having come from different cultures, but there isn't a whole lot she knows that I don't. (Or, to be fair, the other way around.) At any rate, it was good conditioning and I needed it.

Adara did not trouble me again with any manner of pursuit. I was a little surprised; didn't she think I was worth it? And didn't a woman expect a man to pursue her even if at first she says no?

Except when I thought about it, I realized it might be a bit difficult. Loki or no loki, Del was always present. It would make any sort of assignation downright impossible.

Although, I reflected, once I'd have tried it regardless.

Just for the hoolies of it.

Cipriana came around more and more. Quietly, she asked me to tell her stories.

Real stories, she said, tales of victories in the circle. And so, in the evenings, as we sat around the fire, I fell into the habit of reciting things that had happened before, being very careful not to elaborate. Embellishment has its place, as Bellin the Cat would surely agree, but I felt it best not to make

me sound too invincible; Massou and Cipriana might believe me and try to equal my feats.

And, eventually, I worked my way around to Del. Who looked back at me gravely and did nothing at all to help out.

"These are your stories, too," I pointed out. "Don't you tell tales in the North?"

"The trueborn skjald is most honored among our people."

"Then--?"

"I am not a skjald."

I scratched my claw-marked cheek in a bid for patience. "No, maybe not, but you can at least hold up your end of the history."

"Now you're speaking of skjelps."

"What?"

She didn't smile. "Skjelps are historians. Skjalds are storytellers."

Hoolies, here we go. "And there's a difference."

"Much like there's a difference between loki and afreet."

"Loki?" Massou, of course, perked up. "What about loki?"

"What about afreets?" Cipriana asked.

Del grinned pointedly at me.

I sighed. "Afreets are Southron demons. Playful demons. They can't really hurt you, they just bother you."

"Loki can." Massou was solemn, but curiosity lighted his eyes. "Loki can kill people."

Cipriana nodded. "Loki are evil demons."

Adara, silent up till now, added her encouraging comment. "Kesar used to speak of how, in the far north, loki would prey on entire settlements."

And here I'd expected her to admonish her children for speaking nonsense. "Huh."

Disgusted, I had nothing else to offer.

"It was loki who put those chopped up raiders back together." Massou's description, I thought, was just a tad bit too happily gruesome, if eloquently accurate.

"And loki who made horses out of smoke." Cipriani's eyes were black in the light of the fire. She had said nothing of her feat with the quarterstaff, locking it all away. "I know how they gain possession."

"Cipriana." Her mother, quietly.

"Well, I do. I've heard all the stories." Pale hair tumbled over her shoulders.

In poor light, she was Del; or Del an older Cipriana. "They bed with men and women."

Massou made a garbled sound of disgust and disbelief.

"They do," his sister insisted. "They make more loki that way."

Adara's voice sharpened. "Cipriana, enough. You'll give your brother nightmares."

I didn't think so. Neither did he.

Massou's eyes were huge. "You mean--like puppies and kittens?"

I had an odd, brief vision: a river of demon puppies and devil kittens. I had to smother a laugh. Massou was serious; too often we laugh at children.

"Loki exist," Del said quietly. "But if we're careful, they won't hurt us."

"And anyway, you can beat them." Massou's faith was matter-of-fact. "Didn't you beat them before?"

"I helped," his sister said.

Adara rose. "Time for bed."

Naturally, they protested. And naturally, she won. Massou and Cipriana retired to dream their dreams of loki, while Del sent me a level look across the fire as Adara went into the shadows to tend to personal needs.

"You are a fool," she said.

I rose, popping knotted muscles. "So you've said before." I stretched luxuriously, making appropriate sounds. "I think it's just a handy excuse to keep me out of your bed."

Del smiled blandly. "I'm sure Adara would be happy to let you in hers."

Hoolies. Can't keep anything from women.

I fingered the scabbed sword cut on my jaw. "I'm going to bed," I remarked, "with you or without you."

"Without," she said succinctly.

I paused. "You all right?"

"Just thinking, Tiger."

"Then you're not all right." A heavy-handed attempt at humor. Even I thought it was poor.

"Go to bed," Del suggested.

I did, and dreamed of loki.

Sixteen

Having displayed intense interest in the circle and in sword-dancing for well over a week, Massou and Cipriana now lost it entirely. And almost overnight; both adamantly refused to enter the circle.

We couldn't exactly make them. It was their free choice, and now they exercised it. But it did seem odd, until Del suggested an explanation. "They've all caught your cold. They don't feel like doing anything."

We sat facing one another on a goathair blanket, cleaning and honing our blades. The chore was second nature and one we both enjoyed. It was early evening and, of course, cool; Del and I both wore wool and soft leather.

"What do you mean?" I glanced over Del's left shoulder toward Adara and her children, who spoke quietly among themselves.

"They've been sniffing for two days, and just now are beginning to cough."

It was true. All three of them had been very quiet lately, if not downright depressed. If they were feeling anything like I had, I didn't blame them a bit for refusing to step into the circle.

"Well, then forget about the lessons. They don't really need them anyway; neither will be a sword-dancer."

It didn't sit well with Del. I doubted she had sincerely believed either of them would want to seriously apprentice, to assume the life she led, but I knew it was difficult for her to lose her two ishtoya. The lessons had taken her mind off the time she could not afford to lose, yet continued passing too swiftly.

Her voice was soft. "Massou could be good."

Mine was not. "Massou is too young to know what he wants, bascha. He just reminds you of Jamail."

Del continued to clean her blade, but I could see the tension in her shoulders.

"And what about Cipriana?"

"What about Cipriana?"

"You refused the mother. Are you waiting for the daughter?"

I didn't even smile. "No. I'm waiting for you."

She looked up from the weapon. "I've told you--"

"You've told me about the loki," I said quietly. "I don't know that I disbelieve you, after all that's happened, but I think you're going too far. It's been three weeks since I broke the circle--two since we fought those resurrected raiders. Do you plan to stay celibate forever, just in case?"

"You don't know what they can do--"

"I know what they have done."

Del's face was tight. "Then get it somewhere else!" She fought to keep her voice from carrying to the others. "Adara would take you. So would Cipriana."

Something occurred to me. "Are you jealous?"

"No. Why would I be?" Her voice now was cool and steady; Del had recovered herself. "We've made no vows to bind us. And even if we did, you'd do what you wanted to do. Vows would never stop you."

I stopped inspecting my Northern sword. "Are you saying I'd be unfaithful?"

Pale brows arched. "Well? Wouldn't you?"

Would I? Could I? Oh, hoolies, it wasn't worth contemplating. "Maybe if a woman didn't invent so many excuses not to sleep with a man, he wouldn't look for other bedmates."

Del's tone was decidedly frigid. "That isn't the issue, Tiger."

Well, no, but I wished it was. It was easier than the other. "I don't want to sleep with Adara, and Cipriana's too young."

"She's the same age I was when Ajani took me. The same age as her mother when Adara bore a daughter." Del tossed hair behind shoulders. "Don't disregard affection because the giver seems too young."

"Bascha--"

Del didn't avoid my gaze. "She reminds me of me. She reminds you of me... or maybe the me I'd be if Ajani had never happened."

It was true there were similarities. It was true they were much alike in body as well as in spirit. But I had never quite made the connection.

Thoughtfully, I tapped a nail on the edge of Theron's blade. "Maybe we're both fools, Del... looking for something that isn't there."

"Me for my brother--"

"--and me for an unspoiled Del?"

She nodded, looking away. "I know he's not Jamail, but it's hard not to pretend."

"But I don't think you're spoiled."

"No. Maybe not. But don't you ever wonder what I'd be like without this sword?"

Del without that sword was like the South without the sun. "No," I said truthfully. "Because if you didn't have it, I'd be dead ten times over."

Slowly, Del smiled, though it was crooked on her face. "Typical Tiger," she remarked, "thinking of his neck."

"And other portions of my body."

"As well as portions of mine."

Well, yes. Of course. Why should I deny it?

Del sheathed Boreal, shutting away the sheen of rune-worked steel. "Since I have lost the others, will you be my ishtoya?"

It would pass the time. "So long as you remember who I am."

She snorted indelicately. "How could I ever forget?"

I decided it might be best if I said nothing at all.

Next day, thank valhail, thick clouds parted and sunlight slanted through,

setting the world ablaze: gold and silver-gilt. Dew burned off, mist shredded, dampness trickled away.

I hadn't seen normal light for days and was irritable because of it. It just isn't natural to be so hemmed in by mountains and trees, not to mention oppressed by clouds so arrogant they clutter the mountaintops. I was sick of turf and sedge; blush-pink flowers and purple heather; gray-smudged, slate-blue days. I wanted sun and sand, and the heat of a Southron desert.

We climbed down out of the clouds into a lush, rich valley thick with grass and vegetation. It was a small place rimmed with upthrust mountains all tumbled together like oracle bones. At the far end lay a twisting defile, bluish black in raisin purple: narrow entryway from the north. Through the center of the valley cut Traders' Road, winding down from where we were.

Massou and Cipriana, shouting aloud, hurried down the track. They were oblivious to twisting turns and wagon ruts, too excited to slow their headlong pace. Adara started to call them back but in the end didn't, as if she as well as her children wanted company. It had been a long two weeks with only the five of us.

The encampment was large and sprawling, spreading from cradling mountainsides to the center of the valley where it huddled in clusters along the road. But it wasn't a permanent settlement, looking more like a caravan camp.

Del agreed with me. "They're uplanders," she explained, "come down from the Heights for a while. They do it twice a year, once in fall and once in spring."

Her face and eyes were alight and a spring had entered her step. "They're good people, Tiger... generous and friendly. It will be good to see them again."

"Do you know them?"

"Not all of them, no... maybe none of them. But that seems unlikely. Everybody gathers. In Northern, it's called a kymri."

"Every uplander comes down?"

"No, not every. Mostly just those who are landlopers."

This was getting to be too much. "Who?"

"Landlopers. Wanderers. Those who put down no roots."

"Oh. Nomads."

Adara nodded. "Kesar told me about them. He was an uplander himself, though not a landloper. He always said I would enjoy attending a kymri." Her face was solemn. "Now we have come to one, and Kesar isn't here." She watched her children run out onto the floor of the little valley. Already others were coming out from wagons to greet the newcomers. Her eyes were strangely blank. "Kesar isn't here."

Down below, Cipriana and Massou were swallowed by gathering landlopers.

Del sighed happily. "They'll have food and drink in abundance."

I brightened. "Aqivi?"

She grinned. "No. Something called amnit."

"Amnit?"

"Even the Sandtiger might find it too strong."

"Hunh. The liquor too strong for the Sandtiger hasn't been made yet."

"Maybe." Del just kept on grinning.

It was good to see her happy. "Willing to wager on it?"

"Save your coin, Tiger. You'll need it for other things."

I sighed in resignation. "More clothing, I suppose."

"No. Supplies, yes, such as food and drink and horses, but also other things."

Her eyes were filled with anticipation. "Many other wagers."

"Oh?"

"Oh, yes. Uplanders love to wager. Uplanders love the sword-dance." She cast me a bright-eyed glance. "Here they admire a woman with courage; we can't trick them into wagering everything on only you as we have in the past with Southroners. Here the dances will be clean, and so will the wagers."

I thought back on all the circles we had entered on our way to this little valley. "Is this why you've been hammering at me so much? All this 'be a sword, become a sword' nonsense, as if I were Massou or Cipriana?" My tone was dry. "I do know how to dance, Del... it wasn't necessary."

All the animation spilled away. The light was gone from her eyes. "I wish it hadn't been."

"You will leave us here." Adara said flatly.

Both of us looked at her. Since catching my cold she had been listless and withdrawn, although she hadn't been as sick. Nor had Massou and Cipriana. They coughed and sneezed a couple of days, slept poorly, but by and large they got off considerably easier than I.

(Just goes to show you how much all of me hates the North.)

Del isn't the most tactful person I've ever met. "Yes," she said. "You knew that. We agreed to bring you to help. The landlopers will have horses and wagons for sale--here, everything is for sale--and you can go on your way again."

Perhaps she realized how brusque her words sounded, for she softened her tone a little. "There is no need to worry about repayment, or how you will afford so much. Tiger and I have coin, and what we spend on you can be won back in the circle."

Adara shivered. "Circle," she said dully. "The world is a circle, and we are trapped in it."

Del and I exchanged glances. We had been delayed long enough traveling with the

Borderers, and could spare no more time. We had no choice but to buy mounts and supplies and head into the uplands as quickly as possible, regardless of what Adara or her children might prefer. Del's time was running out.

"We'll help you all we can," I told her lamely, and was rewarded with a blank stare.

It didn't take me long to discover I was at a distinct disadvantage. We had left the South and the border behind, entering another world entirely, where people spoke purer Northern without the influence of Southron words. I'd learned a lot from Del over the months and being around the Borderers had expanded my grasp of phrases, but here it was different. Here I was a stranger who spoke only bastard Northern.

I was astonished at the mass of yellow heads. Not everyone was blond, but neither was anyone really dark, except for me. With my brown hair and dark skin, not to mention green eyes in place of blue, I stuck out like a broken toe.

Del was in her element. As they had with Massou and Cipriana, people came out to greet us. Children chattered, men called greetings, women asked questions of us. Except I didn't know what they said or what they asked, being deaf to the twisty tongue.

All was mass confusion. Wagons clustered together or straggled away, horses were staked out or contained in makeshift pens, dogs ran free throughout the encampment and so did unpenned fowl. Men sat around fires and drank and talked, or huddled over wagers, or displayed wrestling and fighting skills. Women gathered at wagons to chatter and cook and sew, or watched their men showing off. The children were never still.

Del strode easily through the throng. "There will be many kymri-bonds."

"What?"

She smiled. "In the uplands, landlopers don't generally gather together very much except for a kymri. All the boys who long for girls and the girls who long for boys often have no one--or few--to choose from. And so kymris are always welcome, and the children who come from them."

I grimaced. "That explains why there are so many of them, I suppose."

She laughed aloud, "Do you dislike children, Tiger?"

"No. I was one myself, once. But I prefer them in small amounts."

Adara's hair was falling down. It straggled around neck and shoulders, spilling into her eyes. She shifted her bundle from arm to arm. "When can we stop? I need rest, food, water."

Del glanced around, then nodded, turning off the track. "Here," she said, halting by a wagon where others gathered as well. "Cheese, amnit, bread... later we can buy meat."

The man at the tailgate said something about food in Northern. I gathered it was his wagon, the contents his to sell. He was tall, fair-haired, blue-eyed; typical Northerner.

Adara dropped her bundle and scooped ruddy hair out of her weary face. "I must find my children."

"They'll be fine," Del said firmly. "Here there is no danger--landlopers are friendly people. Let Massou and Cipriana make friends... they have been too long without them." She accepted a bota from the man, pressed it into Adara's hands.

"Drink. Rest. You have done well without your husband; you should be proud of yourself."

Adara clutched the bota. "I am so alone... and so very tired."

Del's face softened. "Go and sit down," she said. "You have earned your rest."

The Borderer, still clutching her goatskin bota, gathered up her bundle once more and made her way out of the crowd. Men watched her as she went. I thought, watching them, she would not be long alone if she wanted company.

"Here." Del slapped a bota against my chest. "Amnit, Tiger--enough to quench your craving."

I sniffed the stopper. The aroma was very pungent. "Where do you want us, then? Any particular place?"

Del's smile was for herself. "I think I'll be able to find you. You sort of stick out here."

So I did. Glumly, I made my way back through the people and found Adara off to the side, hunched on the grass by her bundle. She still hadn't touched the water. Tears stood in her eyes.

I dumped my burden, sat down, leaned against it with a grunt of satisfaction.

Unstoppered the bota and sucked in my first taste of Northern amnit.

My throat shut, my eyes watered, coughs exploded from my mouth. Del came by and smiled, munching on some cheese. "Welcome to the kymri."

I recovered as best I could, sucked in another squirt. This one went down better, and I was able to smile right back.

And then I stopped smiling, because I heard a sound I knew. An angry, high-pitched screaming that cut right through the crowd.

But it wasn't a human screaming. It came from a horse's mouth.

"Hoolies," I said, "it's the stud."

Seventeen

Del frowned. "Are you sure?"

"Do you think I don't know my own horse?" I was up before she could answer, following the sound.

In the end, it wasn't hard to find him. He was surrounded by a large circle of men, all gathered to view the storm. I heard the sound of coin exchanging hands, snatches of Northern I knew--all dealing with wagering--and the raised voice of a man calling for volunteers to try a ride. For a price, of course.

So, the old man was being difficult.

And there might be profit in it.

He stood in the center of the human circle, much as I did each time I entered the circle to dance. He was angry but unharmed, apparently in good health and none the worse for his disappearance. His legs looked sound, his weight was normal, his conditioning apparently unaffected. The shouting man held the reins to a headstall I didn't recognize, and the saddle was strange as well, but that was because, in fleeing Del's banshee-storm, the stud had also fled his tack. We had left it behind because we didn't want to carry it on foot.

The stud's latest victim was getting up from the ground. Blood flowed from a split lip and broken nose. He wobbled a little when he walked.

Can't say as I was displeased.

I threaded my way through the gathered men until I stood on the edges of the circle, not so far from the stud. His ears were pinned back in warning and he promised violence with back hooves. His handler, I saw, stood close enough to his head to keep him contained, but far enough to avoid a slashing foreleg.

Del slipped in next to me. "Well," she said dryly. "I see he's up to his old

tricks."

I elbowed her in warning, then bent my head casually as she glared. Softly, I suggested, "Let's be quiet a moment, shall we?"

"Tiger--"

I laughed as if she had said something funny, then added quietly, "Let's just see how far this goes... and how much money is wagered."

Del shut her eyes. "I should have known."

I bent a little closer to her ear, watching those around us to make certain no one could hear. "He's not hurt. And he's winning... there's nothing wrong with a little educated entertainment."

Del smiled sweetly, muttering sardonically through clenched teeth as she looked at me in feigned amusement. "Besides, it's not like we haven't done similar things before. Is it?"

A shout went up. Another mark had fallen for the bait. Big, tall, blond man, looking much like all the others. He stepped forward, grinned and made comments to his noisy friends, swaggered into the circle, and said something about being willing to tame the horse.

Tame the horse. Fat chance.

The stud's handler rattled off a few things in Northern, which prompted me to ask Del for a translation.

"He says the rider has to put up a share toward the purse. If he rides the stud, he gets it all. If not, he forfeits the entry fee."

"Seems simple enough... unless you know the stud."

Del slanted me a glance. "If anyone here tumbles to the knowledge that you know this horse so well, I can't answer for the reaction. And I can't promise you'll

survive the drubbing."

I shrugged, grinning. "That's the risk in any scam, bascha. And besides, we've faced it before."

"That was in the South."

"Oh, I see. In the North you want them to win."

"Let's just say I don't want to see you get your geheeties ripped off by an angry Northerner."

"Not a chance, bascha."

Del grunted. I watched the Northerner attempt to mount the stud.

He was, of course, doing it all wrong. Having witnessed the other disasters, he was taking his time. He grasped the reins in one hand. Put foot in stirrup, then rose. Hung there a long moment with all his substantial weight slung on one side, waiting for the stud to explode; when he didn't, the Northerner swung his right leg over the saddle and plopped himself down on top of the stud. He was big and ungainly, and supremely blind to the intelligence of the animal he bestrode.

Not to mention the determination.

"Maybe three hops," Del predicted.

"Not even two, bascha."

It took all of half a hop.

The stud is not a particularly large horse. Neither is he a particularly attractive horse, being a typical desert mount: medium-sized, medium-boned, heavy of head and deep of chest. His eyes are spaced too wide for good looks, but it's because there's a brain in there. He's compact, not leggy or long-bodied; he wasn't born to race. He's not muscle-bound, but what's there is tightly coiled, explosive in strength and style. He's plain old medium brown

with smudgy dark points on all four legs and a straggly black tail. His mane I always clipped; now it stood straight up in spikes as high as the span of a man's hand. And his coat, ordinarily smooth and sleek, was putting on length and volume.

I frowned. "He's all fuzzy."

Del nodded. "He's growing winter hair."

"He never did before."

"Down South, who needs to? But he's North, now, Tiger. You wear wool and leather, he'll grow hair."

Yet another reason, I thought glumly, to go home as soon as we could.

The handler was shouting again. I asked for another translation.

"He says the horse is getting tired."

"No, he's not. He's hardly even winded."

Del sighed. "Do you want me to translate, or not?"

I bit back a retort. "Go on."

"He says that because the horse is getting tired, he'll only accept one more rider. But that if he wins, he wins it all--he'll also win the stud."

"What?"

"The stud is part of the winnings."

Suddenly I became less interested in seeing some stupid lug of a Northerner get dumped on his head than in claiming my horse. "Put some money on me, Del. Let's clean everybody's pockets."

"Tiger--"

But it was too late. I stripped off my harness, handed it to Del, went to stand in the center of the circle while announcing I wanted to ride.

The stud rolled a dark eye in my direction. Stared at me a long moment, during which he flicked black-tipped ears up and down. Then he pinned them again. Bared large, yellowed teeth. Cocked a powerful hind leg and begged me to come close enough.

I just smiled.

The handler was a middle-aged blond man who showed years of experience with horses in old bite scars on bare forearms. His legs were bowed--one was decidedly crooked--and he wasn't much intimidated by the stud's bad manners. He just stood there and held the headstall, absently avoiding a nip, and asked if I was sure I wanted to risk my Southron neck.

I told him yes, in Northern, then asked him why he was willing to put up the horse as a prize in addition to the purse, of which he would get a cut.

He jabbed the stud's reaching lip with a practiced finger. "Too much trouble," he said in accented Borderer speech, mixing Northern and Southron easily. "I'm horse-master, not beast-master--I want to sell clean, unbitten horseflesh. This one has tried to mount every mare in my string, broke the left leg of my best horseboy, nearly crippled the stud I do like." He grinned, assessing me to see if he thought I could ride the stud. "I want to be rid of this one, but only at a profit."

"Why did you buy him, then?"

"Didn't. This one came down out of the hills and right into my camp. Looking for mares, I'd bet. Doesn't seem to mind a bit and bridle, but won't let anyone on his back for more than a jump or two."

I nodded, showing the stud false respect for the Northerner's benefit. "How long does a man have to stay on in order to win?"

The horse-master jabbed a thumb toward a boy standing nearby. "See the sandglass

in his hands? When you mount, he'll turn it upside down. Ride till the sand's run out, and the horse--and the purse--is yours." His tone belied a decided lack of confidence in my abilities.

"And if I come off before the sand's run out?" With the stud, it was always possible; I am not a fool to swear I can win every time.

The Northerner shrugged. "This one's no good to me the way he is, and no one will buy a horse that can't be ridden. He's too small for Northern tastes, so no one'd want to use him for stud." He shrugged again. "Doesn't leave much, so I'll give him to the landlopers."

I frowned. "But you just said no one wants him."

The horse-master grinned. "In the South, you eat goat and sheep and dog. Here, landlopers like the taste of horseflesh. I'd hate to see this one butchered, but if he can't fill my purse at least he'll fill a few bellies."

It took all I had not to plant a fist in his face where he stood. "I'll win," I said flatly. "If I don't, you can butcher me."

The Northerner told me the price of the ride, took it as I handed it over, gave me the reins. "I like my meat rare. Your hide's too charred for me."

I heard him calling out the stakes as I turned my attention to the stud. The bay horse was staring back at me in plain, pointed challenge. He had just spent part of the day dumping men off his back, and that the next one was me appeared to make no difference to him. He knew what was expected of him and intended to deliver.

Del's warning rang true in my ears. If all the bettors did tumble to the truth about my relationship with the stud, they'd be in their rights to beat the hoolies out of me. So it was important that I not treat the stud any

differently, or try to suborn him into complaisance.

Therefore, all I had to do was make him do his best to throw me, then manage to stay on.

"Hoolies," I muttered, "I wish this were a sword-dance." The stud flickered an ear.

I sucked in a deep breath, caught a handful of reins and mane, swung myself aboard without benefit of the stirrup. It placed me square in the saddle before the stud could blink, feet hooked into stirrups. I took as deep a seat as I could.

Now, it was possible he might decide his fighting days were over, at least for the moment. It was possible he might recall precisely who I was and surprise me by accepting me easily. In which case the game was decidedly up and they'd probably butcher me in addition to the stud.

So I planted booted heels deep into his flanks and dug in for all I was worth.

The stud blew up like a deadly simoom, all hooves and teeth and noise.

Well, the first part of my plan was working. Now all I had to do was stay aboard while the sand ran out of the glass.

I was dimly aware of shouting and laughing. Dimly aware of staring eyes and open mouths. Even more dimly aware of the human circle falling back, back, away... giving the stud room to work. But I was quite aware of the immediacy of the threat; the stud was doing his best to unhorse me as violently as possible.

--stupid son of a Salset goat--"

--hop--hop--leap--

--do you want to be butchered--?"

--plunge--buck--twist--

"--do you want to remove any chance I might ever sire a child--?"

--lunge--buck--stomp--

"--ought to make you a gelding--"

spin--spin--twist--

"--you arrogant son of a--"

--BUCK--

I was, of course, tossed forward. Collided with his head. Got smashed back into the saddle, where I was whipped from side to side. All I wanted was to get off--
So the stud helped me out.

When you're thrown from the back of a horse, sometimes you don't know which end is up. All you know is somehow you have become separated from your mount, through misfortune or violence, and are now hanging, however briefly, somewhere in the air. Right side up, upside down--you never really know.

That is, until you land.

I landed.

Thinking,--stupid son of a Salset goat, now they're going to eat you--

And then I stopped thinking entirely, because the stud was standing by my head nosing my blood-smeared face.

Hoolies, all it would take is one stomp of an iron-shod hoof, and my dancing days were done.

Any days were done.

Nostrils bloomed large in my face. Hot horse breath crusted the film of blood by my nose. He sucked air, then snorted noisily, spraying dampness all over my face.

I sat upright, cursing, trying to wipe blood and mucus from my face. In the end someone handed me a damp rag, which helped. The horse-master caught the stud and

led him over to me as I climbed all the way up to my feet.

I looked at the innocent dark eyes and the quivering of whiskers. "Let me buy him from you," I said. "He may have won the battle, but I'd hate to see him butchered."

The Northerner grinned as I mopped my face. "Now, if I was a dishonest man, I'd agree and take your money. But I'm not." He handed over the reins. "He may have tossed you off, but he did it after the sand ran out." I stood there with the reins in right hand as the horse-master plopped a leather pouch into the left.

"I've taken my share out," he said. "The rest of it is yours." He eyed the stud askance. "He'll kill you before winter's done."

"Or we'll kill each other." I turned, made my way through the crowd of onlookers, now clamoring for wagers won or lost, took the stud to Del.

She stood cradling harness and sword. Nodded a little. Took the rag from my hand and reached up to wipe away blood. "Not too bad," she said, "but you cut it a little close. One hop earlier and you'd have lost him and the purse."

"Earlier, later... didn't matter, bascha. He wasn't paying attention to anything I said or did."

Del patted the stud's big jaw. "Not a bad day's work."

"You won a purse and won a horse... now we only need to buy a mount for me."

And a belligerent voice asked, "What about for me?"

Del swung around. "Massou," she said, surprised. Then, with infinite gentleness,

"Massou, you'll go on with Cipriana and your mother."

His face was defiant. "I want to go with you."

"You can't," she told him. "Tiger and I must go on into the uplands, far beyond Reiver's Pass. You'll go on to Kisiri with your mother and sister."

"I don't want to."

"Massou--"

"I don't want to."

The stud reached out and bit him.

Eighteen

It wasn't really bad. Not much more than a nip. The stud simply reached out, caught the top of Massou's right shoulder and bit.

Del shouted. I swore. Massou screamed. And then punched the stud as hard as he could smack on the end of his nose.

This reaction, of course, didn't particularly please the stud, who--understandably startled--shied back violently and snapped reins taut; this reaction subsequently snapped my arm taut. (Hoolies, the impact nearly dislocated my elbow.) I stumbled back as the stud retreated, caught my balance with awkward effort, hung on to the reins and cursed him all the while.

The Northern horse-master, passing by, thought it was very funny.

Del, meanwhile, was trying to examine Massou's shoulder, but Massou wasn't having any of it. He cried, but silently, and the tears were from anger, not from pain or fright. His face was blotchy red. Blue eyes blazed with rage. Both hands were clenched in fists as he pulled away from Del, advancing on the stud.

Who, of course, retreated. Since he was attached to me by virtue of the reins (and I had no intention of letting go), I also retreated. It didn't much please me to be caught in the middle of an argument between an animal who outweighed me

considerably and a boy who barely came up to my waist. It was, I felt, lacking in dignity.

"Enough," I said testily. "I know he bit you, Massou, and I'm sorry, but if you try to punch him again you might get hurt worse."

Massou spat out something angrily in indecipherable Northern, then turned on his heel and ran. Which left me facing Del.

Warily, I waited.

"I suppose it is too much," she began very quietly, "to expect the horse to have manners better than the man's."

Hoolies. She was blaming me. "Oh, Del--come on... how was I to know he'd take such a disliking to the boy? He never warns me about these things. He just does them."

Because she was so calm, the anger was emphasized. "Perhaps we might have been better off if you had lost the contest."

"Oh, no," I answered instantly. "If I'd lost, the stud would be someone's dinner."

Arched brows and pursed mouth told me that was precisely what she'd meant.

I scowled back as the stud pushed muzzle against spine. "Come on, Del--"

She cut me off easily. "I'm going to go see how Massou is. I don't think the bite was bad, but still--"

I waved a hand. "I know," I said, "I know. No need to say it, bascha."

"Somebody has to." She dumped harness and sheathed sword into my arms and slanted a black look at the stud. "Just keep an eye on your horse."

I sighed deeply as I watched her walk away, pushing the stud's nibbling lips away from a harness strap. "Now you've gone and done it."

The stud chose not to answer.

Someone stopped beside me. "I'd rather keep an eye on her."

It took me a moment to realize he was responding to Del's parting comment. Which meant he'd overheard. But since we hadn't been speaking loudly, it meant he'd done more than merely overhear. It meant he'd been listening.

I looked. He was young, male, arrogant, sure of his strength and appeal. The kind of man I hate for a variety of reasons.

He cast me a slanting sideways glance out of pale blue eyes, waiting for my response. Instead, I stared him down.

It amused him. He smiled. The smile was for himself, but directed squarely at me. "Ah," he said with irony, "the Southroner doesn't speak Northern."

He used Borderer speech, not the pure upland dialect, which meant he intended me to understand him. Which meant he was looking for trouble.

Inwardly I sighed (I wasn't really in the mood), then mimicked his own smile pleasantly, complete with curled lip. "Only when I choose to... or when the company's worth it."

The Northerner's smile froze, flickered, then stretched wide, as pale eyes narrowed appraisingly. I've seen the look before; he wanted to judge my worth before initiating hostilities. "Southron--"

"Save it," I said briefly. "If you want to fight, we'll fight, but we'll do it in a circle instead of here with words. Insults waste my time, and you're too young to be any good."

He stared back in shock. He was fairer even than Del, which made his hair almost white, and his eyes were the palest, iciest blue I had ever seen, fringed with equally frosty lashes. On one hand, it was incongruous; it gave him the look of youth as yet untested, when obviously he had been. On the other hand, it lent

him a transparency that was almost other-worldly.

Of course, the jagged scar across his upper lip did diminish the innocence of his features. It looked like a knife had cut it, and done a long time ago.

He looked at the tangle of leather in my hands. He looked at the sheath and hilt. White brows lifted. "Sword-dancer?"

"Sword-dancer," I agreed. "Do you wish to enter a circle?"

Lids flickered. Pale lashes screened pale eyes. After a moment he spread his hands, smiling to show innocent intent. "I have no sword. My weapon is the knife."

I shrugged, clicking my tongue. "Well, that is too bad. I guess we'll have to be friends."

He ignored that altogether, jerking his chin in Del's direction. "Is the woman yours?"

It would have been so simple to answer yes, to stake a claim to Del and warn him away to another. But I had learned, thanks to Del, that a woman couldn't be claimed; that a woman couldn't be owned, and where she went was of her own free choice, not dependent upon a man.

It would have been so simple. But it would have been a lie.

"Ask her" I suggested, "but you might not like the answer. She's a sword-dancer, too."

Pale brows rose consideringly. He stared after Del, though she was gone, then narrowed icy eyes and glanced again at me. What he thought was plain: my disclaimer made me a fool.

The stud nuzzled my shoulder. Remembering Massou's experience, I shoved mouth away from flesh.

It made the Northerner smile. "I won coin on you."

I blinked. "You bet on me to win?"

"I know horses." The smile was secretive. "Perhaps better than the horse-master who was so willing to give this one up. It is my trade, if after a different fashion." The smile widened a little and twisted the upper lip. The scar didn't entirely ruin his looks, but did draw attention. And I think it pleased him instead of warping his nature. (I know a little about scars.) "I would have tried him myself, but you spoke before I could."

"That doesn't tell me why you bet on me."

He rubbed an idle forefinger across the twisted lip. "The horse knew you," he said finally. "There is a language private to horses, but I know how to speak it." He shrugged. "Not in words or thoughts, but in feelings. This one knew you well, so I knew you would win the contest."

I grunted. "You might have told me first and saved me a bloody nose."

He grinned, which stripped away the arrogance and replaced it with genuine amusement. "But I wanted to win. The odds were in my favor, because everyone else bet against you."

I appraised him much as he had appraised me. Tall, but lacking bulk, though not as tall as me. Graceful even in stillness; the boy knew how to move. He wore wool and leather as I did, cross-tied at calves and forearms, but his pale hair was very long and divided into two braids, one for either shoulder. He knotted them with leather thongs adangle with beads of blue and silver. They rattled when he moved.

"Then I think you owe me a drink."

He blinked. Then smiled. "Are we to be friends, then? Or enemies over the woman?"

"Oh, we can be either; that depends on you. But if you're still here when Del comes around, you'll see it doesn't matter."

He laughed. Inclined his head. And, in fluent Southron, invited me to his camp.

I agreed. Drinking a man's liquor is better than fighting him.

Unless you can do both.

He spoke Southron as well as other languages, although mostly he kept to the Borderer mix even I could understand. His name, he said, was Garrod, and he was a horse-speaker. When I asked the difference between horse-speaker and horse-master, he said the second was a misnomer, that no man could master a horse. I thought one name as good as another, and told him so.

Garrod sat on the ground on a blue-and-gray woven blanket, leaning against a convenient tree stump. It was a tiny little one-man camp, consisting of a fire circle filled with ash, a jumble of leather tack, and five magnificent horses.

He tilted his head a little. Braid beads rattled. "As much difference," he said quietly, "as between stallion and mare."

I snorted my response, enjoying the pleasant glow of Northern liquor as I sat on Garrod's blanket and drank Garrod's amnit. "You came to sell your horses, didn't you? It sounds the same to me."

"Horses, to me, are more than things to be sold. More than merely animals who have been trained to carry or pull." His icy eyes were oddly unfocused as he looked at his string of five, staked out in lush green grass. "Horses are my magic."

I was his guest, and there are rules; I refrained from laughing outright.

Instead, I held out the bota. "Have another drink."

Solemnly he took it, drank, smiled companionably back at me, "I could have ridden your horse. I could have made him mine."

"By talking to him, I gather."

He gazed at me thoughtfully. His expression told me nothing, other than he appraised. And then Garrod smiled, twisting the scarred upper lip. "It would have saved you a bloody nose."

I took the bota back. "I need to buy a horse."

"For the woman, or for yourself?"

"For her. For Del. Depending, of course, on price."

Garrod shrugged indifferently. "I would need to see her. To let them see her."

"Who? The horses?" Incredulously, I stared at the five grazing mounts. "Do you mean to tell me you ask them their opinion?"

His tone was one of infinite patience; he'd met disbelief before. "Men choose horses for wrong reasons. They think of themselves, not of the animal. They buy or trade stupidly, and often the horse suffers for it." He smiled. "Or the rider does."

"You mean me."

"I mean you." Garrod sat upright, shifted his position, leaned back again, tugging left braid from under an armpit. "You and your horse could be better friends if the partnership was equal. You spend too much time telling him you are the master, while he tells you the same thing." He shrugged a little, rattling beads in thick pale plaits. "He is happy enough, and so are you, but you both could be happier."

I've heard of strange things before, but never of a man who could talk to horses. Or of horses who would listen. "Garrod--"

"Let them see her," he said. "I will sell you the one who is best for her."

I thought about Del's response. "She might not like any of them."

Garrod smiled. "She's Northern, isn't she?"

"Del? Hoolies yes... nearly as fair as you."

"Then she will understand."

Garrod and I shared the rest of the bota, trading stories full of truths and falsehoods, and generally enjoyed a pleasant afternoon. Once I'd had to tie up the stud again, since he'd pulled free of the treelimb I'd tethered him to, but I caught him before he could do any damage to Garrod's horses and made sure my knot was tight.

Since then he'd done little more than stare morosely at the others, or shred thick-woven turf and spit out globs of muddy roots.

Garrod looked up at the sky. "Sun's going down."

About this time Del arrived. "I've been looking all over for you."

I shrugged, content on Garrod's blanket. "You said it wouldn't be hard to find me."

"I thought not," she agreed, "but then I foolishly neglected to remember that you'd most likely drink yourself into a stupor."

I raised my brows. "Had a bad afternoon, did we?"

Garrod smiled and tossed her the bota. "We saved a swallow or two for you,"

Del caught the bota but did not drink, appraising each of us in silence. Her gaze stayed on Garrod longer, giving nothing away; even I couldn't tell what she thought. But I didn't think she was pleased.

"Massou is all right," she said finally. "The bite will bruise, but nothing more."

"Could have told you that." I gestured toward my host. "Name's Garrod."

Horse-speaker, he says."

"Horse-speaker?" Del frowned, looking more closely at the young man I judged her

own age. "You are young for it."

"True talent doesn't wait on age," Garrod answered. "But I could say the same of you, couldn't I? He says you are a sword-dancer." He paused pointedly a moment.

"Not to mention you're a woman."

Uh-oh. Not a good beginning.

Del stared him down. Then dismissed him with surpassing speed, turning to look at me. "We have made a camp, and Adara has cooked a meal."

I sighed, recalling Massou's temper and Adara's weary depression. "How much longer are we to nursemaid them?"

A fleeting expression told me she was as weary of it, though she said nothing to give the thought away. "One more night," she answered quietly. "We'll buy them a horse and wagon in the morning, and then we are free to go-"

Clearly, she was ready; I saw the subtle signs of tension in her face.

Garrod shifted against his stump, rubbing at his knife-scarred lip. "He says you need a horse."

Del's face masked itself. "And you have one to sell."

He waved a negligent hand over his shoulder. "I have five to sell."

Del looked at the horses. Quietly they grazed, staked out like dogs on a lead.

Big, sturdy horses, fuzzy from winter hair. Two bays, two sorrels, a gray. They looked content enough with their lot; considerably more so than the stud. But then that wasn't saying much.

She flicked a glance at me. I shrugged a very little, lifting one shoulder almost imperceptibly. She was asking me what I thought of Garrod and his claim of equine magic; frankly, I didn't know what I thought.

Del's mouth tightened, twisted faintly, loosened. "I think not," she said, "for

now. Perhaps in the morning."

Garrod's smile was slow. "By morning they may not be here."

Horse-speaker or not, this language even I understood very well. Horse trading and haggling are as old as time itself.

"By morning," Del suggested, "you may want a lower price."

The Northerner grinned. "By morning they may cost more."

"All right, all right." I was tired of the game. "Let's go get some food, bascha--we'll hunt a horse in the morning."

She cast Garrod a sideways glance of cool dismissal and turned on her heel to leave. Loose blonde hair swung against her back, hiding much of the harness and sheath.

But it didn't block the silver hilt, which rose above her left shoulder.

Garrod looked up at me as I got to my feet. "A word of advice, friend Tiger: never trust a woman with a sword. Her tongue is bad enough."

I laughed. Then stopped as Del swung back. Showed her an expression of innocence, then shot a grin at Garrod. He raised his bota in salute.

"Men," Del remarked, as if it said everything.

And I suppose, sometimes, it does.

Nineteen

Del and I threaded our way back through men, women, children, dogs, horses and other assorted livestock, winding around wagons, cookfires and open camps, ducking and dodging various games as we went. The sun decidedly was going down;

it tipped the mountains with gilt and bronze and deepened the purples to black.

"Kind of rude to Garrod, weren't you?" Del is very tall; our steps were evenly matched, particularly as I was leading the stud.

"I don't like him."

I grunted. "I sort of gathered that much. Why, is the question. Or maybe, why not?"

She shrugged. "I just don't."

I suppose I should have been glad. Scarred lip and all, Garrod was a good looking young buck, and considerably closer to Del's age than I am. But because we'd shared a bota and swapped lots of stories, I felt I knew him well enough not to feel threatened by youth or good looks, which I'd lost some time ago (although some women might argue otherwise; I'm not completely hopeless.) So I could afford to be offended by Del's somewhat illogical dismissal of Garrod.

"You don't even know him. How can you judge him so quickly?"

"The same way you judge an opponent when you step into the circle," she said dryly. "It doesn't take a lot of time."

The stud tried to walk over the top of me; I elbowed him back. "But you didn't like me when we met."

Del looked thoughtful. "True," she admitted, nodding. "You were a lot like Garrod, then: smug, arrogant, dominating, convinced of a nonexistent superiority ..."

She shrugged. "But you settled down a lot once I beat you in the circle."

"You never beat me in the circle."

"Oh? What about the time we danced in front of the Hanjii and their painted women? I seem to remember you taking leave of your meal."

"And I seem to remember you jammed a knee into--"

--your brains?" Del smiled blandly. "A man's eternal vulnerability."

I forbore to answer that, preferring to forget our initial sword-dance, which had been a travesty. "Nothing's ever really been settled between us," I reminded her. "We've danced, yes, but mostly it's just been sparring. We've never done it for real, to establish who's the best."

"I have a good idea."

"So do I, and it isn't you."

Del sighed and flopped an arm in an easterly direction. "Camp's over this way...

Tiger, I don't mean to make you angry, but you should know by now that--"

--what? You're better? No, I don't know... because it isn't true." A rag ball rolled out of play into our path. The stud stopped short; so did I. He breathed noisily, ears touching at tips, and eyed the ball uneasily. I told him he was a coward, bent and scooped up the ball, tossed it back to the waiting boy. "I'm bigger, stronger, more powerful--"

"And I'm considerably swifter, and much more subtle with my strokes." Del thrust out a wrist and flexed it. "When it comes to using patterns--"

"But that's the Northern style. I'm a Southroner."

She swung to face me. "But we're North, now, Tiger. You've got to use my style."

"Why?" I asked flatly. "I'm very good at my own."

"Because--" Abruptly, the urgency spilled out of her tone. Briefly, she closed her eyes, then looked at me once more. "Because a good ishtoya is always prepared to learn."

I kept my voice very steady. "I am a seventh-level sword-dancer," I said clearly. "Not first, not third, not fifth. Seventh, Del. There aren't very many of those."

Del wet her lips, fingered hair out of her face, seemed oddly apprehensive.

"Southron," she said, "Southron. This is the North, Tiger... we must adhere to Northern customs."

"You must adhere to Northern customs. I'm just me."

"Tiger--"

"This isn't doing us any good," I said curtly. "You can't make me something I'm not, anymore than I can make you something you're not. Would you have me demand you put down your sword for good and keep house for me all hidden behind Southron veils?"

Del's face was stiff. "There's a difference between sword-dancing and keeping house."

"Is there? One is a man's work, the other a woman's." I paused. "Usually."

"You don't understand."

A woman's eternal defense, although I didn't tell her that. "Probably not," I agreed. "All I know is, you've been acting funny ever since we crossed the border."

Her face was grim, which was a shame; Del's features demand better treatment. "I have responsibilities."

"So do we all, Del."

"And as for acting funny, so have you. Especially lately."

I scratched my scars. "Yes, well...things haven't felt right, lately. I don't know what's wrong, but I'm getting the same prickles I got before."

Del's brows shot up. "Prickles?"

I sighed. "I don't know how to explain it. Things just don't feel right." I gestured. "Shall we go find the camp?"

She hesitated a moment longer, then turned abruptly and marched off. I followed more sedately, slowed by a distracted horse.

Camp indeed, such as it was. There was the familiar rainbreak, though no wagon to hook it to, as well as spread blankets and a fire. Adara squatted by the stone ring, stirring a pot of something that smelled a lot like stew. Cipriana helped her mother by pouring cups of tea. Massou, bowl in hand, sat on a blanket and glowered at the stud.

The little campsite wasn't exactly private, being wedged in between the road and numerous scattered wagons with adjacent open camps. But it would do, and certainly until the morning. I took the restive stud aside, not wanting to trouble the boy, and staked him out by a plot of turf as yet untrampled by wheels and boots and hooves.

Del followed me over. "Kymri are cause for celebration. Tonight there will be singing and dancing." It was, I thought, an apology of sorts.

I slapped the stud on the shoulder. "I'm all for celebration, but I can't do either one."

"You dance in the circle."

"That's different."

"And I've never heard you sing. You might be very good."

I grinned at her. "Bascha, have you heard a danjac bray?"

She looked blank. "A who?"

"A what: a danjac. Beast of burden, down south." I smiled. "Not much known for their voice,"

"No, I've never heard one."

"And you don't want to hear me."

She frowned a little. "Don't you ever sing?"

"Never ever, bascha."

Del shook her head. "A sword-dancer should sing."

"Waste of breath, bascha."

"Not when you want to win."

"Yes, well, I seem to do fine without making any noise." I removed my boot from the patch of turf the stud wanted to plunder and turned back toward the camp.

"Just because you sing--"

She caught my arm. "Tiger--look--"

I looked. Didn't see much of anything out of the ordinary, just three men riding down the road, while a fourth walked out to meet them. A pale-haired man with braids.

"Garrod," I said, "so? He's here to sell his horses."

Del's fingers bit into my forearm. "Those men... Tiger, I know them. They are Ajani's men."

I hauled her back before she could take more than a single step. "Del--wait."

"I know them, Tiger."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"And what do you want to do, storm out there and challenge them to a sword-dance?"

She tried to break free by twisting her arm. I hung on. "Tiger--you don't understand--"

"Yes I do. I also understand that right now probably isn't a good time to challenge them."

She stopped struggling. Color stood high in her face. "And when is a good time?"

"Probably in the morning, if you insist. We've spent the last two weeks tromping all over these hills, bascha--why not at least get a good night's sleep? They'll be here. And so will Garrod. If he knows them, he might just know Ajani. Or not; they may simply want his horses."

"They have horses, Tiger."

"The least we can do is ask him before we spit him on your sword."

"Then let's ask him right now."

"Let's not." I hauled her back again. "Del, I'll even help you, but let's wait till morning."

"We have to leave in the morning."

"And find a horse and wagon for these people." I tilted my head in the direction of Adara and her children. "It's our last night together, bascha... don't you think they might want to spend it without witnessing bloodshed in the circle?"

She gritted teeth. "You are a sentimental fool."

I gripped her arm more firmly. "Better than just a fool, which is what you're being at the moment."

"Those men owe me blood-debt," she hissed angrily. "Each and every one of them owes me blood-debt ten times over, for what was done to my family. And if you think I can let them ride through this kymri without calling them into the circle, you are the fool!"

"And if they refuse?" I released her and saw the reddening handprint on her arm.

"They probably will, Del. They're Southroners, after all. They won't take the invitation seriously. What they will do, however, is cut you to pieces when you're not looking, because that is how they live. They have no honor, Del. And you'll die because of it."

"Not till I find Ajani."

Something inside of me squeezed. "I don't want you to die at all."

The sun was nearly gone. Fading light softened the lines of Del's face and altered her expression into something more sanguine than former anger. She looked back at me blankly a moment, then drew in a deep breath. "No. Neither do I."

"Then let's make sure you don't." The men were gone, Garrod with them. "And let's have something to eat."

In an oddly private silence, Del went to the fire.

The stew was very good, although I might have preferred better company. Adara remained locked in depression, only rarely breaking her silence, and Massou continued his sulk. Del tried to draw him out and he responded a little, but sullenly, as if he blamed me for the stud's hostility.

Well, maybe whatever I felt also affected the stud.

Cipriana, on the other hand, had a strange bright glint in her eyes, smiling to herself, occasionally touching the neckline of her tunic. She served me in place of her mother, tending my cup until I told her to stop, and filled my bowl to brimming three times running.

Del, of course, saw it, smiled wryly, said nothing. On one hand, it was nice not to suffer the sulks of a jealous woman; on the other, it might have been nice to know she cared. Del did not appear to--or else she dismissed Cipriana as not worthy of consideration as real competition.

It became patently clear, however, that Cipriana did.

After dinner I went back to the stud, who was making a lot of noise. He stomped, pawed, dug holes, snorted, peeled back lips to show yellowed teeth. I thought maybe there was a mare in heat close by; it doesn't take much to set him off.

I soothed him as best I could, but he wasn't particularly interested in anything I had to say, nor did a pat or two still his restiveness. I tried scratching the firm layers of muscle lying between the long bones of his underjaw, which usually resulted in a silly half-lidded expression of contentment. This time all it resulted in was a wet, messy snort of abject contempt.

"Fine," I told him, "stay out here and sulk. I'm not taking you to any mare no matter how much you beg."

Cipriana came up to me, melting out of the fireglow. It was dark now, and the entire kymri was shrouded in smoke and glare, smelling of food and liquor.

"Tiger?"

The stud bared teeth; I slapped his nose away from the girl. "Yes?"

"Could you--" She broke off, gathered her courage, asked it. "Would you walk with me?"

Hoolies. Oh, hoolies.

"Not far," she said. "Just--out there." A wave of her hand indicated somewhere beyond the stud.

She is a girl, I told myself. What are you afraid of?

Well, nothing, Nothing, really. Other than being wary of what she wanted, while having a feeling I knew. Part of me suggested I say no and go back to the fire, avoiding the situation; another part jeered for being such a coward.

But I had no experience with fifteen-year-old girls, I like my women older.

Still, there was no dignified way of refusing. So I didn't even try.

We left the stud behind, viciously digging holes in the turf. Side by side we walked out of the light from our fire into the glow cast from other campsites.

In the distance I could hear the ringing of tambors, the clatter of rattle-bones, the trilling hoot of wooden pipes. I thought Cipriana deserved to

go dancing instead of walking with me, and said so.

She shrugged. "I wanted to be with you."

Hoolies. "You've been with all of us the past two weeks."

She walked with arms folded across her chest, head bowed. Pale hair fell forward to obscure her face. "Because I wanted to be with you."

I sighed. "Cipriana--"

She stopped and raised her head, snapping hair out of her face with a deft twist of her head. "I'm confused," she said. "Things happened today that I don't understand, and I need to ask someone." She shrugged again, hugging herself. "My father is dead and Massou is too young. There is no one else but you."

Oh, hoolies,

I drew in a deep breath, trying to buy time. Trying to come up with an answer.

"I think--"

"Men looked at me today," she said, "Men looked at me, and followed me with their eyes... some men even followed me. And they said things, some of them..."

She didn't look away, plainly waiting for an explanation.

"Maybe it would be better if you talked this over with your mother." A safe answer, I thought.

Cipriana shook her head. "She's too tired. She won't listen."

"Well--what about Del?"

Blue eyes widened. "Del wouldn't understand!"

I frowned. "Why not? She's a woman. She knows about these things."

Cipriana was momentarily at a loss for words, searching for the right ones.

"Because," she said finally, "because all she cares about is her sword, and the sword-dance."

I am not entirely stupid when it comes to women, even young ones. I know jealousy when I hear it. I can smell it.

"Cipriana," I said firmly, "when you have survived the hardships Del has, and have learned how to live freely in a man's world no matter what the stakes, you can say something like that. But you are too young and too innocent to understand what Del's life has been like, so I suggest you make no judgments."

The girl was undeterred. "They looked at me," she said. "One even gave me this." I watched as she tugged something from beneath her woolen tunic. Some sort of necklet; beads strung on leather, or stones. They were dark and lumpy, lacking symmetry. The thong tied at the back of her neck.

"And you took it?" I was more than a little amazed.

She shrugged, clearly confused. "He said I should have it. That I was pretty enough for it..." She smiled a little, eyes bright. "Am I pretty, Tiger?"

Hoolies, hoolies, hoolies.

"You will be," I told her, floundering, "but I think maybe you shouldn't accept presents from strange men."

"I would from you." She stepped close. "Even you watch me, Tiger. I've seen you do it. I've seen you follow me with your eyes, and then you look at Del. You look at her, as if comparing us; hard-edged woman and soft young girl." She smelled of musk and lavender, swaying closer yet, whispering, "I'm softer and younger than Del... and I've never killed a man."

The stud squealed. Hands reached up to lock in my hair. I took two steps back, caught her wrists; discovered soft young Cipriana had the strength of a full-grown woman who most distinctly wants a man.

"Cipriana--no--" I jerked her hands away, set her aside more roughly than I intended, realized the tingle was back in my bones. "Something's wrong," I said

sharply. The hair stood up on my flesh. "Something is wrong."

All around us the music played. People laughed, shouted, sang.

"Tiger--"

I shivered. "Hoolies--what is it--?" Of its own accord, my hand went to my sword hilt and jerked the blade out of its sheath. Cipriana fell back a step, gripping her lumpy necklet.

The stud squealed again. I heard him stomping in the turf, digging deeper holes.

Whatever it was, he felt it as strongly as I.

Firelight glinted off my bared blade. Night-blackened runes knotted and broke as

I shifted my weight, turning from side to side.

Cipriana put out a hand and touched the naked blade.

"Don't," I said sharply. "You know better."

"Do I?" Fingers curled around the edges. "This is a sword of power."

"Once," I agreed, distracted. "Not anymore. The man who blooded it is dead."

"You killed him."

"Yes." I was curt, too curt, but my bones itched inside my flesh. "Hoolies, I can feel it--"

"So can I," she said. "It's here, in the sword. Wanting to break free--"

Carefully I moved the blade away from her hand. "Theron is dead and buried in Southron sand. The Punja has scoured the flesh from his bones. There's no life left in this sword." I moved away from her, trying to locate the source of my unease. It was growing stronger, too strong; I felt vaguely sick. "It's everywhere," I said, moving in a circle around the campsite. "It's coming from every direction. Can't you feel it?" I turned as she followed. "Go back to the fire, Cipriana. Go back."

"I want to come with--"

"Go back." My palms were wet against the hilt. I let go long enough with one hand to shove Cipriana toward the fire. "Del!" I shouted.

She came. Her blade was bare in her hands.

"Something is wrong," I told her. "Something bad."

Her sword flashed in the fireglow. The feeling of wrong-ness intensified with that flash, making me queasy and a little disoriented. I felt hatred. Hostility.

A burning dedication coming steadily forward to surround us in the darkness.

"Something--" I said again.

The fire was at her back. I could see nothing of her face. "What do you think--"

But she never got a chance to finish, because people began to scream.

Twenty

"It stinks," I said.

Del cast me a glance combining disbelief with impatience. "Now is not the time to worry about what offends your nose."

"It stinks." I repeated. "Can't you smell it? It's magic, Del... and not meant to be kind to us."

The kymri was in a shambles. No more piping, no more singing, no more dancing.

Everyone was in flight.

The enemy was as yet unseen. But that one existed was plain. I felt it, I smelled it, and knew it was powerful enough to destroy any number of people. The hundreds gathered here would never stop it. Never even slow it.

Del and I are canny fighters. We know very well when the odds make victory impossible, and we're prepared to retreat without concern for how others may view the flight. We were prepared to fight or run now, but not knowing who, what or where the enemy was made it impossible to do either. All we could do was remain with Adara and her children at the campfire, while all around us landlopers panicked and fled into the darkness beyond the smudgy fireglow.

Fled, and died.

By the screams we were able to tell from which direction the enemy approached.

The knowledge didn't please us; the kymri was surrounded. From the hills and mountains flowed a river of hostility, slipping like wraiths through the darkness, devouring anything in its path.

"Eyes," Del said tersely. "Look at all the eyes... human? Or animal?"

"Too low to the ground for human, unless they're crawling on hands and knees."

Which was a possibility. "I think they're animals."

Del was frowning. "Too many for wolves. They're everywhere."

We stood on either side of the fire, our backs to one another with the Borderers in between, huddled around the ring. Campfires still burned by other wagons, but all were unattended. People fled or climbed into and under wagons, calling on various Northern gods.

"Dogs?" I said. "Dogs go mad sometimes."

"I don't think so. The kymri dogs are silent."

They were, which disturbed me. The stud stomped and pawed and generally made his uneasiness known, as did other horses tied at neighboring camps, but the dogs were oddly silent, all of them, as if they understood the enemy far better than any of us, and accepted the role of submission without a single show of

reluctance.

The river flowed closer, The eyes were all around us, fixed and eerily feral.

Slanted, slitted eyes, with the shine of ice in the darkness.

There was no doubt in my mind that we stood a better chance mounted. But we had only one horse for five.

That is, until Garrod arrived. He rode the gray, leading the bays and sorrels.

All were bridled, but he'd had no time at all for saddles.

"Waste no time," he said tersely, "the beasts are all around us. There are enough to pull down the horses, but if we run we stand a better chance of breaking through the ranks."

Del and I sheathed our swords and took the reins he tossed us. "Adara, up," I said.

"Massou and Cipriana--"

--will be fine. Come here." She came; I tried to give her a boost up, but the sorrel shied away. I pulled Adara aside, scowling up at Garrod.

He was frowning. "They shouldn't--" But he broke it off, saying something about beasts, and began speaking to the horses.

It was in a Northern dialect I didn't know, but I heard nuances of peacemaking and placation, a song of soothing promises and endless empathy. All of the horses settled almost at once.

"Adara," I said, lifted her up, made certain she was settled firmly on the sorrel's back. Then I turned to take another horse from Garrod, one of the bays.

"Cipriana."

She was there instantly, saying nothing as I made a step with locked hands and tossed her up. She landed awkwardly in a tangle of woolen skirts, belly-down across the horse's shoulders, but twisted around and yanked skirts out of the

way as she pulled herself into position.

"They are good horses," Garrod said, watching. "The best. But none of them is gentle."

Cipriana gathered reins, grim-faced. "I can ride," she said firmly. "I will stay aboard."

I saw a brief glint of appreciation in Garrod's pale eyes, and then he was twisting his neck to look back at Del, making certain Massou was safely settled on the other bay. It left the remaining sorrel for Del. She swung up lightly, making an easier job of it than Cipriana because she was, as always, skirtless, wearing gartered trews, gaiters and high-wrapped boots very like my own.

It left only me. I went to the stud and pulled the stake. I'd left him bridled, which is not uncommon, tied to the earth by means of a halter, rope and picket stake. Now I looped one rope and reins and brought him closer to the fire.

"Did you know?" I asked Garrod plainly. "I smelled the stink, horse-speaker--did you know they were coming?"

He shook his head. Pale braids twisted against shoulders, rattling beads that glinted in the light. "Not until the horses told me. By then, it was nearly too late. I had time only to come for all of you."

I caught a handful of spiky mane, leaned back, swung a leg up toward the stud's rump. Up and over, settled, hauling in reins and rope. Bareback, he was slippery; I clamped buttocks and legs against his flesh, feeling the play of muscles. "All of us? But you knew only Del and me... why did you think of all of us?"

"Because I saw you," he said quietly, "when I came down to talk to Ajani's men."

I looked at Del. I knew we were thinking identical thoughts: Ajani's men stole

people to sell them into slavery. Were we making it easy for them?

"Come on," Garrod said sharply. "Do you want to let them eat you?"

Given a choice, I'd rather fight men than beasts. We turned the mounts loose and ran.

Garrod took us toward the end of the little valley. There was no question he knew his business; I fully expected the spirited horses to prove difficult, but Garrod apparently had "spoken" to them. They were swift and alert and responsive, but they didn't panic. They didn't lose their riders.

The stud, meanwhile, wasn't particularly pleased with the direction of the flight, since he'd wanted to go the other way. I fought him with hands and heels, keeping him tightly reined as I muscled him through the kymri. Garrod led, while Del and I hung back to herd Adara and her children after him. All around us were abandoned fires, blocky Northern wagons, huddled humans and frightened livestock.

And eyes.

We ran, and they ran with us. I began to see shapes, little more than snatches of shadows as I fought to stay aboard the slick-backed stud. I saw low-slung heads, gaping jaws, tongues lolling out of mouths. Saw the hard shine of eyes and teeth. Heard the whine and whistle of panting breaths. They were four-footed creatures with brushy tails, and a mane across hunched shoulders. Smudgy gray, but dappled silver. Not wolves. Not dogs. Not foxes. Something in between.

"Hounds of hoolies," I muttered.

Del's horse was next to me. "What did you say?" she asked.

"--bedtime story in the South." It was hard to talk over pounding hooves and the noisy breathing of running horses. "Supposedly they're the familiars of Dybbuk himself."

"Who?"

"The lord of hoolies, which is undoubtedly the place I'm bound for, if we keep going the way we're going."

"Oh." Her sorrel stumbled. Del snugged reins, drew up the gelding's white-splashed head, set him to running again.

"For what it's worth," I said, "I don't think Garrod's turning us over to slavers."

Del tilted her head in consideration. "Maybe not at the moment. But once we're free of the valley, who's to say what he'll do?"

I grinned. "A pair of sword-dancers, maybe."

"Tiger--watch out!"

Something snapped at the stud's hocks. Swearing, I saw the flash of teeth and the shine of pale, slanting eyes. The river had reached us at last.

"Keep going!" Garrod called, twisting to shout over one shoulder. Pale braids whipped. "If we slow, they'll pull us down. Just hold on and let the horses go!"

Massou and Cipriana were hunched forward, clutching reins and flying manes. They made themselves very small, pulling knees and ankles upward to present smaller targets to the leaping "hounds." Massou certainly was small enough to succeed, clinging to his bay like a tick to a dog. Cipriana and Adara, longer-legged, had more trouble, but managed, just as Del did. I was bigger than any of them and on a less predictable mount; inwardly I swore and reached to jerk Theron's sword from the sheath slung across my back.

"Bascha--let's cull the pack, shall we?"

Del glanced over, saw the metallic glint, smiled. And freed her own bleeding-blade.

Answering immediately, the beasts began to bay.

"Through the canyon!" Garrod called. "The opening's just ahead."

We went into the canyon, all six of us, cutting a path through blood and bone.

Del and I flanked the others, swept around the edges, closed in. The hounds snapped and howled and yipped, trying to pull down the horses, but they were no match for slashing blades or crushing hooves. We cut them down, smashed them down, broke through their vicious ranks. And left them for their brothers.

Blood sprayed up. Del and I were liberally splattered. But it was nothing we didn't know.

The river continued to flow. The hounds didn't slacken pace, somehow keeping up with the horses. Garrod led us through the canyon and out of the kymri valley onto an open plain that stretched on into forever. It provided better footing, spread the river into a flood, allowed us to judge the numbers better.

"Hoolies," I said curtly. "How many of them are there?"

"Too many." Del was snappish in frustration. "Why do they keep coming? Why don't they turn back?" A glance at her face showed me anger and an unrelenting grimness. "If it's only a meal they want, there are plenty of dead back in the valley."

"So they're after something more." I leaned down to the right, unleashed my sword in a vicious swipe, took off the head of one of the hounds. "I told you it's sorcery, Del. They're not doing this on their own. Someone with power sent them."

"You're sandsick." She used my own expression. "There's no reason for anyone to kill everyone at a kyrmi." Del shook her head, sword flashing in her hand.

"There are fights, yes, sometimes, and men do die, but there's no reason for this. Why kill everyone?"

I swore as the stud jumped over a shadow, caught my balance, gripped harder with knees and ankles. "Not everyone is at the kymri anymore. Six of us are out here, and the hounds are following."

"Not all of them... are they?" Del twisted to look back the way we'd come. "Oh, Tiger--"

"I know. That's what I meant. One of us is the target."

"Or maybe all of us."

"Not all of us are in danger of being proscribed for killing a Northern an-kaidin."

"You think it's me?"

I shrugged, "It's a thought."

Del swung her sword. I heard a hound yelp. "No, Tiger--no. It doesn't work that way. They would send men, not beasts. And they'd never kill the innocent."

"I said it was just a thought."

"Keep that one to yourself."

The flood rolled out across the plain, flanking six fleeing riders. No longer were the hounds leaping at us, trying to catch flesh and tear. Now they appeared to be herding us, running us straight toward the edge of the plain.

It was, I thought, past time to take the initiative.

Garrod still rode ahead, but just barely; Del and I galloped abreast to break a way through the flood. But the flood was beside us now, giving us acres of plain before.

I crowded his gray, still holding my bloodied sword. "Turn," I urged. "Swing left. Cut through the flank. Let's get off this plain."

He nodded and suited actions to my suggestion. Del and I dropped back to play

outriders to Adara and her children, knowing they might be too tired or too slow to heed the change in direction. As it was Del and I squeezed them in between us, knees banging, legs caught between quivering horseflesh, hunching forward to guide the horses.

"They can't run forever!" Adara cried. Her hair had come loose and streamed in the wind like a ruddy pennon. "If one of them goes down, the rider will be killed... or one of us could fall--"

All true. But we had no other choice.

"Just hang on," I told her above the beat of pounding hooves. "Stay with the horse; he'll follow Garrod. Del and I will hold off the hounds. Just ride."

"I have children--"

--as well as yourself." I bent across, lowered my sword in a flat-bladed slap across her sorrel's rump. "Massou and Cipriana are doing fine. Del and I are watching." I pointed at Garrod, whose fair-haired braids flapped behind him.

"Stay with him... don't fall behind!"

Adara looked over one shoulder at the running hounds. "They haven't come for us."

It was distinctly unappreciated in light of the risk Del and I were taking for the Borderers; without them, we stood a better chance of escape. "Well, then," I said rudely, "why don't you just stop? If there's no need for you to run, don't waste the horses."

Adara flicked a glance at me and shook her head in denial.

"Then run, woman! Do what I tell you to do!"

It was, I admit, a bit on the heavy-handed side, but it had the desired effect.

Adara ran.

The stud, I knew, was tiring. He was tough, he was game, he had heart, but even

tremendous stamina gives out when tested too far. I couldn't begin to say how shredded his legs might be from repeated attacks, or his belly, or how much longer he could run before he stumbled, falling, to tumble me onto the plain into the river of beasts.

Not a happy thought. So I made myself stop thinking it and begged the stud for all the heart he had to give.

The hounds started to fall behind. Their yapping faded, the eyes winked out, the flood began to abate. I didn't for one minute think the distance would be enough--they'd proved to have a single-minded devotion to their task--and I knew they wouldn't stop. Fall behind, yes; stop completely, no. They had settled on their prey.

Garrod reached the edge of the plain and took his gray northwest, skirting the shadowed drop. Moonlight was helpful, but it didn't really give us much to go on. We all swung left as he did, saw the flood spread out behind us, and knew without speaking we'd have to find another course.

Del sheathed her sword and thrust out a splayed hand. "Wait," she said, "there may be a way."

We slowed as she did, hideously conscious of the hounds. Intently Del searched the edge, and then stabbed a hand at it. "Earthfall," she said. "Follow me down." And plunged off the edge of the plain.

The earthfall was soft and deep, swallowing legs past the fetlocks, teasing at hocks and knees, threatening heaving bellies. But it slid easily aside as the horses floundered, plowing through; breaking way soundlessly to carry us down from the plain. The stud snorted and quivered, disliking the shifting earth, but he obeyed a firm hand on the reins--the other clutched his mane--and didn't try

to leap away.

Four pale heads bobbed on rigid necks. Then ruddy-haired Adara, leaning back against downward momentum. And me, the Sandtiger--brown-haired, brown-skinned, green-eyed--bringing up the rear: Southron sword-dancer on Southron stud.

Somehow, I didn't fit.

Was it me they might be after?

I shook it off; maybe. And if I was? So what. I'd handle it, as always.

"Hounds of hoolies," I muttered.

The stud was sweating. Dampness soaked through my woolen trews. Salt and horsehair made me itch, but at least it was easier to stay astride a wet horse than a dry. I hugged him with legs and leaned back, staying off his withers. A misstep could render me temporarily uninterested in women--or, rather, incapable--for at least a day or two; I sort of wanted to spare myself unnecessary discomfort.

Down and down we went, sliding through soft earth. And then we hit bottom, firm bottom, and stopped long enough to stare back up at the edge of the plain. It was black against the sky, nothing more than a silhouette. For the moment, it was empty, but we knew it wouldn't last.

"Where are we?" Massou asked, gasping.

The earthfall had funneled us down into a rocky canyon. To the left--the south--stretched a wide, dry riverbed, fouled with sand and boulders. To the left the riverbed narrowed significantly, turning into little more than a crack between the plainside cliffs and another mottled wall.

Garrod shook his head. "Let's just keep riding. We don't dare stop now, not with those beasts on our trail... maybe at sunrise."

"Sunrise!" Adara blurted it. "You can't expect us or the horses to go on

throughout the night."

"If we have to, we will." Cipriana surprised us all with her vehemence.

Garrod's brows went up. He tilted his head thoughtfully and grinned. "We do," he said, "and we will."

"Let's go," Del said abruptly, jerking her chin north. "Let's try this way...

the riverbed is too open. We'll just follow the canyon and see where it goes.

It's better than being up there with those hounds."

"Besides," Garrod said, "we can't let the horses stand." He turned his gray and headed north, patting the lathered right shoulder. Talking to him, maybe?

"Go," I told Adara. "Del and I ride behind just in case they follow."

"They will," Massou declared.

I frowned. "Why do you say that?"

"I just know." He glared back, still sulking over the bite.

I flapped a hand at him. "Go."

He went. Cipriana fell in behind him. Del and I brought up the rear.

"They will follow," Del said quietly.

"Yes. I think so."

"If they corner us--"

"I know. Let's just pray this isn't a trap-canyon."

Del drew in a deep, slow breath. "I have always known I might die," she said quietly, "but never like this."

"We're a long way from dying, Del."

She turned her head sharply and looked at me, very deliberately, for a long, arrested moment. And then she smiled a little. "You told me that once before, when the Hanjii left us to die in the Punja."

"And I was right."

She nodded, lost in the memory. "But there are no Salset here to rescue us."

"Maybe we'll rescue ourselves." I smiled at her and shrugged. "It's not impossible."

Del sighed. "Maybe not."

"Have faith, bascha."

Pale brows rose. "In what, Tiger? I thought you didn't believe in things like gods and divine deliverance."

"I don't. I believe in myself."

"Oh, good." Her face was perfectly blank. "Now I can relax."

I grunted. Grimaced. Glared. "Now you can make your horse stop rubbing his head--and his teeth--against my knee."

Del looked. Laughed. Pulled aside her horse... after he bit my knee.

Such a helpful girl.

Twenty-one

Our flight ended as abruptly as it had begun. There, suddenly, was Garrod, reining in his gray before it could run smack into a cliff of looming stone.

There too was Adara, white-faced, hissing something bitterly in vicious Borderer. And also her son and daughter, drooping on their horses, turning back to look at Del and me hopefully as we stopped our weary mounts.

"Trap-canyon," I said briefly. "All we can do is turn around."

"Turn around and go back?" Adara stared at me in shock, face half-curtained in

tangled hair. "You mean, we've come all this way--"

"We had no choice," Garrod told her, quietly interrupting. "At least it bought us a little time."

"Time," she said bitterly. "Time to die here instead of there?"

I looked at her children. Massou was mostly asleep on his horse, all hunched up and stiff as if he'd locked his joints hours before. His head bobbed a little and eyelids drifted closed, no matter how hard he tried to keep them open.

Cipriana wasn't much different, although her lids were more cooperative. Legs hung slackly against her mount, mostly bared by rucked up skirts to show woolen leggings. Blonde hair straggled limply; she shoved it back with effort.

"What do we do?" she asked.

I looked around at the place that now entombed us. We'd made our way through a narrow, winding conduit cutting through plainside cliffs and freeside rocks, all knuckled from wind and water. The ground itself was solid rock with only a thin crusting of dirt, and in some places it was nothing at all but naked stone.

After a while, in darkness, the canyon had blurred into nothingness, defined only by looming walls and a trace of diluted moonlight.

But now dawn replaced the darkness. And in the distance I heard a howl.

The hounds would, I knew, follow very soon. At this very moment they were probably at the edge of the plains, eyeing the earthfall into the narrow canyon.

Maybe they were even over the edge already, pouring down in a white-eyed river.

I looked at Del, who sat quietly on one of Garrod's sorrels. "We could go back to the narrowest part of the canyon and block them, you and I. Turn them back. Keep them from getting through."

It was, I knew, only a temporary device; it seemed likely the hounds, with their

vastly superior numbers, would eventually kill us both and continue on to catch the others.

Unless, of course, we were the ones they wanted. In which case, maybe they'd leave the others alone.

Del unsheathed her sword. "I have a better idea."

I looked at Boreal. It occurred to me to wonder why Del hadn't used her before now. "Bascha--"

"You saw what happened before." She knew perfectly well what I meant. "You felt what happened before. Loosed like that--uncontrolled, undirected--she can injure the innocent as well as destroy the enemy... on the plain I didn't dare."

I glanced around. Dawn was filling the tiny trap-canyon with a weak, pinkish light, divulging countless holes and crevices cut into the walls themselves. And it occurred to me that Boreal's backlash might be redoubled here.

"Del--"

She thrust out a rigid hand. "Do you see the throat? I'll use it to direct the power, and let the walls protect all of you."

Throat. As good as another word, I guess. At the mouth of the trap-canyon was a bulging of wind-sculpted stone that forced a narrower entryway. A natural shield, of sorts, swelling from either side--a throat of solid stone--barely wide enough to offer admittance to a horse, though it had swallowed six of them.

"What are you going to do?" Massou demanded sharply.

Del glanced back at him. As always, with him, her expression softened. Massou was Jamail to her. "I'm going to try and turn back the beasts."

Blue eyes widened. "How?"

Del was never one to lie, or even to blunt the truth. Not for anyone's sake.

"With magic," she said evenly.

Cipriana urged her bay closer to Del's white-faced sorrel. "Magic," she said.

"Magic? How? What will you do?"

Adara shoved tangled hair out of a tired face. Something glinted in her eyes: an odd, bright awareness. "She's going to use her jivatma."

Four pairs of eyes fixed themselves on the sword. I didn't bother, having seen Boreal before; instead, I looked at them. At Garrod, clearly startled, who only now realized Del was precisely what she claimed; and at Adara and her children, staring avidly at the blade. As if they were dying of thirst and knew it would succor them.

Lastly, at Del, who was sliding off her horse. "You would do well," she suggested, "to find places in which to hide. That way if I fail, perhaps you'll still escape the beasts."

Places in which to hide. Were there any? The trap-canyon was little more than a pen of rock, and we the gathered livestock.

Garrod tipped his head back, looking up. Beaded braids dangled, sweeping against his mount's gray rump. "There are holes," he said. "Ledges and shelves and holes."

So there were. The walls, curving around to trap us within something akin to a semicircle, were freely pocked with hollows and holes. It was possible the walls that trapped us might also provide a means of escape from the hounds.

In the distance I heard the yapping of the beasts, threading down through the narrow canyon. I jumped off the stud and went over to the nearest lobe of cliff.

The morning light was very thin, but growing stronger by the moment. Shadows slid down mottled rock onto a stone floor stair-stepped by a now-banished river, losing themselves in smudgy darkness. "Any holes large enough?"

"Any we can reach?" Methodically I checked for cubbies we could use.

"Massou--over here."

He came at once, peering up at the hole I'd found. "Too high," he said.

"The whole point," I agreed. "Here--I'll give you a boost. Come on."

Garrod dismounted and conducted his own search, motioning Cipriana and her mother to dismount and join him. It didn't take long for him to discover a ledge just large enough for two. He boosted the girl up, then Adara, and told them both to stay put.

"What about you?" Cipriana asked. Her voice echoed in the canyon.

He was clearly pleased, though he answered calmly enough. "I will stay down with the horses."

"But--if those things break through--"

"I will stay with the horses," he repeated, with a strange dignity. "They will be frightened also. I can make them feel better."

I shot him a sardonic glance as I led the stud to the wall and looped his reins over an outcrop. "By talking to them, Garrod?"

He was unoffended. "I've heard you talk to your stud."

"That's different," I pointed out. "That's just talking. He doesn't really understand me."

Garrod grunted. "Do you want me to find out?"

I thought about it. If he could talk to the stud--no, never mind. "Nah," I told him. "He and I do fine."

Del stood by her "throat." She frowned a little, intently studying the interior of the canyon, the narrow entranceway, the bulging lobes of stone on either side. And then abruptly made a decision; she turned and walked swiftly straight to Garrod, who stood talking quietly to his horses.

"I need one," she said.

Interrupted, he looked at her with an oddly unfocused stare. "What?"

"I need one." Del repeated, gesturing to his horses. "Now."

Garrod frowned. "Why? Do you mean to ride back? I thought Tiger said this was the best place to turn them."

"It is," she agreed evenly, "but we need something to block the entrance, like a stopper in a bottle."

I understood instantly, admiring her plan, as well as her courage in asking Garrod to make such a sacrifice. Watching the interplay, I scratched thoughtfully at my scars; Garrod wouldn't like it at all, once he understood exactly what she meant.

For now, he didn't. Braid beads rattled as he shook his head. "When the beasts come, the horse will never stand. He'll try to run, and you'll lose your stopper."

"Not if he can't run." Del's hand was more imperative. "Give me a horse, Garrod. I can ride double with Tiger,"

Abruptly, he understood. Pale eyes widened in astonished disbelief, then narrowed angrily. I don't know exactly what he said, since he said it in uplander dialect, but clearly it wasn't polite. It also wasn't agreement.

The yapping intensified. Del ignored Garrod's diatribe and reached out to catch the reins to the nearest horse. It was the sorrel she had ridden.

He is fast, the Northerner. He had his knife out before I could reach him, but I swept aside the angry attempt and carried him back against the wall.

"No," I said calmly, squeezing the knife from his hand.

He didn't even glance at me, though I held him pressed against the cliff.

Instead he stared past me at Del, who led the sorrel to the opening. His fair-skinned face was blotched with anger. "She can't kill him--she can't kill him--"

"She can," I said quietly. "It's to save our lives, Garrod."

"How can she kill a horse?"

Del positioned the sorrel so that he stood sideways in the throat, blocking the opening.

Garrod lunged off the wall, set me back two steps, tried to twist free. He nearly did it, too; I only just managed to swing him back around and smash him against the wall. "We don't have time for this, Garrod--"

He swore viciously, cutting me off, and spat out something in uplander slang.

Something, I think, about an old man and a nanny goat.

I leaned on him a little, smiling. "If you like, we can use you to block the gate."

Garrod struggled fruitlessly. "You don't understand--"

"All I need to understand is that when it comes down to it, our survival is more important than that of any horse. You'd agree, if you had any brains."

"I'm a horse-speaker, you fool! Don't you know what that means? Don't you understand?" He strained against me. "I feel what they feel--sense what they sense--"

In the canyon, coming closer, I heard the howling of the hounds. "Right now I don't care if it means you're ready to drop a foal yourself," I told him. "Del's trying to save our lives."

He spat out another angry oath in Northern. This time Del was the target.

I sighed and forcibly shut his mouth. "Any time, bascha."

Garrod mumbled urgently against my hand, then went perfectly rigid. I didn't

watch Del dispatch the horse, since my attention was on Garrod, but I heard the familiar wailing whistle of an unkeyed jivatma in use. The horse fell heavily; Garrod's eyes squeezed shut. Then he sagged against the cliff.

Del swung stiffly from the dead horse. Her face was oddly tight. "When you have seen Ajani kill your family, killing a horse is nothing."

Garrod's eyes snapped open.

Del's tone didn't waver. "When we are free of here, I have questions to ask of you. Questions about Ajani."

Garrod said nothing at all, still struck dumb by the death of his horse. Del turned away.

After a moment, certain Garrod now would do nothing, I went over to her. "I'll be with you, bascha."

Her voice was slightly unsteady, "You might do well to get up high."

"I might," I agreed, "but I have no intention of hiding."

Lashes flickered minutely. "Because Garrod's staying down?"

I didn't feel like biting. "Because I want to stay here with you."

Her eyes searched my own. Wavered. Then lips tightened slightly. "I don't need company to die."

"Neither do I, Del. But I have no intention of dying." I glanced through the throat and to the cut beyond.

Heard the yapping of the approaching flood. Took my place behind her. If they got past Boreal, they'd still have an enemy. "The hounds are coming, bascha.

You'd better sing your song."

Del turned. She positioned herself just behind the dead horse, warded by towering stone. Such a fragile, delicate gate, made of flesh and bone. But I

thought it might be enough, because she also was Boreal.

Del lifted the sword and held her angled from shoulder to hip. I knew, underneath the soft-combed wool cross-wrapped from wrist to elbow, Del's arms were flexed and firm. Her legs were spread and set, knees only slightly bent.

She held her stance and waited.

She is tall. She is strong. She is completely unrelenting. Not a soft woman, as Cipriana had needlessly pointed out; what Del was, I knew: a dedicated soldier in the service of her oath.

My sword hissed as I unsheathed it. But the music of the steel was lost in the song of Delilah's making.

The canyon disgorged six hounds. The vanguard had arrived.

Hoolies, bascha, do it--

Twenty-two

Something flickered at the corner of my eye. Something high, up in the cliff wall, and not where Garrod and I had cached any of the others. Which meant maybe the hounds had found another way in, and the vanguard was only a decoy.

Quickly I glanced at Del, who began to sing her sword alive. She was, for the moment, untroubled by the hounds, who merely crouched against the canyon floor, creeping forward to show her their teeth. I glanced up at the wall again, saw the blob of a face in one of the holes, knew it was man instead of beast.

I sheathed, crossed the trap-canyon in two leaps, caught the convenient handholes. Toeholes as well; I clambered up easily, chinned myself on the ledge

some forty feet above the floor, pulled myself up with caution. I wasn't much interested in having my eyes poked out.

No danger of that. The hole was empty, but it wasn't entirely a hole. It was a tunnel in the rock, smoothed by wind, water and time. Feeble light blushed it pink and apricot, which meant the tunnel gave out beyond the trap-canyon, providing a means of escape.

"Garrod!" I shouted. "Garrod, get the others down. Bring them over here. I've found a way out." I swung myself down, around, clung a moment to the lip of the ledge, caught toes in convenient holes, began the awkward descent.

I was down, jumping the last five feet, as Garrod helped the women down from their ledge. I retrieved Massou and steered him to the crude ladder in the wall. I'd found the hand- and toeholes spaced ridiculously close together, carved more for a boy of Massou's size than a man's. But there was no time to wonder about it; it simply meant Massou would find the going easy. He was quick and agile, and more than willing.

Adara, however, was not. "Up there?" she asked, aghast.

"Straight up," I agreed. "There's a solid ledge, once you get up, and a tunnel."

"But you don't know where it goes!"

"Out of here," I said firmly, and caught her around the waist. "Hike up those skirts and climb."

"But--"

"Climb, woman! Or would you rather be eaten?"

Hastily she gathered skirts, kilted them up into her tunic belt to display blue woolen leggings, turned to face the wall. I boosted. Awkwardly she thrust hands and feet into holes.

Beyond Del's throat and the dead horse gate, more hounds gathered. Ugly hounds they were, dappled silver against dull gray, with low-slung heads and prominent jaws, displaying awesome teeth. They had raggedy, wolfish ears, except the ears lacked hair, being leathery, grayish things that now stood firmly upright, fixed upon the song. Hindquarters were slight in comparison to heavy shoulders made heavier by tangled manes. Brushy tails hugged genitals, curled tightly against lean bellies.

In the faint glow of dawn, slanting eyes were colorless. By night, I knew, they were white, throwing back the light.

Del sang, I felt the temperature drop. Down and down, until my breath plumed the air. I knew it was only backlash; the winding conduit in front of Del would suffer the worst of the storm. But it still made me shiver, although I wasn't certain if the response was born of cold or superstition.

The hounds, too, felt it; felt something. As Del loosed the sword, each of them tilted back an ugly head and howled to the skies.

I shook my head, staring. It resembled nothing so much as some uncanny form of obeisance. To Del? Or to the sword? Or maybe to the magic?

Hoolies, I hate magic. There's nothing clean about it.

"Come on," I told Cipriana brusquely as her mother reached halfway. "Your turn."

Her skirts were already kilted. She turned to face the wall, then abruptly swung back. She caught my neck, hugged hard, kissed me before I could say a word. And was climbing the ladder of holes, laughing to herself.

Oh, hoolies. What possesses some women?

Massou's expression was one of embarrassed disgust. Garrod's one of startled speculation. Then he frowned. "Do you have a harem, Southron?"

"She's young," I muttered, reaching to scoop up Massou. "She doesn't know what

she wants." I put the boy against the wall, steadied him, sent him up behind his sister. As I'd expected, he took to the climb with ease.

Garrod's breath wreathed his face. "What about the horses? Do we take them back through the canyon?"

I sighed. "You don't learn too quickly, do you? No, Garrod, we don't take them back through the canyon. We leave them here,"

"Leave them--" He stopped short. "You hope the beasts will be satisfied with them instead of with us."

"I'm not counting on it." I jerked a thumb upward. "Your turn, horse-speaker."

"What of your stud?"

It took all I had to shrug unconcernedly. "He doesn't have wings, does he? So I guess he stays with your horses."

Garrod glanced back. Four Northern horses stood huddled together against the far wall; the fifth lay dead in the entrance to the canyon. I saw his face go stiff, and then he was climbing the ladder.

It left me. And Del.

Del's song faltered. Then stopped. I might have told her to keep singing in order to hold the hounds, but clearly Boreal's power was not what kept them from attacking. Maybe some form of geas?

It didn't sit well. I was not at all fond of the idea that the beasts were more than predators, but under a kind of guidance.

Del voiced similar thoughts. "They're creeping closer," she said as I joined her. "See? Right now they're watching me, judging me... they're thinking out the attack."

She shivered slightly. "They have intelligence, Tiger. As much as you or I."

I looked out at the hounds. Dozens of them crouched down in front of the dead horse, tongues lolling in apparent idleness, but it was belied by the alertness in pale eyes. Del was right; they were judging her.

I wet my lips. "It may not be intelligence," I said, "It may only be direction."

"What do you mean?"

"They cut us out of the kymri and herded us out onto the plain. They lost us briefly in the canyon, but now they've got us pinned. And yet they don't attack." I shrugged. "I still think it's sorcery... and I think they've been bewitched."

"If that's true--"

"It doesn't matter," I interrupted. "There's a way out, Del. The others are free--it leaves only us." I gestured. "There, bascha--up the wall and out. There's a tunnel."

Del stared at the ladder of holes. The swordsong had taken all of her concentration, making her deaf and blind to the rest of us. I saw her surprise transform itself into relief, and then she frowned, glancing at the horses.

"The stud..." She let it trail off, looking at my face. "Oh, Tiger--"

"Climb," I said evenly. "I can be as hardhearted as you."

I'd meant it as a joke. It came out otherwise. But it was too late to apologize;

Del was heading for the cliff.

The hounds moved to follow.

Oh, hoolies. It was Del they wanted.

"Up!" I shouted. "Get up!"

She turned back, saw the hounds coming over the horse.

"Climb!" I shouted, unsheathing. "It's you they want, bascha. Get up that wall--get above them--get out of their reach."

"Tiger--"

"Just do it, bascha--I can hold them off."

Well, I could try.

Del was halfway up the wall as the hounds poured over the horse into the trap-canyon, making it their own. I felt their hot breaths, the scrape of claws on leather boots, the thrust of shoulders and chests against my legs. I stood knee-deep in a river of beasts.

They snapped, slashed, clawed, tried to thrust me aside. Most bit only halfheartedly, out of reflex. It wasn't me they wanted, but if I got in the way they'd take pains to put me out of it.

Well, I intended to get in the way. And let them know it, leveling my sword like a scythe. I took heads, severed spines, opened gaping holes in chests and ribs. I made myself soundly disliked.

Del was gone. Accordingly, they turned from the wall to me, pressing me back, forcing me across the canyon. Behind me, Garrod's horses were restless; the stud stomped uneasily.

The stud. Hoolies. Why do this on foot?

I pulled free of the spangled river, caught the stud, swung up onto his back.

"Well, old son, let's say we try this one together." I gathered reins in one hand, hefted the sword with the other. "Let's stomp some dogs, old man."

Most of the hounds seemed distracted by Del's disappearance. Others melted back, licking at the ones I'd killed or wounded. But a few came for us. They snapped at pasterns, hocks, knees. Slashed at belly, genitals, flanks. Tried to pull him down, to shred him, to turn him back from flight. But the stud was angry and frightened, doing his best to run, and when a horse as single-minded as my old

man decides he wants to run, nothing gets in his way.

Not even the man on his back.

There is something exhilarating about fighting the odds while astride a very good horse. Some elemental emotion that strips bare the so-called civilization we've undergone in order to live in settlements and cities, or to travel the sands in a caravan. Somehow I was not just a man anymore, but a man in tandem with the horse. It made me strong and proud and oddly content, all at once, with a powerful surge of emotion that translated itself into an intensity that, to my altered perceptions, slowed the attacking beasts to a crawl. And it made it easy to kill them.

It was a strange detachment. I felt the bunching of the stud's muscles beneath my buttocks, sensed the powerful anger, heard the snorts and squeals of rage. He struck unerringly with iron-shod hooves; together, we were invincible.

I smelled blood and urine and excrement. The stink of fresh-spilled entrails.

Mostly, I smelled power, and the stench of sorcery.

"Sorry," I said aloud, "but I am not impressed."

I knew better than to give the hounds a chance to pull us down. They still outnumbered us badly, and the stud and I couldn't hold them off forever. I waited until the flood paused to reconsider, jammed heels into the stud's heaving sides, took him through the snarling hounds.

There was, I knew, a chance he might refuse to jump the dead horse. In which case we were fairly trapped, because he couldn't hold out much longer. On foot, I stood little chance. So I aimed him at the opening, fed him rein, slapped the flat of my borrowed blade across his blood-flecked rump.

He jumped, my game old man, and cleared the body easily, landing with a clatter of iron on stone beyond. And, since he had momentum in his favor, I didn't

bother trying to stop him. I merely gave him a second slap and bent down over his spike-maned neck.

"Now's your chance!" I shouted.

Obligingly, the stud ran away with me.

Twenty-three

We were noisy, the stud and I. Hooves clopped and clattered against hard stone, scraping grit, crushing small rocks, scattering bits and pieces against the looming walls. It was easier to see now that the sun was up, but I was still a stranger to the canyon even though I'd ridden through it only the night before.

At a dead run and bareback, the stud was hard to stay aboard. I hugged him with all the strength in thighs and calves, locking my left hand in the stiff upstanding hair of his undipped mane. My other hand was full of sword, which I did not, at this speed, dare to put away. I'd probably cut off my left arm.

We threaded our way through the canyon, dodging overhanging cliffs and jumping ribs of rock. At times the cliffs loomed perilously near my head, threatening to scrape off my ears, but I bent low and tried to stay as unobstructive as possible. At this particular moment the stud didn't need my help; he seemed to know what he was doing. But then again, during a runaway, the stud usually does.

At last we reached the earthfall. I knew better than to try riding up it to the plain; the footing was impossible, too soft for stud or man. And so I went straight, leaving the narrow canyon behind, and entered the riverbed instead,

the wide floodplain of vanished water. A canyon remained, but here the walls parted, taking leave of one another. To my left reared the plainside cliffs, to my right the low, ridged line of reddish wall, reminding me of the tunnel I'd sent the others into.

The others. I cursed, twisting on the stud, to look back the way we'd come. The canyon vanished into little more than a thready black line, made invisible by distance.

Hoolies, where was Del?

Where, for that matter, were the hounds?

Was it possible--? No, probably not. And yet it wasn't me they'd been after, but Del. And Del had walked up walls, disappearing into nothingness. I had no idea how well the hounds took a scent, but it was possible they'd lose her entirely.

It was even possible, I hoped, they'd give up chasing me.

Briefly, I patted the stud. "Bet you'd like that, old man."

He labored beneath me. I didn't like the sound of his breathing. If he ran much longer at this speed, he could break his wind. Or throw shin splints. Or even break his legs. All of which would render him useless to me or to anyone else. And a horse no longer useful... I swore violently. No. He deserved better than that.

I twisted to look back again. No hounds, though I could hear howling in the distance. I sucked in a deep breath, considered things a brief moment, made my decision. Carefully I eased the stud's headlong gallop, slowing him to a lope, then to a jagged trot. And, at long last, into a stumbling walk.

I hooked my leg over and slid off the right side instead of the left in order to keep the sword clear of the stud, who stumbled and weaved so badly I was afraid he might swing his head and smack into the blade itself. I caught up the reins

and led him, searching for a break in the low canyon wall. I wanted to get out of the riverbed, wide as it was, and find higher ground, a place where I could keep an eye out for hounds while I gave the stud--and myself--a rest.

Something caught my eye. A notch in the ridged wall. It was possible... yes; not only possible, but definite. The notch was a jagged break that cut through the line of wall clear to the riverbed. A rough, treacherous stairway up to level ground.

Rain had smoothed the stone, wearing down jagged edges. There were hollows where puddles gathered, shoulders curved like a woman's, crannies wide enough for booted feet and shod hooves. It was not, thank the gods of valhail, incredibly steep, but it would still be a tough climb for the stud. He was horse, not mountain goat.

Tough climb for me, too, I didn't dare lead him up because once he'd gathered his willingness he'd also gather speed. Horses, when left to themselves, climb such things in leaps and bounds; I'd end up splattered all over the rock. And I couldn't ride him up; it was too steep, too treacherous to burden him with my weight, and--without a saddle--I'd probably come off. But I doubted he'd go up it alone without some sort of encouragement, so I stuffed his head into the break, tugged the bit forward, stepped aside quickly as I slapped him once again with the flat of Theron's sword.

Maybe he was a mountain goat after all... three lunging strides took him halfway up, where he slipped, slid, scrabbled, then caught himself and lunged upward again, until he cleared the top.

"Wait for me," I said lamely, and sheathed my sword at last.

He did wait, being too exhausted to go on without me. Upon topping the break

myself, I found the stud engaged in standing still, head drooping in weariness.

Lather flecked chest, shoulders, flanks; sweat ran down between his ears to drip off the end of his nose. He was breathing like a bellows.

"Sorry, old man... nothing else we could do." I caught a rein and examined him quickly, gritting teeth as I noted the damage. Red flecks stained salty white lather. Blood ran from chest, flanks, hocks, ankles. The hounds had stripped hair and flesh away in their bid to pull him down. He needed rest, attention, food and water. And I could give him none of it; the hounds were far too close. I shivered. Glanced skyward. It was early yet, but again clouds snuffed out the sun and gave me gray light instead of yellow, softening the hard edge of the day into one of dampness, of muted sounds and colors. When the rain began to fall, I was unsurprised, and equally unhappy.

It was little more than a heavy mist. But I was miserable nonetheless, longing for my desert. I wanted warmth. I wanted sunlight. I wanted sand beneath my feet, instead of turf and leaves.

And now that I had the stud again, I also wanted Del.

"Hoolies, you're sandsick." I said it aloud, and emphatically, generally disgusted by the intensity of my longing. "You spent thirty-some-odd years without anyone, and now you're bleating like a newborn danjac begging for his mother." I scratched the stud's wet face. "First of all, you'll undoubtedly find her soon enough--they're not that far from here; second of all, even if you don't, it means you can go home again. To the South, where it's warm and bright and mostly free of this thrice-cursed rain. Where cantina girls sit on your knee and men buy you aqivi, counting it a privilege, telling stories later of how they spent time with the Sandtiger. Where the circle is drawn in sand, not mud; where opponents don't mutter of Northern patterns and Northern an-kaidin; where

the tanzeers know your name and offer gold if you'll do them a service. And where, for that matter, you don't have to worry if the Northern bascha might get herself killed in the circle, leaving you alone in the world again--"

I stopped. The exhausted stud stared back at me with an abiding disinterest.

"Oh, hoolies... I am sandsick." I turned the stud north and walked. Hunting the Northern bascha.

The hunt took until late afternoon, and when it ended I was the hunted, not the hunter, because it was Del who found me instead of the other way around.

I was relieving myself when she melted out of the mist, damp hair straggling down her back. She saw the stud, not me; I'd left him in the open while I sought the trees. I considered calling to her, then discarded it. The reunion could wait until I'd finished.

Del went directly to the stud, speaking to him quietly. He whickered a little, nosed her, rubbed his head on her shoulder as she stepped close to stroke his neck. I finished, took two steps, stopped. Said nothing. Instead, I listened to her, and looked.

"Poor boy," she said softly. "Poor brave boy, so torn by teeth and claws... you've been badly used, haven't you? Asked to run and fight and run some more... and given no chance to rest." She smiled a little as he butted against her and rubbed harder, relieving the unpleasantness of damp hair against equally damp wool. "Poor Southron-bred boy, so tired of all the cold and rain and damp... as much as your rider himself, my poor beleaguered Sandtiger, so far from what he knows."

Del glanced around, still rubbing the stud's head. She'd scraped wet hair back from her face, which sharpened the angles of her features and robbed them of

feminine softness. I realized, looking at her anew, she'd lost weight, and tension had tautened the flesh at the corners of her eyes and mouth. It aged her, made her look more determined than ever; stole away the lightheartedness of youth to show instead the burden of responsibilities no one should ever have to know, regardless of gender.

My poor brave Delilah, so driven by the dual needs for forgiveness and retribution.

I stepped out of the trees and went down to her, watching the alteration in her eyes as she saw me; the brief glow of relief that said, "he is alive, he is whole, he is still the Sandtiger."

In which case, I had an image to live up to.

"Well," I said lightly, "took you long enough."

Del smiled, showing teeth. "We did consider leaving you."

"So why didn't you?"

"We needed the horse."

So we did, since five of them were dead. "How are the others?"

"Adara is tired and letting everyone know about it. Garrod is still upset over the loss of his horses; he's a horse-speaker, after all. Massou considers it all an adventure, and Cipriana--well--" Del shrugged. "She wanted to come along, but Adara made her stay behind."

I scrubbed a hand over my face. "Hoolies, Del, what am I to do with her? She's just a girl--"

"And if she were older?" Del smiled again, arching suggestive brows. "She's not really all that young, Tiger. I'm only five years older."

"I know, I know... don't remind me." I sighed. "Sometimes I think you're too young for me."

"Me, too." Heartlessly. "Someone like Garrod, now..." Her expression was elaborately thoughtful.

"No," I said flatly, "not Garrod. Not for you. Not a man who might have taken part in the murder of your kinfolk."

It effectively robbed the moment of humor. The ice was back in her eyes. "Garrod did not," she said coolly, "but plainly he knows about it. He would have to; he has ridden with Ajani."

"Ridden with him?" I frowned. "Knowing him is one thing; riding with him is another."

"He knows him. He said so. He's ridden with him, too. But not lately, he says, and never to murder people." Del's tone was so flat it underscored her anger more than shouting could have. "There is a distinction somewhere, but I have yet to see it."

Garrod's habits were worth discussing, I thought, in view of his link to Ajani, but there were more pressing matters. Like the hounds. And I said so.

Del shook her head. "For the moment, they've disappeared. But I think they'll be back." She braced as the stud rubbed against her again. "You may be right, Tiger. I think they're after someone--or something--in particular... and I think they're conjured beasts. They aren't natural. Otherwise they wouldn't be so selective, so single-minded. And they'd never have let you and the stud break free."

"I sort of wondered about that myself." I gathered dangling reins. "He's too tired to carry double, bascha. We'll have to walk, if you'll lead the way."

She gestured in a northerly direction. "Back that way a couple of miles. In a canyon ..." She smiled oddly a moment. "A very remarkable canyon."

"Not another trap-canyon." I started walking, leading the stud.

"No. Oh, no. And there is no danger of the beasts attacking there. The magic is too strong."

"Magic." I stopped walking. "Magic?"

Del nodded. "A very powerful magic, like nothing you've ever seen."

I grunted. "I've seen a little in my lifetime, bascha, and I haven't liked any of it. The hounds themselves are magic--even you admit it."

"Even I admit it," she agreed patiently. "Yes, the hounds are born of magic; and yes, a malignant magic... but the Canteada aren't."

"The what?"

"Not what: who. The Canteada." Del sighed, looking uncharacteristically fatuous.

"Oh, Tiger, if only you could understand..."

"I'll try!" I said dryly. "Explain it to me."

Del shook her head. "Explaining won't help. You wouldn't understand. I don't think you can understand; not you."

I wasn't particularly pleased by her conviction. "How do you know that? I'm not entirely blind--"

"Not blind," she said, interrupting, "deaf. At least deaf to music."

"Music." I sighed, scrubbing my face again. "Bascha, can't you be a bit more specific? All this jabber about music and magic--"

"All this 'jabber,' as you put it, is as specific as it gets." Del pointed north, suggesting we continue our journey.

I urged the stud forward again. "You're telling me these Canteada people are musicians."

"No," she said softly, "I'm telling you the Canteada are music."

I grunted. "Same difference."

"You are surly, aren't you?" Del shook her head. "I said you wouldn't understand."

"What I understand," I told her plainly, "is that we've been singled out by a sorcerer who's set the hounds of hoolies on us for no particular reason, as far as I can see, except maybe for some sort of peculiar entertainment. And I don't much like it." I scowled at her. "I don't like it, I don't like this, I don't even like this country." I sucked in a deep breath, stopped walking again, continued unabated, since she was listening, "I've been wet since we got here, half-frozen by your sword; attacked by loki, live and dead bodies; savaged by conjured hounds, made to suffer the amorous advances of mother and daughter, all the while being turned neatly away by you. Do you blame me for being surly?"

Del gazed at me thoughtfully. "You're tired," she said finally. "You'll feel better when you've eaten."

"Eaten, schmeaten," I snapped. "I'll feel better when we're done with whatever it is you need to do and we can go back South again, where it's warm and bright and dry."

Del took the reins from me. "And if we don't start moving, Tiger, we'll never go anywhere."

Surliness, like the rain, was completely unabated; I turned on my heel and moved.

Twenty-four

To our right cut the narrow canyon the stud and I had traveled twice, once in, once out. To our left jutted a damp, rocky wall rising well above our heads. Its face was gray and blue, slick and sleek with rain as it drizzled out of the sky. The cliff wall looked like someone had hewn it out of the earth with a giant ax, leaving it choppy and sharp and striated. But the jagged, angry face was softened by moss and fallen leaves, littered green and gold and carnelian, with a touch of faded plum.

"The colors are different here," I said, rustling through rain-washed leaves.

Del glanced at me, then looked at the craggy cliff face, at bare-branched trees, at leaf-softened, otter brown ground. After a moment, she nodded. "They are deeper, richer, older... not impermanent like the South."

"Impermanent." It sounded odd.

"Oh, yes. In the South the colors are subtler, more subject to whims of weather. To simooms, blowing sand across the miles. To lack of water, sucking moisture and color out of trees and vegetation. And to the sun, stealing the life from everything, man and animal alike."

I frowned. "You told me once you liked the South."

"I respect it. I admire its strength, its fierce beauty, its determination to survive. But this--this--" One arm encompassed cliff, canyon, forest, "--is what I have known since birth. These colors are my own; even the smell of the North, the taste of rain-soaked ground. This is what has shaped me."

Something blossomed inside me. Such a tiny little bud, threatening to unfold.

"You sound like you mean to stay here."

Del looked at me sharply. And then glanced away.

The bud became a bloom and showed me the colors of my fear. "Bascha--when this is all done, we're going South again. At least, I am. Aren't you?"

She still didn't look at me. "I haven't decided yet."

Women are spontaneous creatures. They don't generally think things through on a logical level, relying mostly on emotion. They tend to make snap judgments and stick by them stubbornly merely for the sake of appearances, to save face and salve pride, even if you show them they're utterly wrong. Rarely do they look at all the angles, seeing only what they desire. They see, they want, they take, or find a man to get it for them.

They talk off the top of their heads, regretting it later, always, then denying they ever said it.

Women are fickle creatures.

And not so different from men. Which meant I knew what Del's evasiveness indicated, regardless of what she said.

She said she hadn't decided, which meant, of course, she had.

I stopped walking abruptly, which stopped the stud. "Do you mean to tell me you've dragged me all the way up here on some thrice-cursed mission of forgiveness, yet you have no intention of going home?"

She didn't answer at once. Then, softly, she said, "I am home, Tiger."

Hoolies. So she was.

My tone was curt. "Del--"

"I said I hadn't decided."

"And when will you decide?"

She shrugged. "When I do."

That was helpful. I scratched at my scars, dragging broken nails across the distinctive claw marks. I hadn't been able to shave for a couple of days and the stubble was driving me crazy. "And when, do you think, might that be?"

"I don't know!" Her shout echoed in the canyon, climbed the cliff wall, lost itself in trees. The stud flicked his ears.

"Ah," I said, "I see."

Del's face bloomed angrily. "How am I to know?" she asked tightly. "How am I to know if I will even have a life to live until I have faced the ishtoya and an-ishtoya, the kaidin and an-kaidin? I must go before them and abase myself, ask their forgiveness, their judgment, their penance. How can I say what I will do with my life when they may not let me keep it?"

"Oh. I think they'll let you keep--"

"You don't know that, Tiger!"

Clearly I had upset her. "Now, Del--"

"Don't!" she said furiously. "Don't patronize me. Don't dismiss my fear as if it has no validity. Don't pat me on the head and say you'll make it better. Don't promise to chase away the shadows because you don't know what they are," Well, no, I couldn't. Unless she told me, which she hadn't.

"I don't want to lose you," I said. Then regretted it instantly.

Luckily, Del only bristled. "You don't have me, Tiger."

"No," I agreed, "not lately. You and your loki obsession--"

She said something nasty about the loki in succinct, scatalogical Southron.

"I imagine they'd like that," I pointed out. "After, all, you're the one who explained it to me... how they're attracted to men and women 'in congress,' as you put it."

"They are." Only her lips moved; her teeth were tightly locked.

"Well, then, we don't have anything to worry about," I smiled sweetly. "Do we?"

Del swung around and walked.

It was the stud who warned us. Maybe by then Del and I both were sick of

walking, saying nothing but thinking a lot; we simply didn't notice. But the stud did, luckily.

Ears snapped forward. He inhaled deeply, then exhaled noisily, as horses do when they're unsure. And then he stopped dead in his tracks, popping the reins taut in my hand.

I smelled them before I saw them. I remembered the smell well--the putrid, musky stench of death--from brief captivity in the canyon. "I thought you said the hounds were gone."

"They were." Steel sang as Del unsheathed her sword. "They went back through the canyon after you, then simply disappeared."

"Well, they're back now."

We weren't following a path, exactly, just making our way on the strip of ground between canyon and cliff wall. Trees hedged both sides thickly, close-grown or more widely scattered, while rain dripped from bare branches. There was little coverage, but the hounds knew how to use what of it there was.

Wet leaves don't make as much noise as dry ones. Water muffles sound, glues them together, provides a soggy carpet. But they aren't soundless, either, and I heard the hounds around us. Front and sides and back.

No trap-canyon, this time. This time they didn't need it.

It was, as always--at least to me--a day of grays: ash, iron, olive. And now the hounds as well, dull slate and dappled silver, at one with the rain and at one with the cliff, paying mind to neither. In silence they slipped through the trees, heads dipped low, tails tucked, manes flopping on big shoulders.

One-handed, I drew my sword. "What in hoolies do they want?"

"Us," she said.

"You."

Del glanced at me sharply. "You don't mean--"

"I do. You went up that trap-canyon wall and they came in after you. It wasn't me they wanted. They only chased me because you were already gone. Even then, they were rather halfhearted about it. What are there--thirty? Forty? Fifty? More than enough to pull the stud down, and yet they really did nothing at all."

"Nothing," she echoed. "I've seen the stud, Tiger, and I've seen you. That's not all horse blood on your clothing."

Well, no, but I hadn't really taken the time to inspect it. I was stiff and sore and maybe a bit ragged around the edges, but I was well enough.

"I'll say it again; it's you," I told her. "If they could speak, I'd ask them."

Del said nothing, watching as the hounds spilled out to encircle us. They kept their distance, giving us plenty of room, yet I had the feeling that if we moved, they'd go right along with us. Once again, they worked us, like a dog set on Southron goats.

"It doesn't make any sense," she said. "The voca would never rescind my year of response."

"Who?"

"Voca. Those who gather in judgment."

"Theron came after you."

"Theron applied to collect the blood-debt. By voca law, he was required to give me the choice between entering the circle or going home to accept the judgment of my peers and teachers." Her face was stark. "As you know, he chose to dance against me. He lost, because of you. It means no other may challenge me, until the year is up."

"We're awfully close, bascha. With all the delays we've had, it's only a matter

of weeks."

"Yes, Tiger. I know. But they would never have sent the beasts. It isn't the voca's way." Her expression was grim. "They would send men, Tiger, and maybe women. All carefully trained sword-dancers."

"Then why do these hounds want you?"

"Maybe it isn't me."

I frowned. "I know it's not me, Del."

"Not you, not me." She lifted the sword a little. "Maybe they want this."

I shook my head. "What would a pack of hounds want with a sword, Del? They can't exactly use it."

"They've been herding us from the beginning."

"Well, yes--"

"They've never really attacked us, mostly driving us toward the north."

"Well, yes, it does seem--"

"She didn't hold them, Tiger. When I sang. They seemed to relish the power, instead of fearing it."

I thought it over. They had. "Still, Del, I wonder--"

"They're escorting us to someone. Someone who wants this sword."

I sighed. "Seems a bit farfetched to me, Del. Why send a pack of nightmare hounds when a man--or men--could do as well, if not better? After all, hounds don't have hands to carry a sword."

"They don't need hands. They've got us."

I glanced out through the drizzle. Gray on gray, perfectly still, in a perfect perimeter. Staring at Del and her sword. "It just doesn't make sense, bascha."

"Evil rarely does."

I glanced at her sharply. "What do you mean, 'evil'?"

"It depends on your definition," she said, "but evil is usually bad."

The stud still stood and stared, watching the beasts rigidly. Hot breath warmed my shoulder. "Then you're saying there is a sorcerer--"

"Or loki," she said calmly. "Loki require power. And power lives in this sword."

I recalled how she'd yelled at me not to use my borrowed sword in the loki ring.

Could they have siphoned off whatever power remained and used it for themselves?

And now they required more.

"Loki," I said in disgust.

"A sword is a sword," Del said. "A jivatma is more than a sword. If I key her fully, her power can be used against us."

"Well, then, let's not go keying her, shall we?"

Del smiled a little, wryly. "How many do you think we can kill before they kill us?"

"You just said they don't mean to kill us."

"Probably not, if we cooperate. But I don't intend to go with them."

There comes a time when talk is exhausted and earns you nothing. There comes a time when action is the only answer, regardless of the odds. Del and I had known for some time that it would come to this; we'd put it off because no one wants to admit his powerlessness over something that can kill him. It's a way of cheating death.

But it all runs out eventually, and what you want is blood.

I gave the stud his freedom as well as a pat on the neck. "Well, then, bascha--looks like we have a fight on our hands."

Del sucked in a deep breath. "Let's take it to them, Tiger."

Oddly lighthearted, I grinned. "Is there any other way?"

Twenty-five

Trouble was, we never got to take it to anybody. Because even as we moved, ready to commit carnage, something stopped the hounds. Something stopped us.

A sound. A high-pitched, whistling sound that dipped and rose, floated, wound its way around trees, slid down trunks to splash against the ground, spreading out to entrap our feet.

The stud, wandering off, stopped. Shook his head violently, flopping ears. Then pinned them back flat and curled his upper lip, displaying impressive teeth.

The hounds, gray on gray, melted back into the trees, rumps dropped low, leathery ears pinned, manes bristling. Beasts they might be, and conjured by sorcery, but they responded like whipped dogs, running for a bolt hole.

Del and I weren't much better off, until the sound altered. No more the whistle designed to pierce fragile ears, but a flirtatious, fluting song, wreathing branches and clinging, running and humming amid cracks in the craggy cliff face, echoing out of the canyon. And then even that died, leaving us in silence.

Del sighed. "Canteada."

"What?"

"Canteada," she repeated. "I think you're about to meet one."

"One of these music people?"

"You heard him, didn't you?"

I frowned. "You mean it was music that sent the hounds away?"

"Music. Magic. One and the same with the Canteada." Del put away her sword, smiling. "Look, Tiger. Do you see him?"

I looked. No, I didn't; I saw no one.

And then I did, and stared. "Hoolies, Del! What is that?"

"That is a he," she said. "Canteada, and songmaster. Tanzeer, you might call him; he's the authority in the clan."

He. It, more likely; he was like nothing I'd ever seen. Not even in my dreams.

He was smaller than Massou, yet something spoke of greater age. Coming out of rain it was difficult to see him because his coloring was similar. Pale, translucent flesh, oddly opalescent. And he was ugly. He was ugly. There was no other word for it.

But he made me forget it when he spoke, because when he spoke he sang.

Came you here to kill?

All I could do was stare.

Came you here to kill?

He was looking at me, not at Del. Slowly I shook my head, not knowing what else to do.

A delicate, blue-nailed finger lifted gently toward my sword. * Steelsong kills.*

A polite way of calling me a liar. "Del--"

"Your sword is naked," she told me quietly. "Sheathe it; he might accept your denial. Right now he won't."

I sheathed. "What is that thing?" I whispered. "Not human. Not animal."

"Canteada," she said softly. "As children we are taught they brought music to the world. But I never thought I'd ever see one, until this morning. I wasn't even sure they were real."

I looked at the little man. He reached my waist, barely, barrel-chested with spindly limbs, and long, eloquent fingers. He wore only a leather kilt. His eyes were palest purple, a bit like Theron's blade. The pupils were weirdly catlike.

Steelsong kills he repeated.

Del drew in a deep breath. "Steelsong kills," she agreed. "But so do beasts like those."

The Canteada tilted his head. *Sendsong halts! Steelsong no longer needed. *

I frowned. "What's he saying?"

Del smiled a little. "Don't you wish now you understood music better? He's saying we don't need our swords anymore. The hounds have been sent away."

"How do we know that?"

"Canteada never lie."

"Oh, right. You yourself just told me you thought they lived only in stories.

Now you expect me to believe this little man is some magical creature who sings instead of talks, and won't ever lie to us?"

"He has no reason to lie."

"Hunh."

Arguesong discordant.

Del promptly laughed.

I sighed. Looked at the Canteada. Such a strange little man, with his prominent jaw and mobile mouth, and a throat that swelled when he talked, very much like a frog's.

"We'd prefer not to kill them," I said politely, "so long as they don't kill us.

If, as you say, your song has sent the hounds away, will it be for good?"

Birdlike, he tilted his head again. His ears, too, were overlarge, vaguely

pointed, with the slightest suggestion of mobility. His hair, thin and silver-gray, rose from a peak at the top of his forehead and ran in a crest down the back of his neck, feathering out on either side. It was more like down than hair, I thought. And, like hackles, the crest could rise, speaking a language of its own.

*Distance diminishes*Diminishment obscures*

"What?"

Del sighed. "I think he means if we get too far, the song diminishes and the spell stops working." She frowned. "Can't you understand anything?"

"I know he's singing, bascha--I can hear a few of the words--but noise is noise to me." I paused. "What do you hear, Del?"

She smiled with a startling serenity. "Everything. All the tones, all the inflections, all the subtleties. It's clearer even than our speech, because it expresses the emotions."

I was skeptical. "And this is the man--the thing--that rescued you this morning?"

"When we climbed out of the tunnel, he was waiting."

The threat of death drew him, and some of the others. Canteada despise death."

"Don't they die?"

"I should have said, Canteada despise murder. No matter what the victim."

I sighed and went over to catch the stud's dangling reins. "I'm not too fond of it myself, particularly when I'm the target. Well, what do we do now? Will he take us to the others?"

"I think it's what he came to do."

"So what are we waiting for?"

Del sighed. "Maybe a little courtesy."

"Courtesy has its place," I agreed, "but right now so does promptness. I'd sort of like to gather together our little clan, take stock of things, then get the hoolies out of here before we lose more time." I stopped. "So should you, Del. It's your skin the voci want, not mine."

"Voci," she corrected.

"Voci, loki, whatever. Let's just get moving, bascha."

The Canteada, listening, seemed to understand before Del said a word. He turned, leaped up a tree, flung himself through branches. From tree to tree he sped, agile as a monkey. In his wake floated a fragile, fluting whistle.

"Followsong," Del explained. "Well? You were the one in a hurry."

I clicked to the stud and walked.

The rain worsened before it got better. Del and I were both soaked to the skin.

Rivulets ran down my back, tickled buttocks, squelched inside my boots. Hair was plastered against my head, spilling droplets whenever I moved. I was wet and cold and miserable, like a cat caught in a downpour.

Well, so I was; cat and caught.

I blew out an impatient breath. It plumed in the air much as the stud's did, wreathing his nostrils in transient steam. Dark brown ordinarily, he was nearly blackened by the rain. Wet tail slapped at hocks and stuck, briefly, before freed again by the motion of his walking.

"Hoolies, I hate the wet. What I'd give for a little sun and warmth..."

Del didn't smile. "What would you give?"

"What?" I frowned, not following. "Oh. Hoolies, I don't know. It was only a manner of speech."

"If you really want the sun, they can probably get it for you."

"Who can?" I followed her gesture. "Him? You're saying that little man can control the weather?"

"I think the Canteada can do anything."

"They're men, Del... or something thereabouts. Just because he can scare away beasts doesn't mean he can actually change the weather."

"Of course not." She was strangely solemn. "No more than I can with my jivatma."

So much for a fair fight. "I don't understand your sword anymore than the Canteada, bascha, but I'm not certain even their magic can change the weather."

I peered up at thick dark clouds caught on the cliff to our left, rolling up to spill over its edge like bolts of crumpled, pearlescent silk. "If they could control it, wouldn't they? Why live in rain and cold?"

"To maintain the balance," she answered, ducking a hanging limb. "Here in the North, we believe there is a balance struck between heat and cold, good and bad, men and women. Opposites all, but important to one another. Without one, the other would fail."

"Oh, I don't know. Sometimes I think men would be better off without women."

Her mouth twisted a little. "For a while, probably. Of course, men don't live forever. Too stubborn. Too violent." Her expression was innocent. "Once you'd killed one another off, what would be left? A world without men or women."

"He's stopping," I said suddenly.

Del glanced around, then nodded. "We're very near their canyon. This way, Tiger."

The trees were very thick, branches so tangled I couldn't tell one from another. Trunks were striped from rain, gathering in crotches and broken knots until it spilled over edges. Mud and leaves balled on the soles of my boots. I followed in silence, still leading the stud, and hoped the homes of the Canteada were big

enough to house me.

We came, quite unexpectedly, face to face with the edge of the world. Out of trees into nothingness; the ground was no more than a sword blade, and I balanced on its edge, close to falling, until Del caught my arm and pulled me back.

"I forgot," she said.

"Forgot what?" I cried, stumbling back. "Forgot the world stopped just as I walked off the edge?"

Del signed. "It wasn't that bad, Tiger."

"Hoolies, woman--if I didn't know better I'd say you were trying to get me killed." I paused. "Maybe I don't know better; were you?"

"Hardly." Her tone was dry, but she didn't look at me. Then the tone changed into wistful admiration. "Oh, Tiger, isn't it beautiful?"

To her, undoubtedly; Del was raised on uplands, downlands, heights and sharp-carved canyons. She had suckled on wind and rain.

But not me. Not me. I looked out into nothingness and saw only an emptiness filled with clouds.

The world had ended. What lay before us was a canyon cut out of rock, but filled to choking on clouds. I could see little but the layers, cluttering up the other side as well as the distant bottom.

Beautiful. Maybe. But I wanted a little sun.

"How in hoolies do we get down from here?"

"Follow him down, Tiger. The songmaster's waiting for us."

So he was. Against the clouds, against the rain, he was nearly invisible. He flicked a hand and was gone, but I heard the thread of a whistle.

"Followsong, again?"

"You're catching on, Southron."

I went after the little man, wary of the hidden canyon. It would be incredibly easy to miss a step simply because clouds blurred the edge, creeping insidiously across the ground to merge earth and sky with themselves. They clung to trunks and earth, filling the spaces in between and lingering in the treetops.

"Gods," Del whispered behind me, "I'd forgotten how beautiful."

"He's gone again, bascha."

"That's what the followsong's for."

"I don't like it, Del."

"You don't like anything."

Hoolies. There was no sense in talking to her. She was sandsick, or maybe cloudsick; her loyalties had changed.

I kept walking, leading the stud, not looking at the cloudbank. It rolled and wisped and caressed, reaching out to touch my face. It made me want to shudder, but I didn't do it in front of Del.

Not that she could have seen; the clouds were like a shroud.

Even I'll admit it, the Canteada's followsong was incredibly compelling. I marched along, resolutely avoiding the edge of the canyon, and felt myself locked in place. As if I knew the way as well as I knew myself, which struck me as odd; who really knows himself? At any rate, I was caught. Which probably was just as well; when the ground suddenly sloped downward without warning, I didn't panic. I didn't even hesitate. I just kept on walking.

"Magic, huh, Del?" The ground continued to drop.

"He's taking us into the canyon."

"Is this the way you came out?"

"Yes. Only then there were no clouds; I could see the way easily."

I glanced back over my shoulder. Del was mostly blocked by the stud, who ambled between us, but I could see her walking steadfastly through the shreds. It looked like fog to me.

She smiled. Damp hair swung forward, slapping against her shoulders. She was as wet as I, but obviously less bothered. Her gait was smooth and unforced, conspicuously free of tension. She even hummed a little, echoing the lilting tune. Her face was alight with contentment.

Hoolies. I'm going to lose her.

Twenty-six

I could see next to nothing except my boots and maybe a foot in front of them.

Everything else was fog or clouds or some other conjured stuff.

"This is ridiculous," I muttered. "Here I am in a place I have no business being, following a little spit-colored man with blue fingernails who sings to show us the way." I let that sink in a minute. It didn't make any more sense aloud than it did in my mind. "Hoolies, I must be sandsick."

As if on cue, the clouds lifted entirely and we were done with climbing down, having reached the bottom at last.

I stopped so short the stud walked into me and banged his nose against my shoulder. But I didn't pay any attention, I didn't even move--except to turn my head--as Del caught up and slipped by me.

"What is this place?" I asked, though it was mostly of myself.

"The home of the Canteada."

She had stopped not far from me, turning to watch my astonishment. She was smiling, if only a little, pleased to see my reaction.

Well, it was an honest one. Now that the clouds had lifted I could see the canyon clearly, and what I saw was amazing.

The walls were very sheer, jutting straight up from the canyon floor. The stone was mostly gray, flecked with chips of black and white, but richer colors cascaded from top to bottom. The walls were sharply cut and pocked by massive natural shelves, as canyons often are, each hollowed shelf packed with moss and grass and dirt. But this canyon differed. Each shelf spilled a fall of flowers and vines, all tangled against the stone. Reds and blues and purples, dappled canary and copper and lime.

I looked up at the sky. Cloud/fog still blocked the sun, but had lifted out of the canyon, clogging higher ground. I couldn't see the top, where I had nearly walked off the edge of the world.

"Nice coverage," I remarked. "No wonder no one believes they really exist; they hide themselves down here."

"They have reason," Del said. "If they didn't, men would try to steal their magic, or make them use it for selfish reasons."

The canyon itself was fairly small. It was a trap-canyon much as the other had been, although larger, and as pocked with hollows and holes, including the flower-box shelves.

I glanced back up the path we'd come down. Was glad I hadn't seen it, buffered by fog and cloud. It was a narrow, switch-backed trail not much wider than a horse.

The followsong had stopped. The songmaster, or whatever he was, had disappeared.

But I was still aware of a quiet humming, a thread of a sound that was unobtrusive but still evident, like the buzz of bees on a summer day, though considerably more melodic.

"What's that noise?" I asked.

"Wardsong," Del told me. "Keeping the hounds at bay."

Someone shouted my name. I turned, frowning, and saw Cipriana popping free of a hole in the canyon wall like a stopper from a bottle. The hole also disgorged Massou, Adara and, eventually, Garrod.

Cipriana ran right up to me, making indications she wanted to hug me; I sort of slid out of it by pretending the stud was fractious and turned her enthusiasm aside. Del stood there smiling, half-amused, half-resigned, and didn't move to help, being disposed merely to watch.

Luckily, the stud picked that moment to be fractious, so my make-believe wasn't make-believe anymore, and I had to tend him closely to keep him under control. Massou said something nasty, rubbing the place on his shoulder where the stud had bitten him.

"Then stay back," I told him, half-distracted by the stud but also annoyed by the boy's continuing bad humor. "It's sort of obvious he doesn't like you; you may as well just accept that fact and leave him alone. Egging him on won't help."

Garrod stood behind Adara's left shoulder, pale braids hanging to his waist. His fair-skinned face was pinched as he watched me with the stud, and I recalled he had lost all of his mounts. I couldn't really blame him for resenting me for keeping mine.

The stud bared teeth, raised a threatening hind hoof, pinned tipped ears flat back. Brown eyes rolled; he was glaring at Adara.

I sighed, thumbing the lip away from my ear. "Look--let me get him settled and then we can talk. We have to decide what we're going to do."

"Go north," Cipriana said promptly. "Aren't you taking us to Kisiri?"

I shot a quick glance at Del. She masked her face as the girl spoke, but I saw the tension in her mouth. More delay, I knew, would not be tolerated.

"Like I said, let me get him settled. Is there a place I can put him?"

Massou shrugged. "The Canteada don't have horses."

"Well, then, I'll just stake him out. There's plenty of grazing here." I knew better than to ask Massou to find a good spot; the stud, provoked, would probably try to bite again.

"Let me." It was Garrod, moving out from behind Adara. "He's upset, and you are adding to the problem."

"Am I really? I think I know my own horse."

"Sometimes yes, sometimes no." Garrod put out a hand.

I considered it. Wondered if Garrod was the type of man who, having lost something, wanted others to lose it as well. He had ridden with Ajani, he might be a vengeful man.

"Tell you what," I said lightly, "let's both go."

Del pointed across the canyon to the hole. "We'll be there,"

I nodded, turning to lead the stud away. Garrod followed, watching the stud move with an attentive eye. I heard him click tongue against teeth in dismay as he saw the tears and teethmarks in hocks and flanks, the wounds on shoulders and belly.

"Hard-used," he muttered.

"No choice," I told him flatly. "If I'd stopped, they would have had him."

"As they had my horses." His tone hardened. "Except for the one she killed."

I stopped, unlooped the stake and picket rope, bent to push the stake into the ground. Stepped on it to anchor it. "She did it to try and save our lives," I said evenly, examining my weary horse. "And it did slow them. Maybe just enough to let Del get up the wall... but I guess you'd prefer that she had died."

Garrod's tone was bitter. "She accuses me of murder. Of killing families."

"You rode with Ajani."

"I sold horses to Ajani! Who is to say that's wrong? I am trying to make a living."

"So is Del," I said. "What's left of her life, that is."

Garrod watched me in strained silence as I bent, lifted a foreleg, used my knife to carefully cut away mud, inspected hoof and shoe. Braid beads rattled; he was shredding bits of hair.

"She says Ajani killed her kin."

"He did. He and his men."

"I was not there."

"But you do know Ajani," I set the hoof down, moved to the other foreleg.

"I have traded with him, yes. I don't kill people."

"But you provide horses to those who do." I cleaned the hoof, pried a stone loose. "And do you also buy from Ajani the horses he steals from families?"

Garrod was conspicuously silent.

I lowered the hoof, straightened, looked at him across the stud's back. "I think she is well within her rights to distrust and dislike you. You and men like you make Ajani's trade possible."

"And you?" he accused. "Are you better, either one of you? Hiring out your swords to whomever has money to buy you?" He spat at the ground. "How many men have you killed in the circle? How many men have given up their lives to you in the ritual of the dance? Does it make it pretty? Does it make it right? Does it make you feel powerful?" Pale eyes were angry, hard and cold as ice. "I have killed men in my life, men who have sought to cheat me or steal from me or have forced me into a fight. I am not Ajani; I don't kill or steal families. But neither am I you; I don't step into a circle and hold myself above the rights of other men, justified by a jivatma."

I had not for some time thought about my life. It was what I was and did: sword-dancer for hire. If you think about what you do and question why you do it, it gets in the way of things. It makes you wonder why you bother to live at all. And that's deadly in my profession.

I shook my head. "I'm sorry about your horses, but provoking me won't bring them back."

His face was tight. "I'm a horse-speaker; it matters. But that's not why I say this now. I say this now because I am accused of doing things I have never done, nor have a wish to do. I am not a murderer."

"She has reason," I repeated.

"To her way of thinking, no doubt; it's easy to justify. But I think she is warped. I think she is twisted and warped and misshapen, all bound up by a need for revenge that eats at her soul like a canker."

"Just because you two don't get along--"

He shook his head so violently the braids flopped against his chest. "I'm speaking of other things. I'm a horse-speaker. I know things of the emotions. Things of men's and women's emotions, which are not so different from horses,

when reduced to needs such as the one driving her." He paused, took a steadying breath, put out a hand and touched the stud. "I dismiss none of Ajani's actions; he is a ruthless, cold-hearted bastard. But she should look at her own actions. Is she so very different?"

I felt a flicker of anger. "If you'd survived the sort of hoolies she did--if you'd lived through what she did--"

--undoubtedly I would be warped as well." Garrod nodded. "But she did survive; she lived through Ajani's raid. Why let him triumph now by shaping her into a woman who has no kindness, no mercy; a blade without a name?"

I frowned. "What?"

"Blade without a name," he repeated. "A thing of Staal-Ysta." His mouth twisted a little. "Ask her," he said. "Ask her if she's a blade without a name. Ask her if her song has an ending."

I shook my head. "You're not making any sense."

"No? Ask her. Ask her what I have said. And tell her--" He paused. "Tell her even an upland horse-speaker has heard of Staal-Ysta, and the honor codes of the voca."

I sighed. "Garrod--"

He cut me off with a shake of his head. "No more of this, sword-dancer. Go and see your woman. Let me tend your horse. It is something I can do."

Eventually, I let him, and went to see my woman.

No, not mine; I went to see Delilah.

Twenty-seven

In the South, I'm used to ducking down to enter low doors because I'm taller than most Southroners. In the North, where men are routinely as tall as I am, I don't have to do it as much. This time, though, I did. I nearly had to crawl.

The canyon walls, I discovered, were honeycombed with holes. The largest ones were at the very bottom, half-buried in the ground to form an arched opening.

This, in turn, formed half-tunnels into the rock, which led into bigger caves.

It was a unique way of living, but I wasn't thrilled by it.

I bent down outside the hole. "Del?" It echoed into darkness.

I waited. No answer. So, sighing, I bent down very low and ducked into the opening.

Not a lot better here. I couldn't stand up straight. "Hoolies, I feel like an old man."

The tunnel extended farther on. I pushed my way through, bumping head and scraping shoulders, twisted sideways, pulled free, discovered the tunnel ceiling was higher here. But the side walls were hardly wider than my shoulders.

It hit me then. Sweat broke out, and trembling, and I tasted the metallic flavor of fear in my mouth.

The walls closed in, and suddenly I was back in Aladar's mine. No chains weighed me down, but recollections did. And they were all incredibly clear.

The tanzeer had robbed me of months. The months had robbed me of me.

Oh, hoolies, will I never forget?

Forcibly, I collected myself. Looked ahead at the tunnel, knowing Del was not so far. And managed to go on.

"Little men," I muttered. "Little men build little homes."

I walked on carefully in muted illumination that filtered in from the canyon behind me. The walls were gray but glittery, catching some of the light. The passage itself was short, for which I was thankful, and opened rather abruptly into another archway. Beyond, the light was quite good.

Shadows stroked the archway. Del's head appeared. "This way," she said. "Watch out for your head."

I grunted, bent, climbed through. And stopped to gawk, for the cave was more like a cavern.

Candlelight. Lanterns. Bright bits of glass and polished metal. I saw beakers, amphorae, cups, bowls, platters, all made of polished metal. Not silver, not copper, not gold. Not anything I'd seen.

I squinted. The motion of my entrance caused the candleflames to gutter, throwing back glints of light. "Some house, bascha."

"This is the songmaster's home," Del said. "He's hosting us for the night."

I glanced around. There were rugs and blankets, leather furniture, wooden flutes and pipes, other things made of reeds or carved from gourds. Even some made of mud with finger holes carved in hollow bellies, or small drums with heads stretched tight.

I spread inquisitive hands. "Well--where is he? I haven't seen any of these Canteada since I reached the bottom."

"Songcircle," Del answered. "Everyone meets to discuss things; I think they're discussing us."

"Private, I take it."

"Very."

I had not expected privacy in the cave, much as I wanted it, which was just as

well. Already Adara and Cipriana were rising to make me welcome. The ceiling arched high overhead, swept down to meet the floor. Someone had painted the walls with muted pigments: melon, magenta and teal, offset with a trace of lilac. The patterns flowed together like the runes on Del's sword, line after fluid line, knot after tangled knot. Enough to confuse the eye.

Del saw my frown of incomprehension. "Music," she said, smiling. "I can tell you more later; right now we should discuss what lies ahead."

Cipriana stood very close to me. "We'll go on, won't we?" she asked. "Go on to Kisiri?"

"No horses," Massou said, staying behind in a tangle of blankets.

His sister shrugged and tossed back loose blonde hair. "Garrod can get us horses."

"Maybe," I said, "maybe not. Things are different, now."

In the glow of candles and lanterns, Adara's hair was bronze. "How different?" she asked. "Will you forsake us after this?"

Oh, hoolies. Now we were forsaking.

Del's tone was carefully neutral. "Tiger and I must go on."

"No!" It was Massou, tearing free of his blankets to run and catch Del's hand.

"You can't leave us behind!"

She didn't try to disengage, but I saw the tension in her stance. "We have to go on," she repeated. "Time is running out. Tiger and I must take a shorter route through the Heights. Kisiri will be out of our way." The cave squashed voices and flattened tones. It made her sound harsher than ever.

"You're just jealous," Cipriana accused. "You're just afraid he'll decide he wants me instead of you."

Visibly, Del collected her patience. "No man owns a woman; no woman owns a man.

Tiger does as he pleases."

Cipriana was adamant. "And if it pleased him to take me?"

Oh, hoolies. Gods keep me from jealous women!

Still, I felt a flicker of deep-seated pleasure. Del, Cipriana, Adara. Three women for one man, and all of them willing women.

Then again, maybe two. Del was still loki-spooked.

Which, rather abruptly, made me testy. "Enough," I said shortly. "Sit down and we'll hash this out." They sat, even Del, taking places on pelts and rugs. I remained standing, avoiding commitment entirely. "We are guests for the night of these people. Come morning we'll leave the canyon." I thought briefly of the hounds, clustering in clouds to wait at the edge of the world. "We have one horse: mine; Del and I will ride him."

"What about us?" Massou asked, staring steadfastly at Del.

She, in turn, looked straight at Adara. "Your mother should have told you. Your mother should have made it clear. You three are bound for Kisiri. Tiger and I are not."

"But you can't leave us!" That from Cipriana. "How can you leave us? How can you desert us? What are we to do?"

This was not the girl who had proved such a staunch foe against the loki. This was an entirely different girl. I didn't like this one.

"You'll do what you intended to do even after you buried your father," I said firmly. "You'll go on."

"Alone!" Tears glittered in her eyes. "Two women and a boy, without a wagon, without a horse... without even supplies!"

"Del and I will talk with the Canteada. They may know a solution." I turned

toward the tunnel, thrusting out a delaying hand. "We'll go talk to them now.

You stay here."

I ducked out before Cipriana could raise another objection. I felt Del coming behind me, locked in silence. It wasn't until we were completely out of the tunnels that I felt free again, sucking in lungfuls of cool, damp air. The day hadn't known much sun, but it was setting nonetheless. Shadows were deepening.

"She's frightened," Del said simply.

I grunted. "She's a pain in the rump."

"They're all frightened, Tiger. Even little Massou."

" 'Little Massou,' as you say, is as bad as his sister. In her own way, so is Adara." I scratched at stubbled scars. "I'll be glad to be rid of them."

"It's so easy for you, then? To turn your back on responsibility?"

I stared. "Hoolies, bascha, it's for your sake we have to leave them. Time is running out."

She turned away, waving a hand. "Never mind. Never mind. I shouldn't have said it. I'm just--oh, hoolies, I don't know. I'm just all twisted up." She leaned back against the canyon wall, next to the tunnel entrance.

I'd grinned as she used the Southron term. But it faded when I thought about Garrod's words. Warped, he'd said. Twisted and misshapen. And a canker eating her soul.

"Del--"

"Listen," she whispered. "Hear it?"

I blinked, cut off in mid-stride. Shut my mouth and listened. Frowned a little, then laughed. "It's Garrod," I said. "He's muttering to the stud."

"No, no--not Garrod. Listen to the song."

Song. All I heard was the same little humming melody Del had labeled a wardsong

sung to keep the hounds away. "I don't hear--"

"Listen, Tiger! Can't you hear anything?"

I sighed. "I've told you before, it's all noise to me. Yes, I hear something, Someone's out there tootling on a pipe. Maybe two pipes. Maybe ten. What does it matter, Del?"

Del lifted both hands and pressed the heels against her eyes, threading rigid fingers into hair. "I despair of you, Tiger! Gods, how I despair. What am I going to do? How can you be what you must? How can I go before the voca confident they'll accept my blood-gift?" She drew in a noisy breath, let it out; half sigh, half groan. "What am I going to do?"

Hoolies. I'd never heard her like this.

"Del. Bascha." I reached out to pull away her hands. "What are you talking about?"

Her fingers were limp in mine. Strain carved lines in her face. "I can't tell you."

"If you don't--"

"I can't."

"Del--"

"I can't."

It took all I had to stop asking. Instead, I turned the topic. "We could just light out of here on the stud come morning and head back down South. We could just forget all about this voca-thing and this blood-debt and blood-gift and all those other things that are driving you half loki." I smiled, liking the phrase, although all Del did was scowl. "We could just go back to being sword-dancers, knowing the freedom of the circle."

Del took her hands out of mine. "There is no freedom now. There are things I have to do."

Something welled up inside me, of realization and frustration, then abruptly burst free. "I think Garrod's right! I think Garrod understands you perfectly, maybe better than I do." I glared, "Hoolies, Del--do you ever stop to think about anything else? Anyone else? Do you ever stop to think there are other things in the world besides revenge and retribution?" Her face was still and white. "Do you even know what you're going to do once this voci-thing is over? Have you thought past anything but the trial?" I shook my head. "No. You're so locked into your course you give yourself no freedom to even think about anything else. You're like a horse who's been reined in so tightly all his life that even once he's given his head, he keeps his neck bowed snug. Partly because he's scared. But mostly because he can't make himself relax and become a horse again."

I have never seen such a mixture of emotions in a woman's face and eyes.

Hoolies, even in a man's. There was shock, pain and anger, disbelief, resentment, realization, and an odd, renewed resolve. I saw Delilah build a wall right in front of me, brick by brick by brick. Then she slapped the mortar in the cracks to make sure nothing could get through.

Once the wall was built, she reached for her deadliest weapon. "You love me," she said.

For a moment the words meant nothing. All I heard was the tone, made up of strange and confusing subtleties. She was angry, was Delilah, but it was a deadly, calm anger shaped of ice instead of heat, and an odd accusation.

I felt a little sick. Deep-in-the-gut sick.

Is this how it ends?

I drew in a slow, deep breath. "I ask you why--now, at this point, having done so much to make yourself a person instead of a woman--do you turn to a woman's weapon?"

It cracked the ice a little. Clearly I'd surprised her. "Weapon--"

"Weapon," I said firmly. "Now that it's out in the open, am I supposed to tuck my tail between my legs? Am I supposed to roll over in submission and bare my belly to you? Or is it meant mostly to castrate me, so I'll still be occasionally useful?"

Even her lips were bloodless. "Is that what you think it means?"

"I think that's what you think it means."

Del's breath was ragged. She covered her mouth with one hand. The other clutched the front of her wool tunic. "Tiger--" she said "--help me--"

Slowly I shook my head. "If you want me to hold you now, as if nothing has happened--no. Because something has happened. If you want me to reassure you and tell you everything's fine, everything's forgotten--no. Because everything is not fine. You have to learn that not everyone can afford to be as single-minded as you. Not everyone can hack off bits of himself because it makes the life he chose easier." I wanted to touch her; didn't. "Not everyone," I said quietly, "can force herself to be someone she isn't, even when her conscience tells her not to."

"Conscience--?"

"I've seen you with Massou. I've seen you with other children. Only with him and only with them have I seen the other Del."

"Other Del," she said bitterly. "That soft, kind-hearted fool... the sweet, gentle soul so many men desire their women to be."

"Some, yes. Maybe a lot. Down South, yes. And there are times when I wonder what life would be like if you were another kind of woman." I shrugged. "But I don't want to change you, Del. Not completely. Maybe just a little... maybe just enough so that horse can unbow his neck and be a horse again." Now I did touch her. I reached out and put a hand on her right shoulder, closing my fingers on the too-rigid tendons beneath her clothes. "I don't want you soft. But I don't want you this hard. It's tearing you apart."

Del was shaking, a little. "You don't know--you don't understand--you can't know what it's like--" She checked, shut her eyes a moment, dismissed the incoherence. "No man, especially a Southroner, can know how hard it is."

"No."

"No man can understand what it is to be a woman who doesn't belong because of her sex, and yet belongs because of her skill."

"No, bascha. He can't."

"No man can know what it's like to watch mother, father, uncles, aunts, sisters and brothers killed... and then be raped and humiliated, made to feel like a thing, stripped of name, of soul, of self--" She checked again, still shaking.

"You don't understand what it is," she said, "to know almost every man who sees you wants you--not you, not really you, just that body, because it pleases him... you don't know, Tiger, what it is to have men rape you with their eyes when they can't do it with their bodies... and then you go away and vomit."

It took all I had to speak. "No," I said, "I can't. But what I do know is that if you carry that guilt and grief forever, it'll make you into a monster. It'll strip you of humanity. You'll become Ajani's triumph."

Del's smile returned. "But I won't," she said in amusement. "I won't carry it forever. Only until I kill him. Until Ajani's dead."

In silence, not daring to speak, I stroked back a strand of pale hair. Thinking to myself: Oh, my poor Delilah... you have so much to learn.

Twenty-eight

I heard Garrod before I saw him because his braid beads rattled as he approached. I turned from Del, frowned a little, saw his expression matched mine.

"Your horse is upset," Garrod said.

I scratched stubble. "He told you that, I suppose."

"Not in so many words, no." Garrod was unamused, distracted by something else.

"But he is bothered by something here."

Del shook her head. "Tiger's stud is always bothered. It's part of his--" she paused, "--charm."

Garrod shrugged. "I can't say what he's like the rest of the time, but something has made him uneasy for now. He wants to leave this place."

"Oh, I see." I nodded sagely. "What I don't understand is, if he tells you this much, why doesn't he tell you why?"

The horse-speaker sighed. "It would be easier if you respected my profession as much as I respect yours."

"Horse stealing is not necessarily the sort of profession anyone respects," I retorted.

"I'm not a--"

"Are you not?" Del interrupted. "No, perhaps not--you only accept the horses other people steal."

Garrod answered her in a dialect I didn't know at all. But whatever he said went home, because I saw Del's color go bad again. She answered sharply, and her fingers twitched as if she meant to draw her sword.

"Now, wait--" I began, and then suddenly the others were among us.

Adara's green eyes glinted. "Are they going to fight?"

"No," I told her flatly.

"Are you going to fight?"

"None of us is going to fight, and I thought I told all of you to wait in the cave while Del and I talk to the Canteada."

Cipriana shrugged ingenuously. "We heard you arguing."

Massou's blue eyes were wide beneath a shock of ragged blond hair. "We had to come out," he said.

Del's patience quite clearly was at an end. "This is private," she snapped.

"This is private, and requires none of your attention. Has no one taught you manners? Has no one taught you respect?"

Massou's fingers plucked at her arm. "Are you going to invite the horse-speaker into a circle?"

Bloodthirsty little brat. "No," I said, "she's not. But even if she were, it's none of your concern."

Massou glared at me. "I was asking her."

Rude little brat, too. "I think it would be best--"

In the distance, the stud nickered uneasily.

"See?" Garrod asked.

Massou gazed at Del. "I think you should fight him."

"I don't." Her tone was very clipped. "I think we should recall where we are. I think we should mend our manners. I think--" She broke it off. "It doesn't matter what I think." Abruptly, she turned and left.

"Angry," Adara said.

Cipriana nodded. "Lately, Del is always angry. Angry deep inside."

"And frightened," agreed Massou. "I can feel her fear."

It was, I thought, an altogether unnecessary conversation, and quickly going nowhere. "What Del is, is tired of playing herd dog to your flock of sheep," I told them bluntly. "We have business of our own, serious business, and you've slowed us down. We're running out of time; Del has that to think of."

"What about us?" Massou demanded. "Are you just going to leave us here?"

"No." I gritted it out between my teeth. "I wouldn't do that to the Canteada."

Garrod laughed softly, said something in uplander, then bent down and entered the tunnel. Leaving us to our argument.

I tried to step around them all, but Cipriana was in the way. "Are you going after her?"

"Cip--"

"Are you?" She moved closer. "Do you always trail after her like a dog who's been abused, but comes back begging for more?" Closer yet. "You shouldn't. You shouldn't. You don't need her, Tiger. You don't need a woman like that; a woman hard and harsh and unfeeling, who'd just as soon stick you with her sword as give you a kind word. You don't need--"

"What I need is some time to myself," I told her, setting her firmly out of the way. "What I need is a little peace of mind, so I have a chance to think."

"Tiger--"

I looked over the daughter's head to the mother. "Isn't it time you took a hand in this? Your daughter has been running after me like a bitch in heat. You're her mother--do something!"

Adara's ruddy hair still lay tangled on her shoulders. "What am I to do? She is grown, she is a woman; it's her choice to make."

"Just as you made yours--and Kesar's for him." I nodded. "Well, then, perhaps you should both know that I'm not about to give up sword-dancing just for the sake of a woman. Not for any woman."

Massou's eyes were oddly bright. "Not even for Del?" he asked.

Hoolies, spare me the questions of little boys... and the attentions of sisters and mothers.

"I'm going to speak to the Canteada," I said firmly. "Stay here. Stay here. Do you understand?"

Cipriana folded her arms. "There you go, chasing... but it's all right when you do it."

"That all depends," I said, "on whether the other person desires your company."

Adara's tone was quiet. "Is that why Del won't share your bed?"

Oh, hoolies--

I turned and stalked away.

Del stood in the shadows with the little Canteada, the one she'd called a songmaster. I marveled all over again at the pale, translucent skin, the feathery cap of down with its eloquently mobile crest, the fragile limbs and heavy chest. His throat, at rest, appeared normal, but when speaking--no, singing--it blew in and out like a frog's.

Her face was very solemn. "They are concerned," she told me. "He says there is discord here, grave discord, and it's affecting the lifesong."

"The what?"

"Lifesong," she repeated. "The way they conduct their lives."

I sighed wearily. "Song this, song that ..." I saw her face. "All right, Del, no more jokes. Does he say why there is discord?"

She looked troubled. "We are alien to them, like dissonance in pure melody. We kill living beings. It causes disharmony."

I smiled. "One way of putting it. But the only thing we've killed lately are those hounds."

She shook her head, shaking loose hair as well; it had dried in waves. "Doesn't matter. To the Canteada, all living things are deserving of honor and respect.

All living things, Tiger. It's why they only eat what they grow, not kill, or what the land provides. It's the lifesong, Tiger... an endless cycle of living in harmony with the world."

"They never kill?" It seemed impossible to imagine. "They go through their entire lives without killing anything?"

Del nodded. "Canteada have great reverence for life. Any life. Even that of a biting gnat."

"Those hounds aren't exactly gnats--"

"No. And the songmaster understands that, which is why he shaped the wardsong and gave it to others to sing. But he insists that while we remain here, we kill or injure nothing."

"Not even a gnat."

"Not even a gnat."

"What about a--"

"Nothing at all, Tiger."

I grunted. "What if we were attacked? We'd have to defend ourselves."

Del smiled. "Nothing will harm us here. This is a place of peace."

"Peace, schmeace," I said. "I respect their customs, but I don't believe in all this wardsong stuff. If any of those hounds come down from the trees, I'll be doing my best to stop them."

"This is also a place of power," she warned. "Don't discount these people."

I was tired. "No. All right. I won't. Now can we get a little rest? Maybe something to eat?"

Del bowed to the little man. "Sulhaya, songmaster. We accept your hospitality."

His throat inflated. *Dreamsong offers rest/Healsong offers renewal.*

I looked at Del. "What?"

"They'll sing you to sleep, Tiger. They'll sing us all to sleep." Del touched my arm. "Come on, let's go back. We all need food and rest."

We turned even as the little Canteada melted away, but I was brought up short. I'd expected the canyon to be little more than a pocket of darkness now that the sun was gone, but I'd reckoned without the efficiency of the people who lived in it. Every entrance, chimney, crack and airhole was bright with candlelight, which lent the canyon a smoky, muted luminescence. Stone walls glowed like a Southron funeral circle, where sword-dancers with candles gather to give the greatest of the shodos passage to valhail.

I looked around. I could still hear the lilting tone that kept the hounds away.

"Don't they ever get tired of singing?"

"Do you get tired of breathing?"

"There's a difference, bascha. I have to breathe."

"As much as they have to sing." I felt cool fingers slide through mine. "When I was little, my mother used to sing me to sleep. And then Jamail, when he was

born; probably my brothers before me. And my father would hum when he honed the swords." She sighed, looking at the lights that danced in walls. "I can't remember the first time I heard about the Canteada. I just seemed always to know, like everyone else. But the story goes that before the gods made the Canteada, there was no music in the world. And people were sad, not knowing what they lacked, but knowing they weren't whole." Her fingers tightened slightly.

"And so the gods made the Canteada, and the Canteada made music."

I let it sink in; there'd been no singing in my family, because I'd had no family. Only a bed with the goats. "Nice story," I said finally, "if a little hard to believe."

"Let's walk." Del tugged on my fingers. "Do you remember all those patterns on the walls of the song-master's cave? All those lines and knots?"

"I remember." We walked in candleglow. It was cool but not cold, although without my Northern wools and leathers I might feel differently. I was beginning to appreciate them.

"Well, those knots are notes. The line patterns are the flow of the song. Together it makes music,"

I grunted. "Seems awfully complicated."

"It can be. But you don't have to read it, unless you mean to sing or play what's been sung or played before. You can just make it up as you go, or put it away in your head for singing another time." She smiled a little. "It's one of the things an ishtoya is required to learn."

"Along with languages, mathematics and geography."

"Yes. And, of course, the dance."

Ah, yes, the dance. The thing we both lived for. "I think I prefer it less

complicated. No song required."

Her fingers stiffened a little. "But in the North it is required."

I lifted one shoulder. "Fine for you, bascha. But I don't have to worry about it; all I have to do is dance."

"But listen to it, Tiger... listen to the song...."

I listened to the song. Heard the rise and fall of the melody, the mingling of many voices. Or whatever the Canteada used to make their music.

"Nice enough," I said grudgingly, "if a little monotonous after a while."

"It's a wardsong, Tiger... shaped to keep out hounds, not entertain human ears."

I grunted. "It would take something to entertain my ears."

Del sighed. We walked side by side, fingers laced, but only slackly, insisting on nothing. Neither of us is much for pronounced displays of affection, mostly because it's a very private thing. But also because I think both of us are reluctant to use the silent language of bedmates, for fear of giving away too much. Of ourselves as well as to others.

"Do you ever just get tired?"

Her tone was odd. I glanced at her curiously. "Tired?--well, yes... just like anyone else."

"No. I mean tired. Tired of who you are... tired of what you do."

I didn't answer at once. We continued walking, going nowhere in particular, just meandering through the canyon's candleglow. Ahead, the stud whickered; we were near the songmaster's cave.

Finally, I answered. "I think they're one and the same."

Del glanced at me sharply.

I shrugged, made uncomfortable by the turn of the conversation. "I mean--sword-dancing is what I do, but it's also what I am." I spread my free

hand. "Sword-dancing is more than a job. It's also a way of life."

"Not for everyone," she said. "Not for Alric, with his wife and two little girls." She paused, smiling. "Maybe three by now, or even a little boy; Lena was overdue."

I hadn't thought of Alric in months. The big Northerner had proved helpful to us both down South, although at first I'd distrusted him. He was a sword-dancer, Northern-trained, but didn't claim Del's skill or rank. Nor did he have a jivatma, using a Southron blade instead.

I shook my head. "It's not the sort of life a man should have if he keeps a woman."

Del smiled. "I suppose you'd rather stay at home while she tends you, the cookfire and babies... or maybe you'd rather be in bed trying to make those babies."

"Maybe," I agreed. "It's better than celibacy." I cast her a meaningful glance.

"Well, then? What about you? Fair is fair, bascha... what happens a year or two from now? Do you start making babies?"

Del's smile faded. Her expression turned pensive. "You said a man shouldn't be a sword-dancer if he has a woman. Perhaps you're right; it would be difficult for the woman to know how much her man risks each time he steps into the circle."

She sighed, stroking back pale hair. "And so I ask myself: What sort of parent would I be? What sort of mother would I be if I risked myself in the circle?"

"But you have a choice," I told her. "You don't have to be a sword-dancer... once you start having babies, there'll be other things to do. The children will keep you busy."

Del's mouth hooked down. "And there it is, Tiger... a man does what he wants,

even after siring children, A woman must be a mother."

I frowned, puzzled. "Isn't it what you'd want?"

Del looked straight at me. "Not every woman wants children."

"But it seems a natural thing--"

"Does it?" Her tone was inflexible. "Is that why your mother left you in the desert?"

Something pinched deep in my belly. I felt a little sick.

Del's fingers tightened. "Maybe she had no choice. Maybe she was ill. Maybe you were ill, and she thought you'd already died. Maybe--"

"Maybe not," I said dully. "Maybe it's like you said: she simply didn't want me."

Del stopped walking abruptly and raised my hand to her lips. "I want you," she said.

Twenty-nine

It was the stud who warned us, although we weren't paying much attention, being rather engrossed in something other than listening to horses. And then, suddenly, they were here, and we were no longer alone.

Adara's hand was on my shoulder, pulling me away even as Massou slipped between Del and I. "So long--" she said. "So long--"

"Now, wait just a--"

Cipriana grasped my right arm. "You don't know how it is. You don't know how it is."

I heard Del say something to Massou in a questioning tone, although the words themselves were lost beneath Adara and Cipriana. Massou didn't answer. He just hung on to both her wrists.

"What in hoolies--?" I tried to twist free of them, found I couldn't. Found they weren't about to let me.

"So long--" Adara whispered.

"Me first," her daughter said.

"Power," Adara hissed. "Power in flesh, power in steel--"

"Get off--" But they weren't about to--

"Tiger!" It was Del, sounding uncommonly afraid. "Oh, Tiger--loki--"

No. It couldn't be possible. Loki? Adara and Cipriana? Especially Massou; it was impossible.

But it wasn't. And I knew it; it all came together.

"Hoolies--"

I tried ripping away, shouting at Del to do the same. I couldn't see much, being engulfed by two determined loki masquerading as women, and poor light to boot.

All I knew was they were both incredibly strong, both incredibly forceful, and if I wasn't careful they'd have me spread-eagled on the ground before I could say my name.

"Del--?" I wrenched my head around, trying to see her. Saw Massou pushing her back, pushing her back, until she smacked against the wall so hard her head rapped rock. I heard the scrape of her sword hilt. And then I saw Massou, who was no longer Massou.

"Tiger--Tiger--"

Hoolies, I've never heard her sound so frightened. I tried again to wrench free,

but Adara and Cipriana were too much for me. I felt hands digging into belly, into abdomen; lower, between my thighs.

Adara: "--power in flesh--"

Cipriana: "--power in steel--"

Hoolies, they were undoing the tie-string of my trews!

Del began to scream.

I thought: If I can get my sword free--But knew I couldn't. I was flat on my back on my sheath; the sword was lost to me.

Cipriana bent down, tongued my cheek, traced out the scars. Something rattled against my teeth: the necklet of lumpy stones.

And then I recognized it. Reddish, irregular stones strung on a thin leather thong. She had shown it to me once before, no doubt flaunting it in challenge, and I hadn't recognized it. Now I did. Now I knew it was the necklet Del had made for her mother years before, thrown into the circle of stones as an offering to the loki in hopes it would be enough.

Obviously, it hadn't.

They weren't women. Not exactly. More. Demons in women's bodies, using a woman's wiles and a demon's strength. One was more than enough. Two would be my death.

Or whatever was left over when they were done with me.

Del still screamed. Massou, who wasn't Massou, had forced her to the ground. I writhed, twisted, rolled; saw only snatches, because the women were too strong.

Del, like me, was on her back, spitting and kicking and clawing and screaming, but clearly losing the battle. Massou, who wasn't Massou, was dragging her legs apart.

But he's a boy, I said inwardly, even though he was not. There was no boy left, only a thing flowing out of mouth and nose and ears. Something much bigger than

a boy. Bigger even than me.

There was nothing left to fight. Del's enemy had changed, but was using a man's tactics. The ones a conqueror always uses to subdue a proud woman.

Hoolies, not again--

I tried spitting: Cipriana laughed. I tried biting: Adara smiled. I tried kicking and clawing, too, but nothing had any effect.

Del was sobbing now.

Adara's hand was where it shouldn't be. Cipriana licked my face, thrusting her tongue into my mouth. I felt the pinching in my belly and the acrid tang of bile climbing into the back of my throat.

Hoolies, not like this--

No. Not like this. Because something was happening.

A sound. A thin thread of a sound. Not a sword, not a knife, but a needle, thrust into an ear. I felt nothing, but something was there. Something inside my head, piercing into my brain.

Vision flickered. I smelled something foul. Tasted it, too, though I had swallowed nothing. My hearing wavered, then intensified, even as the shrill sound did.

And then I knew what it was.

Gods bless the Canteada.

Hands fell away from me. Bodies retreated, driven back by the song, and so did the demons, trapped in human, alien flesh.

I sat up. Adara, Cipriana and Massou stood stock still, hands clapped over their ears. Their faces were formed of pain.

"Del." I crawled to her, put a hand on her, felt her flesh contract. She lay

face down in the dirt. "Del--"

And then, awkwardly, she was up. Up and scrambling away, scraping on buttocks and hands, thrusting herself away. She scabbled across the dirt until she backed herself up against the stone wall, and there she sat, all jammed up against the stone as if she wanted to crawl inside it.

"Del," I said. "Bascha--" But I broke it off because clearly she wasn't listening.

Hoolies, but it is a frightening thing to look into the face of madness.

Oh, bascha, not you.

Behind me, the loki stood trapped while the Canteada sang.

Oh, bascha, look at me, not at them.

She had driven fingers into the stone. She keeps her nails filed short, but one by one I saw them break, snapping against the rock.

I knew better than to touch her.

Behind me, the loki whimpered.

"Delilah." I said it quietly, with as much command as I could muster.

She looked at me. Blankly, but at me, which was a distinct improvement.

"Delilah," I said again.

Lips moved. Bitten, bloodied lips, already swelling. Shaping something I couldn't hear.

Very gently, a third time: "Delilah."

She stared back at me. She saw me. Sense came back into eyes, looseness to her limbs, purpose to her movements.

Del was Del again, but now she was angry.

Dirt coated her face. I saw spittle on her chin, and blood. Hair straggled into her eyes, stuck itself in sweat and tears and blood. She shook so hard she could

barely stand, yet she did, and managed to draw the sword.

Given time, even in her condition, she would have killed the bodies, the shells that housed the loki. But she was not given time because the Canteada took it.

They took it, remade it, gave it back, in a song of surpassing strength.

It completely swallowed the thread of Del's wailing chant, the warchant, the deathsong, the sound that promised an ending. Swallowed it, chewed it, spat it out upon the ground. Seeing it, Del broke off, beginning to tremble again.

I wanted to touch her but didn't, knowing she wasn't ready. Knowing the woman before me was not the Del I knew, but Delilah, the girl Ajani had nearly destroyed on the threshold of her life. She had crossed that threshold eventually, but it was warped, planed of hatred and vengeance. She might have died--women did--but didn't, being Del, who gave no man a victory he hadn't fairly earned. Ajani hadn't earned it. He'd only stolen it briefly, and then she had won it back.

Del stared at Massou, Cipriana, Adara. At the loki in human form, who had somehow replaced human mind with loki guile, human desires with loki needs. At the woman, the girl, the boy, who had, somewhere on the journey, lost the battle to three loki I had unknowingly freed.

Doors and cracks and chimneys glowed, painted with firelight. Beyond the loki, in the darkness, I saw shadows moving. Small, pale shadows, singing the binding song.

They came from everywhere, the Canteada. Out of and down the walls, carrying candles, creeping forward to form a circle. Even behind Del and me, coming forward, moving us inward, to be clustered within the circle.

The loki made sounds of distress.

It was cold. In darkness blushed with candleflame, I saw my breath plume forth.

But the shiver that racked my body came from within, not without.

The loki in human form were more than merely human. I saw madness in their faces, and desperation, and despair. Bound by the song, all they could do was suffer. As much, maybe, as the human hosts had suffered.

The circle closed. There was flame and song and faces, uncanny, inhuman faces.

Feathery crests stood up from brow to neck, rippling, tinged with firelight, speaking a language all its own. I'd seen only the songmaster. Now I saw the others. Now I heard them sing.

I am not a man much touched by music, being deaf to its intricacies. I've said it before: it's noise, no matter the intent. But this time, this time, it was far more than noise. Far more than song. The sound I heard was power.

Legs gave out; I sat. Even as others sat; as Del collapsed beside me, loose-limbed, rubbery, dropping the sword beside her, awkward in the sudden loss of muscular control. The loki also; I saw them, one by one, turned into lumps of flesh like clay, waiting to be formed. Waiting to be shaped.

I opened my mouth to speak. To say something to Del; to ask her what it meant, what they would do, what they wanted of us. She was Northern; surely she knew.

But I asked nothing because I couldn't. Because the song had become my world.

Flame melted, ran together, made the circle whole. I saw light, only light, and then even that was too much to bear. There was only one thing to do, and I did it. I ran away from it.

Trouble was, it came with me. Just like the song.

Birthsong? someone asked.

Birthsong. Birthsong? Blankly, I stared into the light.

A pause. *Birthname?*

Birthname. The meaning was different. Shaped to make sense to me.

I frowned. Thought about it. Realized I had no answer.

A mother or father names a child. I'd known neither one. Which meant I had no birthname.

Barely, I shook my head.

The song changed a little. *Birthname* it insisted.

The songmaster? I wondered. Again, I shook my head.

The song grew insistent. It was unbearable. I felt pressure inside my skull.

And then, suddenly, a cessation of discomfort. I felt a trace of surprise that had nothing to do with me.

Callname? it asked gently.

That one I could answer. "Sandtiger," I said.

The song lingered in my head. Searched for truth or falsehood. Found the answer, then told me to withdraw.

Withdraw. I frowned. Stared into flame. Then knew I was meant to walk through it.

I stood up. Drew in a breath. Walked slowly out of the circle.

I sagged against the canyon wall, conscious only of exhaustion in mind and body.

No longer did I doubt what Del had said about the magic in their music. It had gone into my soul, and now I understood it.

I turned. Beyond the light sat Del, staring, as I had, into the ring of flame.

The light was stark on her face, and harsh, limning lines of exhaustion and tension. I saw blood and bruises and dirt, and an endurance almost destroyed.

Del was close to breaking.

I wanted to go to her. I wanted to go back into the circle and touch her and

lead her out through the flame, through the song, through the circle of Canteada. But I knew better. This time, I knew better than to ignore the existence of power.

Now it was Del's turn.

Birthname? the songmaster asked.

She stared into the flame.

More gently, it was repeated.

"Del," the sword-dancer answered.

Birthname, he insisted.

"Delilah," the woman whispered.

I waited until she was free of the circle, blinded by light and tears, and then

I took her hand, led her forth, brought her to stand with me. Saying nothing,

asking nothing, merely being there. Hoping it was enough.

The song swelled. I heard dissonance in it, and harshness. An underlying demand.

The songmaster was inflexible as he asked birthnames of the others.

One by one, he asked them. Adara. Cipriana. Massou.

One by one, they lied.

The song intensified. I saw dozens of throats swelling forth, threatening to

burst. I heard the high melodic wailing, the deep thrumming hum, the mid-range

staccato whirring. I heard the power in the song, and knew the loki could never

withstand it.

Nothing could withstand it.

Massou broke first. "Shedu!" he screamed. "Shedu, Shedu, Shedu!"

The songmaster asked again.

"Shedu!" he screamed, in a voice too deep for his throat.

I looked at the boy, Massou. Who wasn't Massou any longer. Whose name was Shedu

instead.

Adara's turn. As had Shedu/Massou, she broke beneath the song. "Daeva," the woman whispered. I saw anger in her eyes, and helplessness and despair. "Daeva," she said again, grinding teeth into lips. Blood flowed down her chin. "Daeva!" she cried, and it echoed in the canyon.

Lastly, I looked at Cipriana. Slender, upright Cipriana: flirtatious, demanding Cipriana, who had reminded me of Del. Who had done her best to seduce me. Who now repulsed the song with every ounce of her strength.

The question was asked.

"Cipriana," she answered.

The question was asked again.

"Cipriana!" she snapped.

Yet a third time it was asked.

Pale hair stood up from her head. Rigid arms thrust into the air. "Cipriana!" she cried.

I took a step forward. Del held me back. In silence, she shook her head.

I waited. The song didn't waver, didn't break. The songmaster asked again.

The air crackled within the circle. I saw frenzy in her eyes, and hatred and anger and fear, "Cip--Cip--Cip--" She stopped. Renewed her attack upon the name.

I saw her features writhe. Heard the song intensify.

Birthname came the command.

Lips peeled back from her teeth. The name was expelled from her mouth, hissing as it left. "Rakshasa," she said, sounding more snake than human.

"Rakshasa--Rakshasa--" Almost as soon as she said it, the crackle died out of the air. Hair settled back against shoulders, hands flopped down at her sides.

"Rakshasa," she said, but it was a final defiance.

Shedu. Daeva. Rakshasa. I didn't know the names, but Del clearly did.

"Bind them," she said, "bind them. Set the stones around them. Sing them into a captivity no one can ever break."

Inwardly, I winced, recalling how I'd freed them.

"Sing it," Del said, "sing it--" She broke off, pressed a hand over her mouth, bit into her hand.

The song altered. I heard the change, subtle as it was, and knew Del had her wish. Especially as each Canteada forming the circle bent slowly, placed an object against the ground, straightened again. Still holding the candles. Still singing the song.

The objects were stones. Round, smooth stones, carved in runic patterns like the ones I'd seen on the songmaster's walls. Wardstones, then, like the ones I'd seen on the hilltop. Like the one I'd kicked aside, breaking open the circle. Setting the loki free.

Something thumped me in the gut. From inside, not out; I recalled, suddenly, the day Massou and Cipriana had given up their lessons. The day each of them had declared they had no more interest in the sword-dance. No interest in the circle.

Now they were trapped in one, as they'd been before.

"Del," I said, "what about the others? What about Adara and the children? Are they dead?"

Behind sweat-dried hair, pale brows meshed. "I don't know," she answered, troubled. "Their bodies live, but the loki inhabit them. You can't have one without the other."

"Can't the loki be driven out? They didn't have bodies before."

Slowly, she shook her head. "I just don't know."

I looked at the loki. No, I looked at the woman and her children. And I knew beyond a doubt the Borderers still lived. Somewhere inside where the loki couldn't reach them lived the spirits that had made a widow and her children continue an impossible journey without the aid of a man.

"Let's see," I suggested, and we went to the songmaster. He wasn't part of the circle. He wasn't singing the song. He had shaped it; his task was to give it to others.

"Songmaster," I said, "there is something left to be done. Those names you heard before--those are the names of real people. Those are the names of a woman and her children. Names that deserve to survive."

His crest trembled, stilled. *Bindsong binds.*

"Yes," Del said, "we know. But the loki have named their true names, reclaiming them; they have freed the other names. The power has been dispersed. Can't the woman and her children reclaim their names?"

The Canteada frowned.

I wet dry lips. "You are the songmaster," I said. "Surely you can shape a song that will give them back their freedom."

His expression was troubled. *Dreamsong powerful*

I looked at familiar faces that had loki living behind them. "I think it's worth the risk."

Like me, he looked at them. And then he fluttered delicate fingers, indicating the entrance to his cave. There was command in the gesture that I didn't dare deny.

"Bascha," I said, "let's go."

She was already running.

Thirty

Garrod stood before the entrance tunnel to the song-master's cave. I saw his expression of baffled curiosity as well as stunned incomprehension. Del brushed by him quickly, hardly noticing him, and ducked into the arched doorway. Garrod moved aside, then swung back to face me.

"I heard screaming," he said. "Screaming--and singing--"

"Not now," I said curtly, waving his words away. Like Del, I brushed by him, but this time he followed us in.

The tunnel was incredibly confining. I wanted nothing more than to be free of the weight of stone and out in the open again, in the desert, beneath the Southron sky. But I knew, deep in my gut, now was the time for hiding.

Free of the tunnel at last, I entered the songmaster's cave. I was dazzled once again by the brilliance of light glinting off metal and glass, the lush richness of rugs. Painted knots and patterns made the walls into more than stone.

"Del--" But there was nothing left to say. I saw her face as she sat huddled against the wall, taut-wrapped in a blue-gray blanket. I saw the dirt and blood and tension, but mostly I saw the fear.

So did Garrod. "What is it?" she asked sharply, but by then it was too late for either of us to answer because the Canteada sang.

It staggered me. Physically, it staggered me, sending me reeling against the wall. Left shoulder met it, scraped wool and leather, rang sword hilt against

the stone. I hung there a moment, in shock, then slid down upon my knees.

Not knowing music, nor paying much attention, I'd never understood what harmony

was. But now, hearing the full-throated singing of the Canteada, I understood.

All the voices blended together, swooped upward, downward, tangled, drew apart;

slurred through incredible ranges of notes, high and low and in between,

blurring the sounds, but delicately, so that the ear heard the differences but

couldn't really identify any of them.

Hoolies, what glorious sound!

And then it altered. No longer was it sound, but much more. It wasn't even a

song. It was the music of memories, dragged angrily out of the soul. Music that

slid into the cracks of my life and rediscovered all the nightmares I'd tried to

forget.

Some of them, I had. But now I remembered them all.

--a boy, maybe six, green-eyed and brown-haired, sprawling facedown with a mouth

full of sand. Trying not to cry as the shukar applies the lash in punishment for

heresy: I'd said there were no gods, because why else would I be a slave?

Such questions are not tolerated any more than heresy is.

--now twelve, being beaten yet again, this time by a father for looking too long

and longingly at his daughter. The girl has teased him into it, but now claims

innocence, tears streaming down her face. But behind the tears she smiles.

Behind the blood, he doesn't.

--now a young man at fifteen, larger on the outside than most of the men but

made tiny inside by ridicule and humiliation. Hands and feet promise further

physical growth; Salset treatment promises continued spiritual shrinkage.

Until he makes hatred his god.

--sixteen, now become a man in the eyes and hearts of the women, who have the right to use him as they might use hide to soften their beds. And it is in their hearts, in their beds, that he learns he has some value; that he learns he can, however briefly, be more than a slave in a woman's arms.

And it is in the arms of one particular woman that he concocts a plan to escape.

The plan that nearly kills him.

In the cave, still bound by song, my hand strayed to my face. Fingers sought, found, traced out the curving scars cut so deeply into my cheek that stubble doesn't grow through them. The sandtiger had marked me well, but he had also given me freedom. Even as I'd stolen his in a slow river of warm, bright blood.

Mine as well as his.

--final memory of chula made man in place of slave. No more the nameless thing, but a free man to name himself. A man who has killed the cat who has eaten Salset men and children, ignoring the shukar's magic. What I've done is a powerful thing. I deserve a powerful name.

And so I pay honorable tribute to the cat who provided the means to escape.

Sandtigers born of the Punja are not owned by any one. Not by man. By woman. Nor god.

My fingers still touch the scars, but now there are also tears.

And the Canteada sing on.

Drained, I let the wall hold me up. I had no strength to move or even to blink my eyes. So I let them shut, shut tightly, and tried to master myself.

The dreamsong was finished. Now all I heard, distantly, was the faint glory of the wardsong keeping the hounds at bay.

I looked at Del. Still she sat wrapped in the blanket, pulled in tightly against her neck to keep herself safe from harm. But the wool couldn't have done it;

only deafness might. And I doubted even that would suffice in the face of such powerful magic.

Hoolies, I hate magic. You just can't trust it.

I heard movement. Not Del. Garrod. I'd forgotten all about him. And realized, looking at his face, he'd been as trapped as Del and I, maybe more so; he'd expected nothing. Del and I had at least been partly prepared. The horse-speaker had known nothing.

Like me, like Del, he sat huddled on the floor of the songmaster's cave. But he moved, a little, wrapping hands around long pale braids. Wrapping, locking, tugging, as if he meant to rip out his hair by the roots.

Dimly, I realized he might.

I stirred. Crawled. Reached Garrod, caught a wrist, held it. "No," I said gently.

Lips were peeled back from teeth. He stared at me out of white-lashed, ice-water eyes. "What I have done," he said. "What I have done in this world."

"No," I said again.

"What I have done in this world!"

"I know," I told him evenly. "Do you think I'm less guilty than you? Cleaner of blood than you?" I let go of his wrist and showed him my palm. "No bloodstains," I said, "but I've spilled more than my share in this world."

He still clutched the braids, but no longer tugged them taut. "Horse-speaker," he said. "I am a horse-speaker, which is a true gift, a magic of its own, here in the North, and yet I have made myself no better than the whores, selling themselves to the man who will pay her price. I am the whore, I am the whore, trading in thievery and trickery, turning my back on what they have done if only

to make a profit. To profit even from murder." His eyes were fixed on my face.

"I am an unworthy man. I have besmirched my gift."

Wearily, I sighed. "Sword-dancer, horse-speaker... do you think it really matters? Neither of us is clean."

Garrod stared at me blankly, lost within his own thoughts. And then, without warning, he pushed me aside, went to Del, knelt in front of her.

"I have never killed a man who did not first intend to kill me, and no man fully innocent. Never a woman or child. I have taken horses from Ajani to sell. I have sold him horses in return. I have taken his stolen money and I have made profit from it, counting myself clever. But I am a horse-speaker. Horse-speaker. Not murderer. Not raider. Not Ajani's man."

His braids dragged on the rugs. He waited for her answer.

Del gazed back at him. "Does it matter what I think?"

Garrod bowed his head.

Her smile was very faint. "You need it as much as I do." Then, very gently, she touched the crown of his head. I don't know what more she said because she said it in upland Northern, but Garrod seemed content. He rose and went out of the cave.

I still felt shaky, too shaky to stand. The dreamsong, as we'd been warned, had been incredibly painful. Not physically, but emotionally; sometimes the worst kind of pain, though men only rarely acknowledge it. Emotions belong to women.

I sat hunched on the rugs and looked at Del. Then, slowly, I made my way over to her, turning to rest my spine against the wall. To sit next to her in silence, offering and taking nothing. Being together was enough.

After a moment, she stirred. Pulled the blanket away from her body and offered a corner of it to me. I took it. Shifted closer, so that hips and shoulders

touched. Settled the weight across legs and lap. In silence we shared the violence of our songs, knowing no words were necessary.

Eventually, Del tipped her head to the side and rested it against my shoulder.

The weight was negligible, but the trust in the gesture immense. It touched the edges of raw emotions and made them quiver in response.

Quietly, she said: "I thought it would be Ajani. I thought it would be the deaths."

I frowned; so had I. Both had shaped the woman from girl into sword-dancer.

"What, then, bascha?"

"When I killed my an-kaidin."

So. There was more to Del's scars. Deeper than even I'd thought.

"That song--" I began, but Del's tone cut me off.

"It was easy," she said. "Easy. I thought it would be hard. I thought it should be hard... but it was easy, Tiger."

After a moment, I nodded. "The mechanics of death aren't so difficult when you've been properly trained. You were. So I think--"

Del's head rolled slightly against my shoulder. "I don't mean the mechanics of death. I mean the death itself. When I took the an-kaidin's life. When I took him into my sword." She paused. "When Boreal became mine, truly mine, as a jivatma must become... a blood-thirsty, blooded jivatma"

I could see little of her face. Mostly tangled hair. But her tone said more than enough. "Bascha--"

Yet again, she cut me off. She sat up, throwing off the blanket from us both, then lurched upward to her knees. A quick glance slanted my way told me to be still; I was. And Del drew the sword.

In the cave, it rang. It sang, as much as a Canteada. And I realized, in that moment, that the world was made of music. Lifesong, deathsong, dreamsong. The cycle personified.

"Sword-singer," I said.

Del twitched, holding the sword. Turned her head to look at me over a shoulder.

"Sword-singer," I repeated. "The dance requires a song."

Delilah began to smile.

"It's what you do, isn't it?" I asked. "Sing. To your sword. Your opponent. Your gods. To pay tribute to the world." I nodded slowly. "I remember the old man's words... the old Northerner in Harquhal, who sold you the leathers and furs and wool." Again, I nodded. "He told you to sing well."

Del dragged in a breath. "No dance is danced in silence."

"And it's how you key the sword."

"Part of it," she agreed. "There is more to it than that, but yes... the true name, the song--all is required."

"And I suppose the song must be special, like the name? A personal song?"

Something no one else can know?" I frowned. "But that doesn't make sense, bascha. If someone hears you sing, the song is no longer secret."

Del turned, still holding the sword. Still on her knees. And then she tucked heels beneath buttocks and sat, laying the jivatma across her thighs. One hand on the hilt. One hand on the blade. With infinite gentleness.

"You make a new one," she said, "each time. You touch yourself--what you are, what you were, what you can be--and shape it into a song. It's as much you as your hand on the hilt, but drawn from a deeper level. From the you no one else may know." Behind dirt and blood and tangled hair, the flawless face was somber.

"You sing yourself into the sword, so the sword becomes part of you."

"Then why bother to blood it?" I asked. "Why all this nonsense about blooding it by taking the life of an honored enemy?" I straightened a little, frowning.

"What happens if the enemy isn't honored? What happens if you have to kill before you're ready?"

Del's tone was steady. "A sword requires blood. First blood is part of the ritual; it is a rite of passage." Gently, she fingered the blade. "A boy becomes a man. A girl becomes a woman. A sword becomes a jivatma. Until then, it isn't whole."

"You didn't kill an enemy. You killed a friend instead."

She didn't so much as twitch. But then I saw blood on her fingers. Blood running into the runes.

"In the name of my need, I killed," she said. "I killed my honored an-kaidin, and took him into my sword."

"And are you content with it?"

Steadfastly, she stared at the blade. "It was what I had to do."

"And are you content with it?"

Her hand tightened on the hilt. Tendons stood up in the flesh. "There are times I hate this sword. There are times I hate myself."

"Do you regret what you have done?"

Del looked straight at me. "No," she said, "I don't. And that is what frightens me."

We stood beside the loki ring at dawn: Del, myself, Garrod, and the Borderers. Fog gathered above us, skirting the top of the canyon. Below, mist clung to us, dampening our hair. My nose and ears were cold.

Massou tore free of his mother and ran to Del. "I'm sorry!" he cried. "I'm

sorry!"

I saw her flinch. I saw her recoil. I saw her fight back the response that might have destroyed him, in his frenzy to make things right.

"I'm sorry!" the boy cried, clinging to Del's waist. "It wasn't me, I swear... it wasn't... it wasn't." Sobs broke up additional words, rendering them incoherent.

It was plain all of them knew. And all of them remembered. Cipriana's face flamed red. She refused to look at me. Adara was less humiliated, but I saw how hard it was even for her to meet my eyes. She clutched her skirts in fists.

I cast a glance around the canyon. Once again the other Canteada were hidden, leaving the songmaster to represent them. But I recalled them, the night before. Recalled them with candles and wardstones, melting out of the darkness to sing the Borderers free. To imprison the loki in a ring I wouldn't break.

Such a delicate thing, the ring. So transient on the surface. Smooth, rounded stones placed in a careful circle in the center of the canyon, not far from the songmaster's cave. In it resided loki. Daeva. Shedu. Rakshasa. The demons of childhood's dreams.

"We have to go," I said. "We can't stay here. This is a place of peace, and we have warped the song."

I felt Del's glance. Well, I was just as surprised. But I knew what I said was true.

"What about us?" Adara asked softly. "I know you must go on, but what are we to do? As you say, we can't stay here."

Garrod stood just behind Del, whose face was freshly scrubbed but still showed bluish bruising. His lids were lowered, hiding pale eyes. But they lifted, flickered, raised; he looked at the Borderers. "I'll take you," he said.

Cipriana's head came around. She stared at him in surprise.

Massou still clung to Del. "Can't you take us with you?"

I saw plainly she was uncomfortable, recalling the loki-Massou. With effort she kept her tone steady and didn't draw away. "No," she said quietly, touching the tousled blond hair. "No. I must go on. There is a thing I have to do."

Adara was looking at Garrod. There was hope in her green eyes, but also a trace of confusion. And I recalled that Garrod was mostly a stranger to them, since he had known only the loki within them.

The horse-speaker looked at me. "I'll take responsibility."

I raised brows. "Can you?"

The scarred lip twisted a little. "After the dreamsong, yes. And I think it's time I did."

Adara smoothed her skirts. "We're going to Kisiri."

Garrod smiled a little, flicking a glance at Cipriana. "Kisiri is a long way upland, but the uplands are my home. I will take you there safely."

I'll admit it, I was relieved. Del and I simply couldn't afford the time to escort the Borderers, but neither could we leave them behind without worrying about their welfare. Now Garrod could do it for us; it would be good for us all.

Cipriana looked back at him. "We haven't any horses."

Braid beads rattled as the horse-speaker laughed. "Leave that to me. I know ways of getting horses."

"Through trickery?" I asked. "The Canteada don't ride; there are no horses to steal."

Ice-water eyes appraised and found me lacking. But the smile appeared again.

"The songmaster told me last night there is a settlement half a day south. I

plan to buy the horses, Southron... with the money you will lend us."

"Lend you--"

"Or give," Adara said softly. "You did promise to buy us a horse and wagon to replace the ones we lost."

"Yes," Del said, "you did."

I scowled at her. Dug down to drag free my coin pouch. Counted out coin, passed it over to Garrod.

Adara's hand flashed out. "I will tend the money."

The horse-speaker looked like he'd swallowed something sour. Grudgingly, he handed Adara the coin. She tied it into her tunic as Del nodded approval.

Trust a woman to want the money. It's the woman who always spends it.

"I'll go get the stud," I said, hearing him nickering in the distance.

He was happy to see me, I think. Certainly pleased to stick his nose into my neck and blow mucus all over me. I swore, shoved the nose away, tugged the stake from the ground. Turned and saw Cipriana.

Color stood high in her face. She hugged ribs and stared at the ground, wanting to speak but clearly unable.

The stud reached out the ever-questing nose. Touched her face. Nuzzled. Then snorted all over her.

Cipriana was less than pleased, wiping a forearm across her face. I pushed the stud away, then abruptly knew what was wrong.

No. What was right.

"All that time," I said in discovery. "All that time... He knew something was wrong. Remember?"

Cipriana just stared, still scrubbing at her face.

"He bit Massou," I said, "and was always restive around you. The stud knew

something was wrong. Garrod even said so. He just couldn't say what or why."

As if to prove me right, the stud sidled casually toward Cipriana. The girl sidled closer to me, then caught herself and lunged back. Color flamed in her face.

I whacked the stud on the nose, but only halfheartedly. "It's all right," I told her. "I don't blame you--it wasn't your fault. You had nothing to do with it."

"But--all those things I said." The girl could barely speak. "Those things I said and did--"

"It wasn't you," I repeated. "Not you, not your mother, not Massou."

"But--I liked you. I did." She sounded surprised, which was a bit disgruntling.

"And then I acted like such a fool, saying and doing those things... trying to make you--want me." The color stained her throat; I saw a film of shame-sweat on her face. "I acted like a Harquhal cantina girl, selling herself for coin."

"You acted like a woman who wanted a man," I told her bluntly. "Cipriana, you're young, but not that young. You have nothing to be ashamed of. There will come a day soon--" abruptly, I thought of Garrod "--maybe sooner than you think, when a man will return that favor--" now I thought of her mother, "--after you are married."

Shyly, Cipriana smiled a little. "That's what my mother said."

"Then maybe you should listen to her. She hasn't done so badly." I turned, headed slowly back toward Del. "Never blame yourself, Cipriana. Not for honest feelings. It's better to say them out loud."

Coyly, she lifted one brow. "And do you say them to Del?"

Resignedly, I sighed. "Probably not enough."

She matched my pace. Then held something out. "I don't want this," she said. "It

was Rakshasa's, never mine."

I took it. Looked at it: a string of lumpy stones, red-brown against my palm.

Rubbed smooth from years of wear.

In my mind, I saw Del's throat. Saw myself putting it on her, as she had put it on her mother.

Cipriana smiled. Then ran ahead to her mother.

Thirty-one

The hounds were arrayed around us. I'd forgotten how ugly they were.

The stud, naturally, was less than happy with the standoff. He recalled all too clearly the bites and nips and clawings he'd received from them before. He stomped and pawed and snorted, trying to warn them away.

"Hoolies," I said, "now what?"

Del sat behind me on the stud, hands locked into leather. Thinking only about the journey, we'd left the canyon far below us, as well as the wardsong, forgetting it was the only thing that had kept the hounds at bay.

"This," she answered quietly, fumbling at her woolen tunic.

I didn't turn to look, not wanting to take my attention from the hounds. So I couldn't see what she did. All I knew was, one minute we were surrounded by white-eyed beasts, the next moment they were gone. Fleeing like beaten dogs.

Now I twisted a little. "All right, bascha... what'd you do?"

She looped something over her head, held it out to me. I took it: a thin leather thong and a tiny metallic tube, glinting silver in faint foggy sunlight.

"This?" I asked suspiciously. "What in hoolies is this?"

"Something from the Canteada." She kicked the stud, urging him forward, even though she was behind the saddle; it made me sit up and take notice.

"Hey--" I reined him out of a hop, skip and jump into a more decorous pace, still studying the thing on its thong. It was hollow. One end was open. There was also a hole in one side. "A whistle?"

"The songmaster said it would keep the hounds at a distance."

"But not send them away."

"No. They appear to be under a geas, or some other sort of binding. They'll probably follow along, but at least we won't have to worry about them keeping so close."

"I don't like it," I said.

Del sighed. "Is there anything you do like?"

I answered promptly. "A sword, a circle, a good woman. A Southron sword that is--I could do without this one."

"And a Southron woman?"

I guided the stud through the trees, slipping the whistle thong over my head.

I've never been one to ignore an advantage, regardless of origins. "Southron women," I said calmly, "have certain points in their favor. They're more biddable, for one; you don't much have to worry about them getting all uppity if you ask them to do something. And they're definitely good at domestic things, like cooking and cleaning and tending a man's gear. And they know how to please a man, in bed and out, being brought up to know who's in charge."

Del was silent a long, thoughtful moment. I grinned at the stud's ears, waiting for her response.

"If Southron women are so wonderful," she said at last, "why is it Southron men are so quick to steal Northern women?"

My grin went away. Finally, I said, "Probably because they're different. In coloring, customs, personality."

"Which could mean Southron men actually prefer women with more independence and spirit."

"Could," I agreed cautiously, "but never once have I heard a Southron man expressing a desire for a contentious woman."

"There is a distinct difference," Del said, "between a contentious woman and an independent one."

"Only women who are truly unhappy will seek out that sort of independence," I countered. "I'll bet if you asked most Southron women which kind of lifestyle they prefer, they'd take Southron over Northern."

"Maybe," she agreed coolly, "at first, because they know it... but only until they had a chance to experience our freedom."

"Not if it cost them their men."

"A true man wouldn't be threatened by an independent woman."

"How do you know what a true man is or isn't threatened by?" I demanded in disgust. "With you sitting so close against my back, there's no way I'd mistake you for a man. Which means you can't know."

Del scootched back a little, which wasn't what I'd intended. "I can know," she answered readily, "and I can prove it by asking a simple question: are you threatened by me?"

Oh, hoolies. She's so good at laying traps.

"Well?" Del, again.

"A lot of men would be--"

"Are you?"

"--and probably with reason. You're a man's fantasy, maybe, but not the sort of woman--" I broke off there because the hole was getting deeper.

"Tiger, answer the question. Are you threatened by me?"

"If I said yes, I'd be lying. But if I said no, I'd sound like an arrogant fool."

"That never stopped you before."

So nice, was Del. "No, I'm not threatened by you."

"Which means that a true man can accept independence in a woman."

I chewed on that a little. I'm not so stupid around women as to believe all their flattery, backhanded or not.

"Now," she said, "what kind of woman am I not?"

Hoolies. She'd noticed.

I sighed. "Not the kind of woman Southroners marry."

"Only the kind they dream about...if they have room for imagination along with ignorance."

"Now, Del," I sighed again, giving it up; it wasn't worth arguing. "Of course Southroners dream. All men dream. And I'd be willing to bet that Northern men dream about Southron women."

"I have no argument with dreams," she said tartly. "It's when men oppress women in reality that I become concerned."

"The North and South are two different places, Del... with different people, different customs, different gods. One isn't better than the other... it's just different." I paused. "And anyway, where'd you become so vocal about women's independence?"

She didn't answer at once. When she did, her tone was odd. "Mostly, from my family," Del said softly. "My mother was a strong, strong-minded woman who raised her sons to respect her gender and taught her husband to, as well. I was her only daughter... I grew up doing all of the things my brothers and uncles and father did, even to learning the knife and sword, and how to fight like a man. But it was in Staal-Ysta where I learned to be myself. Where I learned to be a person instead of male or female."

Staal-Ysta. I recalled the name from something Garrod had said. Ask her, he had told me. Ask her of Staal-Ysta.

So I did.

Del didn't answer at once. And, sitting squarely in front of her, I couldn't see her expression. All I had to go by to judge her reaction was the tension in her body, by necessity close to mine.

Eventually, I asked again.

"Place of Swords," she said finally. "That's what the words mean."

Poetic enough, I thought. Appealing, too; being a sword-dancer, I kind of liked the picture the words painted.

But Garrod hadn't meant to ask her merely about the name. "What does the phrase 'a blade without a name' mean?"

Behind me, Del stiffened. Only slightly, but I found it remarkable nonetheless.

"Where did you hear that?"

I might have lied. But I didn't. It seemed a fair enough question. "Garrod. He was angry... upset about the horses. He said something--" I paused, frowning, "--something about you being a blade without a name." I shrugged, guiding the stud. "He said it was a thing of Staal-Ysta."

"So it is." Her tone was cool.

"Something secret, I take it."

"A blade without a name translates to outcast, outlaw, wolf's-head," she explained precisely. "It indicates someone outside the honor codes of the voca."

"By choice."

"By choice," Del agreed. "Someone who can't learn the codes, or can't finish the training, is merely told to go home. But an an-ishtoya who refuses the final training that would make him a kaidin, yet uses his sword skills for harm, is considered a blade without a name."

"You didn't become a kaidin?"

"No. But I chose to become a sword-dancer, which is open to students as well.

And I live within the codes."

Something tickled me in the belly. "How close are you, Del? How close to breaking the codes?"

"A matter of weeks," she said without hesitation. "If I fail to reach Staal-Ysta within three weeks, to stand trial before the voca, I will be declared a blade without a name and subject to execution by any who wish to try."

I'd known that. Just not the language. "One more thing," I said. "Does your song have an ending?"

She said nothing at all at first. And then: "Stop this horse."

At first, I didn't. "Del--"

"Stop this horse."

I'm not deaf; she was upset. She didn't yell, but then Del doesn't need to. She knows how to use her tone. Accordingly, I stopped the horse. Looked around as Del slid off to stand in damp leaves. Saw the ice in her eyes, but also the blaze behind it.

Hoolies. Now I'd done it.

"Del--"

"Come down," she said.

"Come up," I countered. "You yourself said there are only three weeks left before the voca can make you an outlaw. Shouldn't we be going?"

Del drew her sword. "Come down," she said. In the distance, hounds bayed.

I scratched stubble. Considered entering into argument. Decided against it; that look in her eyes told me to take her seriously and not waste any more time.

I swung a leg over and slid off the stud, retaining my hold on the reins. It wouldn't do to lose him now, after going afoot before.

Del thrust the blade into the ground. It sank halfway in the damp, decaying layers of rain-soaked leaves, then slid into mud and held. She took her hands from the hilt.

"I can't give you the oaths," she said, "because they are private things. But I swore them on the souls of murdered kin, wrote them in my own blood, told them to the runemaster who set them into the blade." Fingers indicated the alien glyphs running from hilt to tip, though half-buried in the ground. "To abdicate those oaths dishonors my sword, my training, my kin. Do you think I could do that?"

"I only asked--"

"You asked if my song had an ending."

"Well, yes--"

"Without knowing what it means."

"Well... yes--"

"Without knowing what you asked."

And again yes. "Garrod said I should ask you."

Her tone was bitter. "And do you always do what young Northern strangers ask you to do? Especially one whose own personal honor is highly questionable?"

I ignored her questions. "Maybe Garrod was right to do it."

It took her off guard. "What?"

"He said even an upland horse-speaker knows about Staal-Ysta and the honor codes of the voca. It seemed to make a difference. But I, being a Southroner, know nothing about the place. Nothing about the customs." I looked at Boreal, then over to Del. "Does your song have an ending?"

Her face was white. "You ask that, not knowing what you ask?"

"Maybe I would if I had an answer."

Del stared at her sword. It was plain I'd put her in turmoil, though the indications were subtle. Del masks her face well, but I've learned to read the signs. She stared at her sword as if hoping--or honestly expecting--it would tell her what to do, but in the end she decided all by herself.

"He'll have to know," she said obscurely, "one way or another."

Not what I call encouraging. "Del--"

"I swore oaths," she said, "as I told you. But these are oaths of a different nature than the kind ordinarily sworn. They have to do with Staal-Ysta, and what it makes you; what you become to name a jivatma." Her gaze was on Boreal. "I have no doubts you have sworn oaths in your life, Tiger, and they are as binding as you make them... but in the North, it's different. In Staal-Ysta, more different yet; the binding is permanent, made of blood and steel and magic and the blessings of the gods."

"Now, Del--"

She lifted a silencing hand. "I am giving you an answer to your question. Never

say I didn't warn you; it's more than most people get."

Part of me wanted to break it off; obscurity irritates me. But Del was clearly serious, and it wouldn't hurt to listen.

At least, I didn't think so. "All right, bascha... go on."

"When you set yourself a task, you make yourself a song. And go on singing it until the task is completed."

I frowned. "I don't understand."

Del's face was expressionless. "My first task was to find Jamail and bring him home. As you know, I couldn't do it; that part of the song was destroyed. But there still remains another. A bloodsong, Tiger--a deathsong. My task is to kill Ajani and the men who accompanied him. Until that is accomplished, my song can never end. And a song without an end is not a true song at all, but merely meaningless noise."

In the distance, hounds yapped and howled. I glanced around, then back at Del.

"Something like that," I said.

"Yes," she said, "but forever. Noise without purpose or ending."

I nodded. "What it means is a sword-dancer out of control. One without purpose or honor."

"I am hard," Del said. "Hard and cold and cruel. But my song has an ending. My blade has a name."

"For how much longer?" I asked. "If the voca finds you guilty and orders your execution, your task will remain undone. Your song will never end. Your oaths will all be broken."

"No," she said, "they won't. I made a pact with the gods."

I wanted to laugh, but didn't. Del was too serious.

I pointed at the sword. "Clean that thing and let's go."

Thirty-two

I woke up because I was cold, and because someone was spitting on my face. Not a good way to start the day.

I swore beneath heavy blankets, heaved myself up, realized the sky was doing the spitting; wet, cold things were falling out of it. Not rain; I know rain.

Something like sticky ice.

"Del!"

She woke up. Peered at me sleepily. "You're letting in the cold."

So I was. I lay down again, but stiffly, blankets hooded around my head.

"Del--what is this?"

"Snow." She hitched herself closer, hair catching on my stubble. "Why--what did you think it was?" When I didn't answer, Del pushed herself up on one elbow and looked at me more closely. And then she began to laugh.

"Not funny," I muttered. "How was I supposed to know?"

Del was stretched against me, feet intertwined with mine. I felt the trembling of her laughter; heard the giggles she tried to suppress.

I turned over onto my side, facing her beneath blankets. Cold snuck into the folds and chilled exposed flesh, turning it rose-red along the angles of Northern cheekbones. I reached out and smoothed back hair. It was good to hear her laugh, even at my expense.

I pushed the blanket off her head. Snow stuck on hair and lashes, turning to

droplets on her face. Barehanded, I touched her cheek. "How long has it been since you laughed? Like this, I mean; really laughed?"

Slowly, the smile fell away. Tears of merriment dried in her eyes. She said nothing at all in answer, too startled by my question. There was wariness in her expression as well as bafflement.

Her tone was odd. "I don't know."

I traced the thin lace of a silvery scar threading the flesh of one cheek. "A week ago you stood before your sword and named yourself hard and cold and cruel, sworn to avenge your family. I won't disagree; sometimes you are. But you can also be other things. A woman of passion and laughter."

She shrugged. "Maybe once."

I grunted. "More than once, bascha. I'll swear to that. I share your bed, remember?"

Del sighed. We are not a man and woman for soft words between us, being too ruled by other things; locked too tightly into our roles and allowing no latitude. But I would be a liar to say I didn't think them. To say I didn't feel them. And I think Del would, too.

It was a soft and silent dawn, except for the stream nearby, and filled by falling snow. It was cold, but we were not, for the moment warmed by new thoughts and feelings, not thinking about the weather. And then she lowered snow-frosted lids and shuttered her thoughts from me, turning away a little.

"Don't," was all she said.

"Del, I don't mean to hurt you. I only mean that if you push yourself any harder, wind yourself any tighter, something is going to break."

Tautly: "There are things I have to do."

"Not at the risk of destroying yourself."

"Ajani did that a long time ago."

Inwardly, I swore. Outwardly, I shook my head. "And so you have reshaped the real Delilah into someone she is not."

"Am not," she said softly. After a moment, she shook her head. "I don't know what I'm not. I don't know what I am, other than what I have to be." Del resettled the blankets. "Not so different from you."

I rose, took up harness and sword, stood up to meet the dawn even as it fell down to meet me. Such a soft, gentle thing, sneaking up like a woman's caress. Flakes fell out of the sky and took roost on any part of me they could touch, melting or sticking together. The world itself was blurred, softened by falling snow. I couldn't hear anything but my own breathing as I exhaled a cloud of steam.

"I'm a killer," I said. "Strip away the pretty words and the real ones come to the surface. Men hire me to kill; it is what I do."

She twisted to stare at me. Her face was pallid with shock.

"Not always," I said. "Sometimes the job has nothing to do with killing. But I am effective because I can kill, and people know I will do it. It frightens them into docility, into payment... into doing whatever I tell them, being hired to tell them things. I don't take sides--or very rarely. Mostly, I just take money.

I take money to dance." I slid the sword from its sheath. "I'm a whore in my own way, ruled by greed, not retribution. But I think I'm happier than you."

Del folded back the blankets and sat up. Snow gathered on head and shoulders, clinging to her hair. "Why are you telling me this? What point are you trying to make?"

"No point. I just want you to realize that it's an ugly sort of life you've

portioned out for yourself, in the name of retribution."

Del's mouth nearly dropped open in amazement. "You don't think I should hunt Ajani down? After what he did?"

"I didn't say that, now, did I?" I turned from her, found a tree limb, began to draw a circle. Snow would eventually hide most of the line, but it really wouldn't matter. We'd know where it was. In our hearts, if nowhere else. "I just meant you ought to give yourself room to be Delilah along with the sword-dancer known as Del."

Damp hair straggled on either side of her face. She gazed at me blindly, locked away in her head.

I straightened, tossed the limb aside. "I have hated as well or better than anyone, in my life, maybe even you. Because much of it wasn't a life. I never had anything--or anyone--to lose, except myself. I don't doubt that if I'd had kin stripped from me as you did, as well as innocence, I'd be angry, too. I'd want revenge, too. But destroying myself in the process isn't a choice I'd make."

Del's stare sharpened. She frowned a little, thinking about my words, then stood up and brushed off snow.

"A woman is required to be stronger," she said quietly. "Even in the North, even in Staal-Ysta. Tougher. Stronger. Better--if she is to be judged worthy at all.

And so there are sacrifices--"

I didn't let her finish. "Did they demand those sacrifices? Or did you simply offer them, determining them yourself?"

Del stood very still. "I don't know," she said numbly. "I can't remember, now."

It made me angry, that she could be so focused on hatred and revenge that she could forget herself. I stalked back through the snow to face her squarely. "Be

you," I told her curtly. "Just you, whoever that may be... that's what I want from you. And if it means traipsing across two countries to find the man who killed your kin, so be it; I don't much like him, either. If it means going into sleet and snow and banshee-storms, I'll do it willingly. Not happily, but I'll do it; there's enough between us for that, even if you won't admit it. But if it means warping yourself into a travesty of Delilah because it's the only way, I say it isn't worth it. You deserve better than that."

Softly, she said: "I'm afraid."

"I know you are, bascha. I've known it all along. But it doesn't make you a bad person." I smiled, reached behind her left shoulder, drew her Northern sword.

"Step into the circle, Del. Let's do what we do best."

Good idea, bad execution. I'm not used to snow. And so I performed badly, giving Del an easy match, but in the end it served its purpose. She was thinking about the dance, not about herself, and it burned the tension out.

"No, no," she blurted, as I let one of her subtle wrist patterns break through my haphazard guard. "If you do that in Staal-Ysta, you'll impress no one."

I grunted, moving away again. "I didn't know I'd have to impress anyone. We're going there for you, remember? Not for me."

Her mouth was flat and grim. "You are the Sandtiger. One of the greatest sword-dancers in the South. If you think you can go to Staal-Ysta and not be called upon to dance, you are sandsick."

One of the greatest, not the greatest... as usual, she knew how to provoke me. I beat her blade back, then followed it up with a slashing blow that, had it connected, would have severed an arm at the shoulder.

"Better," she said grudgingly, skipping out of the way.

Better, schmetter. I was the best. "How long is this trial supposed to take? I mean, we will be done before spring, won't we? We won't have to winter here?"

Del moved warily, testing my intentions. Snow still fell, but softly, clearly not bothering her. But I could do without it. I don't like footwork fouled by slush.

"Maybe," she said quietly, mostly under her breath.

"Maybe? Maybe? You mean--this thing could last for months?" I dropped my guard completely, calling off the dance. "Just what will you have to do?"

"I don't know. Tiger, don't stop. You need to learn how to move. Snow, mud and slush can be difficult to dance in."

"I'm not dancing!" I shouted. "I'm coming along for the ride, and that's it. I suppose if someone invited me to participate in a friendly little wager revolving around a dance, I'd do it, but that's as far as it goes. I'm not a performing dog."

"No, but you are my sponsor."

Dimly I recalled having agreed to some such title. "I said I'd back you at the trial."

"And if the trial is a dance?" Del had stopped moving, too. We faced each other across the circle, fogging the air with our breath. "Here in the North, such things are often decided by combat. It seems the fairest thing."

"Wait a minute. Do you mean to tell me that you've dragged me all the way up here to do your righting for you?" I stared at her in astonishment. "Hoolies, Del, you're sandsick! For as long as I've known you, all you've done is fill my ears with all this noise about you being as good a sword-dancer as any man--including me--and now you tell me I might have to dance in your place?" I shook my head. "What kind of a deal is that?"

Del nodded grimly. "Not much of one, is it? But it may be the only deal. Who can say what the voca will do?"

"You," I accused. "I've seen that look in your eye... you've got a good idea."

"No," she demurred calmly. "Now, about your footwork--"

"To hoolies with footwork, bascha... I want to know what I face!"

Del glared across the circle. "I don't know!" she shouted. Then, more quietly,

"But you just said again you'd go with me, so I guess we'll find out together."

I said something very rude in Desert dialect, because Del didn't know it, and because I didn't really want to call her names, but felt I had to do something.

So, all that being said, I continued to scowl at her. "Sometimes," I said,

"sometimes."

Del waited, brows arched.

"Sometimes," I muttered again, stepping out of the circle.

"Where are you going, Tiger?"

"To wash my face," I answered. "Maybe the cold will shock me awake, and I'll know this is all a dream."

I tromped down to the rushing stream, sheathing my sword, and knelt down on the snowy crust at the edge of the water. I had every intention of thrusting my face into the water, but something kept me from it. Something told me it would be terribly, horribly cold; too cold, even, for anger. I paused, considering it, and then felt the familiar warning tingle in my bones.

"Magic," I blurted, disbelieving, then spun in place to warn Del.

Unfortunately, the magic came from behind. From the water. It reached up and dragged me down.

The stream was no deeper than possibly two feet, no wider than maybe three. But

suddenly it felt like a river in full spate, sucking me into the depths.

I was, of course, cold, being soaked through in an instant. I was also frightened and angry; what in hoolies had me? And what could I do about it?

I gurgled Del's name. Knew she'd never hear that, but surely she'd hear my splashing. I was kicking like a danjac, trying to thrust my head above water so I could breathe again.

Hands were on me. For just a moment I thought they belonged to Del, coming to my rescue, and then I realized the hands were on my front, not my back, and were dragging me farther down.

Can't be real, I thought. The stream isn't deep enough.

Hands dragged me down.

Hoolies, not like this... I'm a desert man--

And then I realized the water was warm. Incredibly warm. So were the hands, tangling in my hair. Threading fingers through my beard. Pulling my face toward hers...

Hers?

Hoolies, I've gone sandsick. Or have I? There's a woman staring at me...a gray-haired, gray-eyed woman, young, not old, but all gray, gray and pallid white, but the lips are carmine red.

Hoolies, I am sandsick!

And then, abruptly, something grabbed me by the hair and yanked me up out of the water.

It hurt. I yelled, struggled, splashed, was rewarded by yet another yank on the hair.

"Get out!" Del shouted. "Get out of the water now!"

Well, I was trying. But so was the other woman, who reached up to catch my

hands.

Hoolies, two women?

"It's an undine!" Del shouted. "Tiger--fight her off! She'll drown you if you give in!"

Red lips smiled at me. Gray eyes beseeched my own. Wet hair tied itself in knots around my wrists.

Del yanked harder yet. "Get out of there!" she yelled.

Hoolies, one woman wanted to drown me, the other to pluck me bald.

The hair was like wire around my wrists. I tried to twist loose, failed; lunged toward the side even as Del took a harder grip. I landed face down in the snow with half of me still in the water.

One hand was free. "Knife," I croaked, and felt Del press hers into my hand.

Quickly, I cut the hair that bound my right wrist and felt the tension slacken.

"Get up," Del said, "get away. She can still reach you from here."

I pushed to my knees, to my feet, staggered two steps, stumbled, got up and ran again. Fell down again in exhaustion.

"Far enough," Del said. "Give me the hair, Tiger."

It was all I could do to breathe. I held up my arm, felt her strip the hair from my wrist. Watched, hacking loudly, as she threw it on the fire.

I thought the water would quench the flame. But for a moment it burned very brightly, red as blood, and then the hair ashed away into nothing, leaving behind an acrid stink.

I sucked in a wheezing breath. "What in hoolies was that?"

"Undine," she told me. "She wanted you for her own; unfortunately, she would have drowned you. It's the only way she could have kept you."

"Kept me for what?"

Del shrugged. "What most lonely women desire... she wanted a man of her own."

Coughing interrupted my outraged expression of horror. I was wet and cold and shivering; if I wasn't careful, I'd freeze. "That--thing--wanted to keep me?"

"Legend says undines--always female--can gain a human soul if they conceive by a human man." She shrugged. "I guess she wanted a soul."

I peered at her out of stinging eyes. "You're awfully calm about it."

"She didn't want me."

I tried to sit up and failed. "First the loki, now this. Is this how the North is? Filled with frustrated female spirits?"

Del laughed aloud, then smothered it, but the amusement remained in her eyes.

"Here," she said gently, "I'll build up the fire. You strip down and get under the blankets; I'll come in beside you."

"At least you're human," I croaked. "Hoolies, I hate this place."

But at least the snow had stopped.

Thirty-three

Days passed. So did the storm, but another followed on its heels. Just like the hounds on ours.

They were always out there somewhere, slinking through the trees. The ward-whistle kept them at a distance but didn't drive them away. It made us irritable, snappish, because we weren't sure what they'd do, other than drive us north. It was where we wanted to go, but we wanted to do it without escort.

Del hunched down in the snow, carefully nursing a tiny fire in an attempt to keep it burning. But wind made it difficult; wind and snow and damp wood. I did what I could to form a shield, holding up a large blanket, but knew the effort was futile.

"Hoolies," I said, "I'm sick of this! What I'd give for a little warmth!"

Del hunched over the flickering flames. "What would you give?" she asked.

"My beard?" I suggested hopefully.

She grinned, casting me a glance as she made a windbreak with her hands. "How many times must I tell you?--you'll do better with a beard. It's a form of winter hair, just like the stud wears."

"He's a horse, Del; I'm a man. And I prefer bare skin to a pelt, especially on my face."

She laughed a little, nodding. "As much hair as you've grown lately, I begin to think you're half bear."

Well, I was. The Canteada had given us blankets for bedding, but lately we'd taken to using them as cloaks against the increasing cold. I hadn't cut my hair or shaved in weeks; not much of my face showed, except for my nose, the bare patches beneath my eyes, and the sandtiger scars on my cheek. Everything else was covered by hair, wool and leather.

Del, of course, didn't have the advantage of a beard, which meant she spent most of her time wrapped to the eyes in her blankets. Now she had set them aside; wind chafed her face rose-red and stung tears out of her eyes.

"How much farther?" I asked.

She glanced northward, frowning. The trees were naked save for frost, and the snow caught in crotches. The storm had begun the night before and showed no

signs of letting up.

Del sighed, shrugging a little. "In good weather, a week. But with the snow, maybe two."

"Too long," I said.

She hunched again over the fire. "I know, Tiger. I know."

"Won't they give you extra time? I mean, what with all this snow ..." I let it trail off; Del was shaking her head.

"Unlikely," she told me. "A year is more than enough time. They would merely say I left it till too late."

"But you're making every effort, bascha. Won't they give you credit for that?"

Snow slapped her in the face, crusted in her hair. "I don't think so, Tiger. If I'm late, I'm late."

The wind shifted. So did I, trying to block its strength so Del could coax the fire to life. "How long do you think this will last?"

She muttered something in Northern, cursing the failed fire, then lurched up from her kneeling posture. "I don't know!" she cried. "Do you think I know everything?" And then she covered her face with her hands. "Gods, oh, gods, what is happening to me? Why am I always so angry?"

"You're tired," I told her flatly. "Tired and worn to the bone." I shoved my way through calf-deep snow, hating the heaviness, draped the blanket around her shoulders and snugged the ends together. "When you came South, all you had to worry about was Jamail. Now there is much more: time, Ajani, the voca, the hounds, even bad weather. What did you expect?"

The brief anger had spent itself. Now she was merely tired. "I don't know what I expected. At first, I was happy just to be home. But now--now there are other concerns. The ones you've made me think about, like what I will do when the

trial is over."

"Good."

"If they let me live."

"There's no question of that." I plowed my way through snow to the stud, tied to a tree. He had turned his rump to the wind, head hanging down; I pushed off the blanket of snow that turned him from bay to gray. "After all, with the Sandtiger as your sponsor--"

"Tiger--look out--"

I swung instantly, reaching for my sword, but the beast was already on me. I felt jaws closing on my left wrist, trying to gnaw through wool and leather; smelled the musky stink; heard the snarling deep in his throat. Caught completely by surprise--and cursing myself for it--I went down on one knee; felt the jaws compress my wrist.

Hoolies, the thing was strong!

I felt the stud behind me, trying to snap his rope. Heard his frantic squealing.

Fell backward against his forelegs and felt him quivering, trying to avoid me. A horse hates to step on a man, but will if there's no other choice.

Beyond the beast, I saw Del, Boreal raised to strike. But I also saw anguish and indecision; in her haste she might strike me. In delay, the beast might kill me.

Some choice, *bascha*.

She shifted her stance. Dropped to one knee. Altered her grip on the sword and used it like a pike, thrusting into the underbelly. I was grateful she missed mine.

Blood rained down, hot and acrid. The beast howled, writhed, released his grip on my arm to snap at the blade. His entrails were hanging out; Del had done more

than thrust. She'd ripped the guts from his belly.

I pulled away, staggered up, ran three steps past the stud simply in reaction.

Swung around and looked back, panting steamclouds in exertion.

Through the snowfall, I saw her face. Pink from exposure, but also stained with blood. She put up one gloved hand to touch her cheek, smeared blood, took it away again. Her eyes were on the beast, now lying dead in the snow.

I caught the stud's picket line. "Easy," I told him, "easy." I untied him, led him three trees away, tied him up again. He was still frightened by the beast, but I dared not tie him farther. Where there was one there were probably more. I trudged back through snow, marking the crimson bloodstains. Was glad it wasn't mine.

Del rose slowly. "Wolf," was all she said.

I frowned. I'd expected to see a hound, and so I had. But closer inspection proved her right. The beast was wolf, not hound.

"The whistle," I began, puzzled. "Shouldn't it keep wolves away as well?"

"The Canteada made it for beasts shaped by sorcery. This wolf was merely a wolf, doing what wolves do in winter: feeding a family."

I cast her a sour glance. "Don't sound so regretful, Del; I might have been the dinner."

She shrugged one shoulder, sword dripping blood to stain the snow. "He probably wanted the stud. You just got in the way." She looked from the wolf to me. "Only rarely do they attack men, preferring other prey. But in winter, when game is scarce; when there are hungry cubs in the den, sometimes they turn to men. Or anything they can find."

She was, like many women, an easy mark for animals, particularly the young. I recalled her defiance of Southron custom by briefly adopting two sandtiger cubs,

even knowing how deadly they'd be once poisonous claws broke free of buds and fangs replaced their milk-teeth. Luckily, we'd gotten rid of them before they could mature.

"No," I said flatly.

Del frowned at me. "What do you mean, 'no'?"

"I know what you're thinking, bascha. You're thinking about two or three wolflings holed up in a den nearby. Well, I say no. They've probably got a mother."

"You don't know that, Tiger."

"What I do know is, we can't waste even an hour hunting them; we've got no time to spare."

Del looked down at the butchered male. "No," she said, "we don't." And turned her back on the wolf as she went to clean her sword.

I followed a moment later. "We'll have to break camp now. Likely the body'll bring down other beasts. I'd rather not risk it, Del, especially so close to dark."

She cleaned the blade, slid it home again. "Let me see your wrist."

I twitched a shoulder briefly. "It's sore, but it'll do. He didn't break the skin."

"Let me see, Tiger. We don't move until I do."

I swore, muttered, stuck out my left arm. Del peeled back the layers. "See?" I said. "No blood. Just a little swelling."

She touched it. I winced. "Umm hmmm," she murmured, "I see. Swollen, as you say..." Her voice trailed off.

I looked down on her bowed head, "If I didn't know better, I'd say something--or

someone--was out to get me."

Del didn't answer at once, deftly inspecting my wrist. Eventually she asked why.

"Well, first there were the loki... then those hounds of hoolies... that water witch--and now the wolf."

"The North is a naturally dangerous place," she said patiently, "like the South. There is no one trying to get you."

"How do you know? You haven't been the target."

She glanced up sharply. "No? Do you want to split up to prove it? I'll wager the hounds follow me. Me and my sword."

I thought about it. "No, let's not split up--ouch!"

"It will likely bruise by morning." Smiling sweetly, she worked the hand and wrist before I could flex it stiff. "Maybe sprained, Tiger, but then that will never bother a big, strong man like you." She yanked the layers of leather and wool back down, rose, slapped me on the shoulder. "Get the stud and let's go," So much for sympathy. Glumly, I went for the horse.

Two days later, the track took us above the timberline, into the snowy mountains. Del called them the Heights.

"This is Reiver's Pass," she said. "From here, Staal-Ysta is maybe a week. We might make it yet."

We stood on a treeless escarpment: Del, the stud, and I. Behind us tumbled the uplands, farther yet the downlands, below that the borderlands and the plateaus close to Harquhal. The snowstorm had finally died, but the cold was colder yet. I shivered inside my woolen blankets, wishing I was a bear. Because then I'd be hibernating, oblivious to the cold.

There were mountains yet before us, blasted by wind and filmed with ice. They glittered in meager sunlight like sand crystals in the Punja. My eyes were

dazzled by the light; I put up a hand to block it.

"A good day," Del said. "The clouds are thin, and the sun shines through. See the ring around it? It's widening, not contracting; it means the weather will be good. The blessing of the gods."

"Hunh." I wasn't so sure. "How do you live up here? How do you survive the winters?"

"You're surviving one." Del grinned at me, scraping back wind-tangled hair. "Man adapts, Tiger... even a man like you. Once you've adjusted--"

"Adjusted, nothing," I said rudely. "Once you're done with this trial, I'm heading South again."

Too quickly, Del looked away. "We should go on, Tiger. I want to avoid another storm."

"You just said the weather would be good."

"Maybe I lied."

I sighed. Glanced back the way we had come. "I don't see the hounds."

Del turned. "The ward-whistle's still working."

"Then why don't they just give up?"

She shook her head. "I don't know, Tiger. Maybe they're like me... maybe their song hasn't ended yet."

I glanced at her sharply. Being cryptic, again; as always, it annoyed me. "I hardly think beasts--"

"I would," she interrupted, "if someone has given them one to sing."

"Oh, Del, come on."

She thrust out a pointing hand that indicated the treeline far below our tracks against the snow. "Someone set them on us, Tiger... someone told them to stay

with us. The ward-whistle keeps them at bay, but it doesn't send them away. Have you any other explanation?"

"Maybe they're just hungry."

She cast me a withering glance.

I turned to the stud and swung up, suppressing a wince of pain. The wrist was still very sore, but I wouldn't tell her that. She'd only use it to claim some sort of odd, obscure victory of woman over man.

"Are you coming?" I asked.

Del grabbed my wrist, which hurt, and swung up, settling onto a furry rump. The stud had lost weight since we'd first picked up our shadows, particularly carrying two, but he was tough and stubborn and valiant and I knew he'd never give up.

Not more than Delilah would.

Thirty-four

Del leaned sideways and forward, all at once, to press against my back. One arm curved around me, pointing. "There," she said. "Staal-Ysta."

I stared. I gaped; what she pointed at was a lake, a cold, glass-black lake, huddled amidst the mountains. In its center swam an island. "That?" I asked succinctly.

"That," she agreed. "There's a pathway down to the shoreline."

So there was, winding down; I wasn't sure I wanted to take it. The lake looked bottomless, and I can't swim. "Bascha--"

But Del was off the stud, striding forward to pause at the head of the path.

Here the wind blew constantly, though not at gale force; it did, however, strip the ground we stood on free of snow, baring dark earth and darker rubble. She stood there, hair blowing back from her face, and stared down at the Place of Swords. What she saw I couldn't say, except to see what it did to her.

I slid off the stud and let him graze; the tough, fibrous turf growing in swollen patches here and there would keep him from wandering. I stepped in behind Del and put my hands on her shoulders. Strands of hair caught in my beard, blonde on brown; smiling wryly, I pulled them away.

Del drew in a breath. "Nearly six years ago I came here, alone, because it was a thing I had to do. There was no other to avenge my family's murder; no son, no brother, no cousin. Only me, a fifteen-year-old girl who knew enough of the sword to know it could be her deliverance, and her brother's, if she chose to take it up." Her tone hardened. "I chose. Then, I chose. But now I am back, with my song unfinished, to have my choice made for me: do I live? Or do I die?"

I stared out at the flanks of snowy mountains, ranked in rows around the lake.

The island in the center was scalloped at the edges, like lace, thorny with bare-limbed trees, veiled in bluish vegetation impervious to the cold. The colors were smudgy and dull, like the winterscape: smoke blue, steel gray, indigo black, all swathed in the pristine white of mourning. From here the island looked quite small. But from there, so did we. If they could see us at all.

I squeezed her shoulders briefly. "Let's go down, Delilah. You've waited long enough."

Down. We walked, leading the stud, because the way was steep and he was weary of

carrying two. Del preceded me, I him; he seemed grateful, bobbing his head with the downward motion.

Down and down and down, until we reached the bottom, and the shoreline curved before us, left and right, butting up against treeless mountain slopes, wearing only snow.

I frowned. "What are all these lumps?"

Del didn't answer at once. Wrapped in her borrowed blankets, she walked forward, toward the shoreline, oblivious to the lumps.

The turf was winter-brown, but thriving. It crawled from the shoreline to the path we'd just descended, even over the oblong lumps, like a cloak. It softened all the edges; velvet over stone.

Halfway to the shoreline, Del stopped. Turned back to look at me. "Not lumps," she said, "barrows. See the stones? Cairns and dolmens, marking the passage graves."

I stopped so short the stud walked into me. He snorted, shook his head, nudged my elbow.

Hoolies. Graves.

I drew in a breath. The lumps--barrows--closest to me had no stones, being merely turf-covered, oblong mounds. But those closer to Del, closer to the lake, boasted conical piles of weathered dark stone, or large, flat rock caps, some standing on end, others resting across them like a table top. There were, I saw, runes, carved into the standing stones.

"Staal-Kithra," Del said quietly. "Place of Spirits."

I shivered. "How do we get to the island? There's no boat. And I don't plan on swimming--particularly as I can't."

"There will be a boat." Del stared out at the island. "There's something I must

do, first. And then we will see if we're given leave to go to Staal-Ysta, or if it is too late."

In the distance, I heard the whinnying of a horse. So did the stud; he lifted his head and answered, peeling the sound through clear winter air.

"Someone's coming," I said.

She shook her head. "Not yet. Someone will come for the stud, yes, but not until it's time." She nodded her head eastward, along the shoreline. "The horses are kept over there, a mile, maybe two, at the settlement. They're tended by the children, who take turns. It's a way of teaching them responsibility. But there are adults, as well; families of the ishtoya and an-ishtoya. Those of higher rank may keep their families on the island."

"Why so far? Why not here?"

"Staal-Kithra," Del said simply. "Only the dead live here."

The stud whinnied again, smelling mares; other stallions. I gathered slack rein and kept him close even as he protested, not wanting to lose him now. I might need him again. And soon.

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"Tell the voca I am here." Del peeled back her blankets, slipped them, folded them carefully and placed them on the ground. Wind rippled the wool of her tunic and gaitered trews, plucking at leather fringe and knots. "It shouldn't take long, Tiger."

Standing amidst the barrows and cairns and dolmens of Staal-Kithra, Place of Spirits, Del drew Boreal from her sheath and held up the jivatma as she had done before, on the border between North and South, balancing hilt and blade on the open palms of both hands, offering Boreal to the skies, to the gods, to her kin.

Maybe to the spirits.

Or maybe to the voca who waited to pass judgment.

Then, without speaking, she shifted her stance. Brought the sword down, altered her grip, plunged the blade into the ground so the hilt stood boldly upright.

Del knelt and began to sing.

Across the water, awareness stirred. It lifted the hairs on the back of my neck.

Behind me, the stud blew noisily. Uneasily. I felt his intensity, his arrested attention, torn from mares and stallions to focus on Del and her sword. And her song.

She sang until the boat bumped into the shoreline. And then she stopped and waited, leaving, for the moment, Boreal sheathed in living earth.

A man. A Northerner. Blond. Young. Not much older than Del herself. Blue-eyed, as I expected, and spectacularly good looking. He moved with grace and economy, a mixture not trained but born, and he had it in abundance.

Like Garrod, he wore braids. But his were wrapped with gray fur from top to bottom, laced with black cord. His clothing, too, was black; plain, unadorned black, except for the leather harness. He'd studded it with silver to match the hilt of his sword, worn in harness behind his right shoulder.

Left-handed, then.

"Bron," Del said. No more than that, but I heard surprise, pleasure and thankfulness in her tone. Saw the slight lessening of rigidity in the line of her shoulders as she knelt.

"Delilah." He stopped before her, looking briefly past her to me. His expression was stern, austere, too stark for a face such as his, made for laughter and lightheartedness. But there was nothing of it in his tone. "An-ishtoya," he amended, lids flickering only minutely.

"Sword-dancer," she told him quietly, speaking Borderer. "Give me no rank, Bron; you know why."

Again he looked to me. Said something to her in a dialect I didn't know.

Del answered him in the same, tilting her head slightly in my direction, and I heard the word for Southroner.

It mattered. His mouth tightened. His expression grew more severe. He spoke in accented Borderer, welcoming me, clearly preferring the pure uplander dialect but speaking instead a tongue I knew. I could not be kept in ignorance. I was the an-ishtoya's sponsor.

Or would be, eventually, when Bron gave us leave to go--

But he didn't.

"The year is done," he told her, "by three days. I am sent to tell the blade she no longer has a name, and to invite her to step into the circle. Here. Now. In Staal-Kithra, as is fitting, with the spirits of others as witnesses, before the blade without a name can profane the Place of Swords."

Jerkily, Del stood up. She pulled the blade from the ground. "I have a name," she said firmly.

"For three days past, you have not."

"I have a name," she said.

Slowly, he shook his head.

"Bron--" But she cut it off. Swung to face me. "Sandtiger," she said evenly,

"will you honor us by drawing the circle?"

I looked at Bron. He was fair, as are all Northerners, but having ridden with Del, I knew the signs. He had placed himself under rigid self-control; he liked it no more than she. But he was as bound by the honor codes as the woman who

would face him.

I unlooped the stud's picket rope and peg, pushing it into the soft turf easily with a single thrust of one foot. Stepped away, unsheathed my sword.

No. Not mine. Theron's. And Bron knew it.

Very cool, he was. But I've learned to judge the eyes, the flesh, the tautness of tiny muscles. One ticked by his left eye.

They waited in silence, Del and Bron, as I drew the circle. Turf gave way easily beneath honed steel, parting to show damp earth. Their footwork might obscure it, altering the line, but I knew they would not require me as arbiter, to warn them if they moved too close. Clearly, Bron and Del knew one another well.

I stepped away. Cleaned my blade. Sent it hissing home into its sheath. Waited as they stripped off harness, gloves, placed them outside the circle, placed blades in the center, then took their positions on opposite sides, outside, waiting for my word to begin the dance.

For the first time in my life, I changed the ritual. "Three days," I said, "is nothing. She is here. She is prepared to face the voca, to accept their decision. Isn't this a bit unnecessary?"

Bron was shocked. He stared at me, speechless, then sent a furious look at Del, as if to blame her for my behavior.

"Or is it that you want to die?" I asked. "Because you will. She's that good, Bron. But then, you know that. You've danced with her before." I folded my arms.

"Why not call this off and let the voca decide instead? There's no need for bloodshed--" I paused "--yet."

He said something to Del in fast, pure uplander. I understood nothing of it, save the anger in his tone. His control was beginning to slip, but only a little. Not enough.

Del shook her head. Taut-faced, she looked at me. "Tiger, please... begin the dance."

"Why?" I shrugged. "Neither one of you wants to dance. I can see it. Can't you?"

I paused. "Yes. You can. Though neither wants to admit it." I shrugged again, casually. "Well then, why not simply get in that boat, row to the island and take this up with the voca? Don't they have the authority? Aren't they the arbiters?"

Bron snapped something curtly. It flushed her face with color. "Don't dishonor me," she said; not begging, asking. "Don't dishonor the circle."

I looked at Bron. At Del. Inclined my head and unfolded my arms. "Prepare."

Northerners both, they sang. Soft little songs of death in a language I didn't know. Nor did I care to know it.

"Dance," I told them curtly.

Thirty-five

In my life, I have seen many sword-dances. Most I haven't actually witnessed, being part of the dances themselves, but I knew, watching Del and Bron, I was seeing the purest form of the dance. The magic of trueborn talent.

Here the style was different from the one I'd been taught in the South. Instead of brute strength, there was finesse; in place of power, dexterity. And speed, and incredible reflexes. I am big and strong and powerful, difficult to bring down. But Del is quickness personified, subtle and calculating, trained to wear

down stamina and to irritate, to frustrate with sheer skill, which, in the long run, can destroy an opponent mentally. He will make mistakes. She will not. We have sparred many times, Del and I. We've even danced for real, though only in exhibition. But now, against Bron, in a Northern circle and facing a Northern opponent, Del's skills unveiled themselves entirely, and showed me a new kind of brilliance.

One of Del's peculiar gifts is the ability to force mistakes, to create instability on the part of her opponent. She'd done it with me. And now she tried to do it with Bron.

But Bron was also good, as good as any I've ever seen, and he wasn't about to fall victim to her tricks.

The swords had been keyed by the songs. Del's was salmon-silver, Bron's copper-gold. Together they reclaimed winter and made it spring again, setting the smudgy gray sky alight with illumination born of Northern stars and nightskies.

They were perfectly matched. The dance was magnificent. But I knew one of them had to die.

Sword-dancers. Sword-singers. Each beautifully trained. And each one clearly focused on the need to kill the other.

Blades clashed, whined, scraped free. Spat sparks in the blue light of winter.

Alien runes tied alien knots, then unwound and started all over again, with more determination.

I saw the patterns begin to form in the air between them. They built a lattice, each of them; wove a living tapestry of subtle, significant strokes, reflecting their signatures. The Northern style is one of wristwork, like a painter at a canvas. Dab here, swirl there, complex curlicue here. Except their brushes were

made of steel, and the paint they spilled was blood.

Sweat sheened both faces. Exhalations plumed the air. Bron's expression was one of tense expectancy, a careful calculation of her movements. But I saw him begin to relax, to loosen, shedding the tension in his muscles and allowing them to flow. He was incredibly graceful, particularly for a man; he was deer to my bear. Fur-sheathed blond braids swung free as he moved smoothly, easily, clearly accustomed to the lumpiness of the turf. He was untroubled by its texture, as Del had suggested I become, and hadn't.

Del inhabits a different world when she dances, rising above normal physicalities and their limitations. It's almost as if she becomes the sword she wields, employing all the knowledge of her slain an-kaidin.

But I knew she would tire faster than Bron, no matter how good her skills, because she'd been too long below the border; her breath would run out before his, leaving her dizzy and fighting for air. It had to be finished quickly.

But I didn't see how it would be. I didn't see how it could be.

The blades were blurs of light, setting the day afire. Patterns dripped in the air like honey from a hive, running out of a spoon. Against the backdrop of lake and island, they knit themselves new colors and overwhelmed the gray of the day.

Hoolies, let it be ended. Before I dishonor the dance.

Del cried out. In strength expended, power expelled, in utter extremity. She cried out something in Northern, then braced herself for the blow.

It came swiftly, scything through the air. Bron severed all his remaining patterns with the boldness of his stroke, and tried to run her through the belly.

Boreal flicked. Met his blade, held firm. Turned the force of the blow aside, if

not the blow itself, and screeched in discordant protest as Bron's blade slid across runes.

I saw the fabric of Del's tunic separate. I saw pale flesh beneath. I waited for the blood, but nothing showed itself.

Hilts hooked. Then Del snatched hers back, reclaiming the blade; leaned away quickly, came back, with a twist of determined wrists.

Bron's blade had missed. Boreal did not.

She took him through the belly. It was a clean, simple thrust, missing bones that might turn the blade, allowing it lethal freedom instead. Her an-kaidin would have been proud; the death was worthy of her.

Bron fell, pulling free of the sword. His own blade swung wildly, then tumbled out of his hand to lie unattended just out of the circle. He remained within.

He gazed up at her in surprise, then said something in uplander. Del answered in the same tongue, kneeling down by his side. She was clearly exhausted, winded by exertion. Her hand shook as she touched his.

I don't know what more he said. I don't speak uplander, and his life was nearly spent. But it meant something to Del; she bent forward and kissed his brow. When she straightened, he was dead.

Del sat very still for a very long time. Slowly her breathing stilled, ran smooth. I saw the expressions in her face: grief, guilt, regret, a hardening of resolve. But the latter was most extreme; it changed her face from flesh to marble and stripped it of humanity.

Carefully, Del cleaned her sword. Rose. Stepped out of the circle. Sheathed her sword and put on the harness, then bent to collect his things, including the now-dull jivatma.

She gazed past me to the east. "They're coming for the stud."

I turned. Saw two children, a girl and a boy; the girl was maybe twelve, the boy a year or two younger. Tow-headed like them all.

"What did he say?" I asked.

Del stared at me. A new and frosty austerity was in her eyes, as much as had been in Bron's. "That I was to honor my an-kaidin."

I frowned. "That's all?"

"All that was necessary." She looked down at the harness and sword, briefly caressing silver studs. "Bron and I were swordmates for as long as I was here.

His an-kaidin was mine; we were his favorite an-ishtoya."

Privacy has its place, but her manner was too rigid. "What else, bascha?"

Del looked at me. "He told me the name of his sword."

"Told you--" I stared. "But I thought you said a Northerner never does that... that it destroys all the magic--lessens the power, or something."

"It was a gift to me," she said bleakly, "to mark the things we once shared as ishtoya and an-ishtoya. And so they would know he forgave me the blood-debt; one is enough, he said."

"Del," I said, "I'm sorry."

After a moment, she nodded. "Sulhaya, Sandtiger. I know what you tried to do... how you tried to stop the dance." She shrugged a little, stark-faced. "But if you break one ritual, one oath, the others become as worthless. The bindings come undone."

The children had finally reached us. I pulled the peg, looped the rope so the stud wouldn't trip, handed the rein to the boy, who reminded me of Massou. Who reminded Del of Jamail.

I turned back to her. "What about the body?"

The impersonality of it rocked her. "Bron--" But she stopped; hardened her tone, said the voca would send someone to give him burial in Staal-Kithra.

I nodded. Looked at the island, floating on winter water. "I don't know how to row."

"That's all right. I do." Resolutely, Del turned toward the lake.

Staal-Ysta. A stark, bleak place, afloat in the center of a glass-black lake: a deep-cut cauldron filled with too-dark wine, all hedged with white-flanked mountains. Born of the desert, such an abundance of water was incomprehensible to me. But here it was, everywhere: the lake, the snow, even the touch of the air. Everything was wet, in an odd, indefinable way.

I looked at Del's face as she rowed. She had masked herself to me, but I had learned to peel it back and discover what lay beneath. The tension of arrival at last at the place of her training had taken its own toll. Bron's death--and the manner of it--made it even worse.

She had built her wall again, the old familiar wall employed as a shield before, when we'd first met, made of harshness, coldness, ruthlessness. The angles of her face were sharp as glass; I expected the cheekbones to cut through flesh.

I am not a man for leaving a thing unsaid if I want to say it, no matter what the situation. But this time, under these circumstances, seeing her face, I held my silence. Del was somewhere else. When she wanted me, when she needed me, I'd be available.

She brought the boat in deftly, snugging it up into the cove out into the edge of the island itself. Holding the rope as well as Bron's harness and sheathed sword, she jumped out onto the shore, setting the boat to trembling and grating against the bottom, and waited for me to join her. She said nothing.

I rose carefully, made my way forward, judiciously selected the best place to

land, and leaped. I landed in mushy, lake-wet turf and mud, slipped to one knee, got up with a muttered curse. Del anchored the rope beneath a stone, then swung around and headed inland.

There was, I saw, a pathway cut through the trees. Feeble sunlight caught on naked branches and wet dark trunks, playing vague shadows against snow and bare brown turf. Mine, blurred, walked with me, stretched taller by elongation. A bearded, bearlike man made of wool and leather and hair, with a sword strapped to his back.

The trees gave way abruptly to a large oblong field, cleared of stumps and vegetation, where wooden lodges skirted edges in curving symmetry. Smoke threaded the air from each, gray on gray, and bluish. Long, rectangular lodges, cracks stuffed with turf and mud and bits of wood to keep out the winter cold. Gathered outside of the lodges, bared blades glinting dully in the dull light of a blue-gray day, were more than a hundred Northern warriors, and a handful of equally fair-haired women. All with swords. All in silence. All watching as we approached.

Del wore her own jivatma, snugged home in its leather sheath slung in a slant across her back. In her hands she carried Bron's, harness straps wrapped like swaddling around the sheath. She carried it like a woman would a baby, with care and pride and honor.

I let her go before me, taking precedence over the man. In the South, when required--and it had been, all too often--she had done the same for me.

Del walked directly to the end of the oblong circle, paying no mind to those who watched. And when she reached the end, facing the ten men who waited before it, she paid no homage to anyone but stood straight and tall and proud. Delilah to

the bone.

"He died well," she told them, in clear Borderer for my benefit. "He honored his an-kaidin."

Ten men. The voca, I knew. Strong men all, of all sizes, some gray, others blond, one even with light brown hair. They were scarred, hard men, accustomed to hard lives, and unlikely to be softened by her sex. If anything, made tougher; I could see it in their eyes.

One of them said something in pure uplander. He looked past her to me, undoubtedly questioning my presence.

Again in Borderer, Del told him I was her sponsor.

He changed languages adroitly. The oldest of them all, I thought, with snowy braids and wind-reddened skin. But he was at least as tall as I, and nothing about him spoke of weakness. "A blade without a name is due no trial, and therefore due no sponsor."

Del's tone was stiffly formal. "Three days," she said. "I have known such trials to take three weeks, when left to the voca. Am I not due consideration for the weather? For hardships? For sorcery leveled against us?"

That sharpened ten pairs of eyes, all shades of blue and gray. A pale race, the Northerners; I felt sun-charred by comparison, copper-brown with bronze-streaked hair.

"What manner of sorcery?" the old man asked.

Del shrugged. "Hounds. Beasts. Even now they wait across the water... unless they know how to swim."

Lids flickered. He started to glance at the others, changed his mind. Clearly it was something to be considered. And since Del hadn't told them about the ward-whistle, I wasn't about to, either. It's nice to have an advantage.

"Trial," he said at last. "Beginning at dawn tomorrow."

Another of them spoke. "You know the rituals, the constraints. You are not to go out of Staal-Ysta. Not to bare your jivatma. Not to invoke its power. You are to remain closeted until the trial. Not a guest, but neither a prisoner; nor will your sponsor be dishonored, so long as he honors the customs of Staal-Ysta." He was younger than the others; brown-haired, gray-eyed. Something softened the line of his mouth. "Kalle is there," he told her, and nodded toward a lodge.

Del looked down at the harness and sword in her hands. For a long moment she didn't move. And then, slowly, she knelt. Placed Bron's jivatma on the boot-trampled ground. One hand touched the hilt. She looked up at the watching voca.

"It was enough to send Bron," she said tightly. "More than enough. You could give me no punishment as hard or harder than that, even naming my execution."

The old man's expression didn't change. "It was why we sent him."

Del rose. Turned on her heel and marched away. Heading straight for the lodge the younger man had indicated.

Those in front of it parted, let her through, said nothing as she opened the wooden door. I saw hard features and harder eyes. I saw anger, grief and resentment. But I also saw respect.

The door scraped against dirt. Del forced it, went inside. I pulled it closed and latched it.

The interior of the lodge was mostly dark, lighted only by vents and the smoke hole, as well as a single lantern depending from the roof beam. The lodge was wide, squat, divided down the center by two rows of posts, evenly spaced to provide a corridor without walls. On either side of the post rows were

compartments, something like large box stalls. In them I saw women and children, as well as dogs and cats. The earthen floor was hardpacked and covered with straw for warmth. It was like nothing I was accustomed to.

More than ever I missed the South.

"Kalle," Del said quietly.

No one answered. No one moved. And then one of the women bent, whispered something to a small girl, sent her forward to greet Del.

Sent her forward to meet her mother.

A single glance told me. There was no need for an explanation. And Del offered me none. She simply turned the girl to face me, turned to face me herself, let flesh and bones tell the story.

"Kalle," she said simply. "The result of Ajani's lust."

Oh. Hoolies. Bascha.

"Well," I said inanely, "at least she takes after her mother."

Slowly, Del shook her head. "Mother and father. Ajani's a Northerner."

Thirty-six

She was five years old, and magnificent. Small, delicate, shyly beautiful, like a fragile, pristine blossom. But she was also clearly a child: active, awkward, blunt. Plainly she stated her preference, which was to be with her mother, not Del.

Del let her go, binding her to nothing. She made no claims on the girl's loyalty, since there was no foundation for it. She made no claims on courtesy,

either, understanding a child's thinking. She simply let Kalle go outside with the woman she knew as her mother, in name if not in blood, and sat down in a corner compartment the rest left conspicuously empty for the blade without a name.

She knelt. Unbuckled harness and jivatma, set both aside in silence. Then pulled a blue-speckled pelt over her legs and looked up at me, still standing, too full of thinking to sit.

Del pulled up legs, clasped her arms around pelted knees, sighed a little, wearily. "When I escaped from Ajani and his men, I had nowhere to go. All of my kin were dead, except for Jamail, and him they took south almost at once. I knew better than to try and rescue him without weapons, without proper training... I'd have failed. He'd have been sold anyway, and probably me as well... so I went north. North to the Place of Swords."

"A difficult journey, alone."

Del scooped tangled hair back from her face. "By the time I arrived, I was heavily pregnant. But I had made up my mind, and nothing would turn me from my course. I didn't want the child, I couldn't love the child; it was nothing more than the result of casual seed spilled by a wolf's-head Northerner... why should I want his byblow?"

Why, indeed; the question made sense. Yet it sounded so horribly cold.

"The voca refused to turn me away, offering succor to someone in need, but neither would they admit me as ishtoya. It was only once I swore to prove myself after the birth of the child that they agreed to even consider admitting me as a probationer. And so I bore Kalle in the dead of winter, and when I was physically able I showed the voca I knew how to handle a sword." She sighed.

"Not as well as I needed to, for my purposes, but enough to convince them of my worth. And so they admitted me."

Del and I had been together nearly a year. Prior to that she'd been in Staal-Ysta for five. But she'd also borne a child; it meant she'd had, at most, four and a half years of training.

I sat down across from her, leaning against the divider. "So very good," I said quietly, "in so very short a time."

She didn't avoid my gaze. "I had a need," she said. "A great and terrible need. You have seen the result."

"Revenge."

"Rescue," she countered, "that first, always. Revenge later, yes. I want to collect the blood-debt Ajani owes me."

"As the voca wants to collect the one you owe Staal-Ysta."

"Once again, a choice," Del said. "In killing Theron, you gave me the rest of the year to live in freedom from the blood-guilt. Even then, I might have ignored the summons and remained in the South, free of the voca, declared a blade without a name." Fingers smoothed the pelts stretched over her knees. "But I have a name, a true name, and I won't let them strip it from me."

"And if death strips it from you?"

Slowly, she shook her head. "I will be buried in Staal-Kithra, with Bron and others like him. An honorable death; my name will be carved into the dolmens and sung in all the songs."

My mouth twisted wryly. "Immortality, such as it is."

Del sighed. "A Southroner wouldn't understand--"

"I understand death," curtly, I interrupted. "I understand permanence. Your name might live on forever, but I'd rather you did, too."

Too abruptly, she changed the subject. "There is amnit," she said, "if you want it. And food. We're not prisoners, as Stigand said; we have the freedom to do and say what we want, so long as it is in here."

"Stigand being the old man?"

"Yes. The other, the youngest, was Telek." She smiled, but only briefly, as if too weary to hold it. "When I left, he was but newly made an-kaidin. At least it hasn't ruined him; he always was a fair man."

"And Stigand isn't?"

"Not unfair. Just hard. Demanding. Difficult to know. He is of the old school, as Baldur was... and Baldur's best friend." She sighed. "It was Stigand himself who gave me the choice between being sword-dancer or kaidin... I insulted him when I left Staal-Ysta. He expected me to stay. And then, of course, I killed Baldur. He has hated me for that."

I could see why. But I didn't say it to her. "Telek seemed reasonable."

"Telek is a good man. He and his woman took Kalle as their own and have given her a fine home."

"But she isn't their own," I said. "Kalle is your daughter."

Del's expression wasn't one, being masked again. This time I couldn't read it.

"I may not live beyond tomorrow, depending on the verdict. What good would it do Kalle to lose a mother she doesn't know? A mother she never had?"

I had no answer for her, because she wasn't arguing with me. She was arguing with herself.

Lines dented her brow. "Why should a child be taken from the only parents she has known, given to a stranger, and told to love her as a mother?"

Still I made no answer.

Del threaded fingers through hair, scraping it back from a haggard face. "Why," she began raggedly, "am I expected to want the girl? I'm not fit to be a mother."

Delilah was, I thought, more fit than many women. I've seen her with children before.

But I was afraid of this one. Of who and what she was; of what she represented. Of the threat she distinctly provided.

"About this trial," I said. "Just exactly what will it be?"

"Exactly? I don't know." Del shrugged, slumping down against the wall. "We'll find out in the morning."

"I'd rather know now."

"You'll have to be patient, Tiger. We're to stay in here until we're sent for."

I frowned. "And not go out at all? But what about--"

She waved. "The nightpot's over there."

It was, I thought, sufficient to end the conversation. And so I bundled myself up in one of the pelts, stretched out, slept--

--and dreamed of dozens of blonde little girls clinging to Del's sword.

Preventing her from using it even to save my life.

I woke up later, long enough to eat and drink what we were brought, then went back to sleep again. The trip north had taken its toll, and I was incredibly tired. I didn't think Del would mind; she was asleep herself.

I hoped her dreams were better than mine.

I slept heavily, woke up in the dead of night. Sleep was completely banished; I'd done my catching up. I got up, used the pot, looked around the lodge.

The light was bad, but I had marked where the door was. Quietly I grabbed Theron's sword, made my way down the corridor between the parade of posts,

unlatched the door, slipped out. Didn't make a sound.

The night was cold. The mud and turf underneath my feet had frozen into hardness. Light was negligible, but reflection off the mountains lent enough to see by. I sucked in frigid air, wishing I'd brought a pelt.

The hand came down on my shoulder. I twitched, swung, lifted the sword, saw Telek's face in the dim light. We were of a like size and build, though there the resemblance stopped. He was fair to my dark and probably a year or two older. Young compared to the rest.

He'd untied and loosened his braids. Light brown hair flowed around his shoulders. But that was the only difference from the man he'd been before.

In fluent Borderer, he reminded me I should remain inside.

"I know that," I agreed. "But when I'm told for no particular reason that I shouldn't do a thing, I generally try to do it. It's my way of fighting injustice."

He took his hand from my shoulder. "You think we're being unjust when we expect you to honor the customs of Staal-Ysta?"

"I want to see Stigand."

Telek drew in a breath. "Now? Why? What business have you with him?"

"Private business, Telek. Will you take me to him?"

Grimly he shook his head. "At dawn the trial begins."

"Which is why I want to talk with him now. He won't have time, later."

"Custom requires--"

"I don't give a danjac's rump what your custom requires," I snapped. "This has to do with that woman in there, the one you've all declared a blade without a name, when she has a greater sense of honor than any of us on this island." I

jerked my head toward the door. "I've spent almost a year with her, Telek... I will swear on anything you name that what she did was out of need, not desire; out of conviction, not caprice. And I will swear also that she bears the guilt with honor, as a true an-ishtoya should, paying respect to her training, her sword, her an-kaidin. She does not dishonor you, or anyone in this place. She does not dishonor Staal-Ysta."

The dim light hid much of his face in shadow. "And if I require you to swear the oath you offered?"

"Do it," I said curtly.

His mouth curved a little. "Then I will," he said smoothly. "I require you to swear by the life of Delilah's daughter that you will not interfere with the trial, but will accept its requisites. No matter what they are."

My blurted response was automatic. "But Kalle is your daughter."

Telek's gaze didn't waver. "Yes," he agreed tautly, "and that is what you will say if Del asks you for advice concerning Kalle's future."

It was, I thought, an ironic, if interesting, pact. I was afraid Del would decide to stay here, to keep the girl, forsaking the life we'd shared. Telek was, too--if for different reasons.

It was an easy oath. But it made me feel dirty.

Telek latched the door. "I'll take you to Stigand's lodge."

The old man was distinctly displeased to see me. He spoke in rapid staccato uplander to Telek, who answered calmly, quietly, reasonably. And eventually Stigand agreed to listen.

We hunkered down in his compartment within the rectangular lodge. His woman was rolled up in pelts, sleeping soundly. Snores issued from other compartments, and the noises of coupling. A baby squalled briefly, stopped. One of the dogs yipped

in dreams. I would have preferred more privacy, but short of going outside it seemed none existed.

Telek took his leave. Stigand waited in silence after waving me to begin.

He was old. Older by night, with his braids shaken loose and a pelt wrapped around his shoulders. I saw the seams of scars in his face, the crookedness of his nose, the line of a jaw that lost more teeth each year. Outside, facing Del, he had been a strong, if aging man. Now he was simply an old one.

I drew in a deep breath. "Friendship is an honorable thing," I said quietly.

"The bond forged between childhood companions, swordmates, fellow ishtoya, kaidin, and an-kaidin, is something to be cherished. Something to be respected. A thing of deep and abiding honor."

Pale blue eyes stared back. He didn't even blink. He was going to be very tough.

"Men who grow old together in adversity and mutual admiration are closer even than babies born at one birth. But one must die first. One always dies first, leaving the other to grieve."

Still the old man said nothing.

"His death was hard enough," I said, "but does it deserve another? Is that what Baldur would want?"

Stigand's lips worked briefly. "It might be what I want," he said.

After a moment, I nodded. "But it's also what she wants, Stigand. To avenge the death of her kin. The slavery of her brother. The loss of innocence at the hands of a Northerner who cast off his honor long ago, replacing it with brutality."

"We gave her a place," he said. "We gave her skills and a trade. We even gave her honor, offering her a thing no other woman has ever been offered."

"You didn't give her honor. What Del has, she earns."

"She repudiated Staal-Ysta."

"She had other responsibilities."

"She blooded her sword in one of us--"

"And now Baldur will never die."

It startled him. He gaped.

I nodded. "You may have buried his body in Staal-Kithra, but his spirit survives in her sword. His teaching survives in her sword; Baldur's wisdom is undiminished. His skills are not forgotten. He teaches her every day."

"You say, Southroner--"

"I have seen her dance."

"You don't understand our customs--"

"I have danced against her."

Stigand glared. "Does that make you any judge? What do I know of you?"

"Probably nothing," I admitted. "In the South, I am known, and well... but this is the North. This is Staal-Ysta. I am most likely an empty name. But it might mean something to you if I say I defeated Theron."

Wrinkled lids twitched. Now he was paying attention. "He was sent to give her the choice."

"And he did, but badly. He wanted to dance against her." I shrugged. "Del accommodated. But I was the one who killed him."

"Have you proof?"

I put the sword into the dim light. "I don't know its name," I told him, "but this is Theron's jivatma. Would I have it if he lived? Would it be a powerless blade?"

The old man looked down at the sword set across my lap. I rested my hands upon hilt and blade, letting him see what I did. Letting him see I survived; once, I

wouldn't have.

Stigand put out a gnarled hand. I saw blotches on it, twisted sinews, swollen knuckles. He touched fingers to the runes.

"It must be painful for you," I told him quietly, "to look at the woman who took the life of your friend. If you give me the chance, I will take her away from here."

It startled him. He jerked back his hand and stared. "Take her out of Staal-Ysta?"

"Provided she's alive."

Slowly, he shook his head. "I am not the sole judge. The voca is made of ten men."

"But you hold the power here. Traditionally, they defer to you; I can see it in Telek. You could sway the decision."

Stigand hissed something angrily in uplander. "Do you know," he choked, once he had recovered his Borderer, "do you know I could have you killed for this? For asking such a thing?"

"I'm asking out of need."

"What need?" he demanded. "What is the woman to a man like you, a Southroner, to whom women are merely things?"

I fought to remain calm. "Everything Baldur was to you. I honor her as much as you honored him."

Stigand spat by my knee. "You know nothing of honor. If you did, you wouldn't be here like this, trying to twist me this way and that. Trying to shape justice to your liking. What do you know of honor?"

"I know the circle," I told him, "the sword-dance. If you like, I'll swear by

that, so you'll know I mean what I say."

Tears glittered in rheumy eyes. "He was my friend."

With difficulty, I swallowed. "We have a saying, in the South, about cats. A desert cat, born of the Punja, an animal worth avoiding. We say: 'the sandtiger walks alone!'"

Stigand stared; I went on.

"But this one has tired of that. The Sandtiger has chosen a mate... swordmate, bedmate, lifemate. Yet now you place her at risk; do you think I will let you do it?" I leaned forward, over the sword. "Old man, I will honor your customs to a point, because they are worth it--to a point. But if you sentence that woman to death, I'll exact my own revenge. A sandtiger's revenge."

His chin trembled. "You threaten an old man."

"No." I shook my head. "I address a warrior, Stigand. I address an an-kaidin. I address a man I respect, because, in my tongue, you are a shodo. Sword-master. One who teaches others the circle, and the beauty of the dance."

Stigand looked at the sword. "That is not yours."

I took it out of my lap and set it on the rugs. "Then I gladly give it up. It belongs in Staal-Kithra."

The old man frowned. Worked his tongue against his teeth. Glanced briefly at the woman still sleeping in her pelts.

Heavily, he sighed. "It is hard to lose a friend."

"Even harder to lose a mate."

"Go," Stigand said.

I started to rise, held back. "May I have an answer?"

"In the morning," he answered gruffly.

Alarm flickered dully. There were nine other men involved. Without assurances

from this one... "Shodo--"

"An-kaidin," he corrected. "I have told you to go."

Hoolies. There was nothing left to do.

I rose. Looked down at the jivatma I'd carried so long. Then bid it a silent farewell, turning to walk away.

"Southroner." I swung back. Stigand's expression was enigmatic. "How many years have you?"

It caught me off guard. "Altogether?--I don't know. Thirty-four, maybe thirty-five... I grew up without mother or father."

"How long a sword-dancer?"

I shrugged. "Eighteen years, give or take a day. Without knowing my age, it's difficult to say."

His gaze held my own. "Baldur and I were born on the same day in the same village, seventy-two years ago. From birth we were companions. It was a strong bond, and one we greatly honored."

Silently, I nodded.

"My woman and I have been together more than fifty years. That bond I also honor."

Baffled, I frowned.

Stigand's tone was rough. "That is my answer. Now go." Silently, I went. Wishing

I knew what he meant.

I made my way back toward the compartment Del and I shared in Telek's lodge. But

I stopped short before reaching it, pausing to look down on Telek himself,

asleep in a corner with his woman and the daughter Del had borne.

Mostly they were lumps beneath pelts, huddled together against the cold. The

girl slept between them, snuggled up for body warmth, but one arm was free of pelts and blankets. One small, slender arm, with delicate hand and even more delicate fingers. And I wondered, looking at it, if that hand would ever hold a sword, as her mother's did. If the girl would ever step into a circle.

Fine pale hair spilled out into the fur of pelt-swathed pallets. Most of her face was hidden, but I saw the mouth--Del's mouth... the subtle cleft in her chin--Ajani's, I wondered? The curve of one cheek. And lashes curled against it. I turned. Moved to rejoin Del in our compartment. Found her eyes open, looking at me; saw the shine of tears in them. Saw the desperate tension in the line of her mouth as she fought to keep from giving herself away.

I wanted to tell her it didn't matter, that I understood. That I comprehended the incredible tension she had been under, knowing she had left a child behind; I even recalled our brief discussion of mothers and fathers, and children born to sword-dancers; Del's pensive melancholy, the undertone of despair. I wanted to tell her it all made sense now, that I understood, and didn't blame her for it.

But as I lay down beside her, Del turned from me toward the wooden wall and shut me out decisively.

I spent the remainder of the night wide awake. So, I knew, did Del.

Thirty-seven

Just before dawn, Del and I were separated. I wasn't happy about it, being more than a bit concerned for her state of mind, but Telek assured me it was

customary. His woman, Hana--with Kalle as a helper--took Del into a compartment at the far end of the lodge. Telek himself took me into the one he shared with his family and presented me with fresh clothing.

"Northern garb, not Southron," he apologized courteously. "But we are of a like size, and there is none here other than our own."

I shrugged. "If I'd come north with only a dhoti, burnous and sandals, I'd have frozen my gehetties off long ago--or so Del repeatedly told me." I smiled even as Telek did. "I've gotten used to the weight."

He cast a glance down the way at Hana, busily aiding Del. "I won't ask what passed between you and Stigand last night--it's your business--but I will ask you to recall the agreement you made with me."

I was stripping out of garters, gaiters, boots. "Yes. I remember. I will abide by the requirements of the trial." I tugged the tunic over my head. "I don't suppose you could give me an idea what to expect?"

Telek shook his head. "I am only one man. The voca is ruled by a majority. Even if I told you the sentence I might prefer, others may desire otherwise."

I scratched my chest, loosening hair bound up by close confinement. Hoolies, but what I wouldn't give to wear the silks and gauzes of the South again, unfettered by scratchy wool, heavy furs, stiff leather!

"And what you want, Telek, is to see Del gone from Staal-Ysta." Stigand as well, though I didn't say it; I figured the trial's results would speak for themselves.

Telek's face was grim, eyes oddly hostile. "I am afraid," he said quietly.

"Afraid she will grow too attached, if she stays, and will lay claim to Kalle."

I lowered my voice, not wanting Del--or Kalle--to hear. "But she gave her to

you, didn't she? Asked you to raise her daughter?"

Briefly, he nodded. "The day after Kalle's birth, she was given into our care.

We named her, not Del. I had been kaidin to Del's ishtoya before she was elevated to an-ishtoya and became Baldur's--she knew me, respected me, honored me... and it was a joy to accept the girl. Hana is--barren." He flicked a glance down the post-lined corridor; everyone else save Hana, the girl and Del was gone, including the dogs and cats. "It was a gift of the gods. But now--"

"Now you're afraid the gift will be rescinded." Grimly, I nodded, tugging on fresh woolen trews. "No more than I am, Telek. I think we have much in common." He frowned, passing me the brushed wool undertunic. "What would you have to fear, Southroner? What is Kalle to you?"

"Change," I declared succinctly. "I happen to like my life. I like the freedom, the challenge, the risks. And I like sharing it with Del... unencumbered, you might say, by anything as significant as a child."

"Significant," he echoed. "Indeed, a child has significance. And the man or woman who can't see that is without honor."

Honor, again. A familiar refrain. "It's not that I don't like children, or that I think Kalle isn't a beautiful little girl--"

--but you don't want the responsibility." Telek nodded. "Once, I felt the same. But then once I swore never to take a woman to wife, preferring the ease of uncomplicated relationships." His smile was wry. "We all change, Southroner. Sooner or later. Some of us more than others." His gaze was on Del's distant head bobbing above the privacy divider.

It sobered me. Too often I didn't bother to think about what would happen when I got old--well, older, maybe not old--and was unable to earn my living as a sword-dancer. There weren't a whole lot of old or older sword-dancers around;

age takes its toll, and we tend to kill ourselves off.

So I don't think about it much. I decided not to think about it now.

I finished dressing in silence. The borrowed clothing was of good wool dyed a deep blue-black: long-sleeved tunic with fringe depending from the neck, ornamented with silver beads that clattered as they collided; soft-combed treads, silver-tipped fur gaiters cross-wrapped from ankles to knees; heavy leather bracers stretching from wrists to mid-forearm, weighted with round silver bosses.

Hoolies, such vanity!

More yet: a matching belt so wide it guarded nearly my entire midsection, also elaborately bossed, and finally a heavy wool cloak dyed a rich, bright indigo-teal, to set off the darker color of tunic and treads.

Telek twisted it from shoulder to shoulder, folding it back, then pinned it in place with massive silver brooches, one on each shoulder. The weight of the cloak spilled down my back, reaching to my boots.

I rolled shoulders unaccustomed to such weight. "If I fell into the lake, I'd drown in all this finery."

"You'd drown anyway; Del says you can't swim." Telek grinned. "Except for the sun-coppered skin and brown hair, you could be one of us."

"No thanks," I said politely. "Too many traditions attached... I'd rather just be a Southron sword-dancer, whose only obligation is to survival in the circle."

"A worthy ambition," Telek said quietly, then nodded his head in Del's direction. "The an-ishtoya, Southroner--Baldur's greatest student... and his greatest failure."

I turned. For a moment all I could do was stare at Del--white-faced, stark-faced

Del--who wore the same color Bron had, in the circle: somber, unrelieved black, as well as fur-sheathed, cord-wrapped braids. As I did, she wore bracers on her forearms, but in place of leather they were silver. At her left shoulder rode the jivatma named Boreal.

She was magnificent. She was also hard and cold as death, whose color she wore so well.

Her expression was implacable. "They are calling for us."

Telek nodded, preceded us out of the long lodge. His light brown hair had been freshly braided and wrapped by Hana, and he wore subdued brown. The cloak was warm sienna, reminding me of the South.

As we passed, Hana reached out and caught Kalle by one shoulder, pulling her out of the way. Del paused, abruptly knelt, brushed back the girl's fine hair. "I will make you proud of me today."

I saw the blossom of fear in Hana's face, though Kalle merely smiled, not comprehending the undercurrents of the moment.

I looked at Telek. His face was grim and hard, though I saw something else in his eyes. Apprehension, impatience, a tremendous tension struggling to show itself in spite of the iron grip he had on his emotions. He saw me looking at him, abruptly pushed open the door. "The circle awaits, Del."

She rose. Fingertips lingered briefly in Kalle's hair. Then she walked resolutely away from the girl.

As we stepped out, I was grateful for the voluminous cloak. Pinned back for effect and ease of movement, it lacked the freedom I needed for total warmth, but at least there was a little. The air was crisp and clear and cold; snow and turf crunched under my boots.

The light, as yet, was newborn, filtering through bare-branched trees to paint

faint striped patterns on the ground. It lent everything an ethereal, blue-gray tint, polishing the silver of the sword hilts strapped to so many backs.

Everyone was gathered, even the smallest of children.

In the center of the clearing stood nine men, among them Stigand. Each of them bore a sword. Telek gestured me to stand aside, away from the center, though separate from the audience. Del he took to the very center, before the voca, and commanded her to stand before those who would judge her.

She took her place. She was in profile to me, sharp as glass, rigidly correct.

Whatever sentence they would declare, she was ready for it.

Telek went first. He drew his sword, stepped close to Del, set its tip into the ground. And pressed, thrusting it down, until the hilt and half the blade stood upright in the dawn.

Nine men followed suit, until she was caged by a circle of swords. Her own she wore on her back.

Stigand stood in the middle of the line of men, side by side, framed by those who were younger and stronger than he. But none, I knew, with his power; I hoped it would be enough.

For the sake of the an-ishtoya's sponsor, he spoke in Borderer. "Declare yourself before us."

"Delilah," she answered quietly, "daughter of Staal-Ysta."

"Why are you come before us?"

"To stand trial for the death of the an-kaidin Baldur, whose life I took last year." Del drew in a breath. "To expiate the blood-guilt and to pay swordgild for his loss."

The silence was heavy. Unobtrusively I glanced around, trying to judge the

others. I saw stiff Northern faces; heard crisp Northern comments in the tongue I didn't know. They were not disposed to give her leniency for the death of the old an-kaidin.

"Tell us why," Stigand said.

"I needed to blood my jivatma."

"But why blood it in Baldur? He was not an honored enemy--he was an honored friend!"

Oh, hoolies. Now Stigand was angry.

"I needed him," Del said. "I needed him in my sword."

Stigand's voice shook. "Tell us why, then. Tell us why it was worth his life."

Del told him. She spoke to Stigand, not to the others, though they could hear as well. So could everyone else. Quietly, unemotionally, she related what had happened to her family. How Ajani and the raiders had destroyed everything she knew. The dry factuality of her report stripped the impact completely from it, and made me fear for the result.

At last she finished her explanation. It wasn't really a defense, being little more than a tale related, and I was afraid the icy control she exerted over herself would prejudice them against her.

Now it was my turn.

Stigand's eyes were sharp. "Will the an-ishtoya's sponsor step forward and declare himself?"

It wasn't really a question, though he phrased it as one. I stepped forward a little, heard murmured comments, tried to catch Del's eyes and failed. Her gaze was locked on the voca.

"I am the Sandtiger," I said. "Born of the South, born of the Punja... I'm a sword-dancer, seventh-level."

The declaration produced silence.

After a moment, Stigand nodded. "This man is known to me. He is indeed the Sandtiger, bearing the scars of the cat he killed to gain a name, won in honor and dignity."

Well, there hadn't been much dignity about it, really. The cat had nearly killed me. It had been sheer good fortune that I'd dodged the worst of his paw-swipes while managing to pin him against the rocks with my crude spear, until I pierced his vitals.

Honor? Maybe. I'd just wanted my freedom; it had seemed the only way.

Stigand droned on. "You have come to Staal-Ysta as sponsor to the an-ishtoya."

I said I had.

"Knowing what the responsibility entails."

Well, more or less; I'd support Del's story and tell them I thought her actions had merit. I said so.

"Willing to accept that responsibility in whatever form it takes."

Inwardly, I sighed. Told him I'd agreed. Wished they'd hurry up--

"How well do you know the an-ishtoya?"

Hoolies, at this rate it would take all day just to establish my credentials!

Briefly, I told the voca I'd spent the last ten months riding with Del, and that

I probably knew her as well or better than anyone, since we'd been bedmates as well as swordmates, and had sparred with her in the circle as well as dancing in exhibitions, and had accompanied her on missions of employment, easily verifiable if they wanted to take the time to track down our Southron employers.

I thought that might shut him up; it would take a very long time.

Stigand's expression was fierce. "And do you support everything the an-ishtoya

has said? Do you support her reasons for killing Baldur?"

It was a true test, and tricky. I'd have to choose my answer carefully.

Cursing my lack of fluency in Borderer, I nonetheless embarked on what I hoped was an eloquent, impassioned defense of Del's actions. But halfway through I ran out of eloquence entirely, stopped, took another step forward.

"It doesn't matter," I told them. "What matters is the voca's interpretation of her actions, not a decision based on wrongness or rightness. We all have been faced with doing things we'd rather not do. I doubt any of us enjoys killing people, but we do it when we have to. I say that have to is determined by the strength of the circumstances." I drew in a breath. "Del swore an oath on the souls of her murdered kin as well as her jivatma that she would avenge their deaths. That in itself has honor, as taught here at Staal-Ysta. But she knew her chances of succeeding were slight; a woman alone, no matter how good with a sword, can't overcome twenty or thirty men." I gestured briefly in Del's direction, indicating the sword. "She could count on no one but herself--collecting a blood-debt is a thing left to kin, and she had none left--so she called upon the only man she knew capable of giving her the strength, support and power she required--she called on her an-kaidin."

"She kitted her an-kaidin!"

Stigand's impassioned cry hung in the morning air. And I thought, looking at him, I'd been a fool to hope he would suggest as a just sentence anything but her death.

I wet my lips. "But Baldur isn't dead. He lives on in her jivatma."

"Not possible," Telek declared.

I disagreed. "Don't Northerners believe that by blooding a jivatma in the body of an honored person, enemy or otherwise, that the sword takes on the attributes

of that person?"

Telek gestured. "There is more to it than that."

"Broken down," I said distinctly, "that's basically what it means. And maybe what it is; I've seen jivatmas 'die,' when deprived of the sword-dancer's life. First Theron's sword, then Bron's... they became merely swords instead of remaining jivatmas."

The voca exchanged glances. Clearly I'd unveiled nothing new, but maybe they'd hoped I wouldn't know so much about their customs.

"So," I said quietly, "Del called on Baldur to help, and Baldur did. He stepped into the circle. He danced with his best an-ishtoya. And he died, so that Del's jivatma could live. So that she could collect the blood-debt, in true Northern style. With true Northern honor."

The old man stared at me. I saw grief, anger, acknowledgment. But he said nothing. He merely swung around and walked away, while the other nine followed him.

Hoolies, I hate waiting. But waiting is what we did, Del and I. While all the others stood and watched, waiting as much as we did.

Eventually, Stigand came marching back with the voca. Took his place again before Del's cage of swords. Said nothing as the others fell in to flank him; Telek avoided my eyes, as did Stigand.

Not a good sign.

The old man looked straight at Del. "You have killed one of our number. That is unforgivable. But so are the deaths of others."

Del didn't even blink.

"You have agreed to pay swordgild to Baldur's kin; he has none. You will pay it

instead to Staal-Ysta, to help in times of need."

Del nodded once.

"As to the sentence for the murder of your an-kaidin, we will be lenient. We offer you a choice: death, or life. Exile yourself and go, or stay here and be executed."

Instantly there was an outbreak of conversation among all those watching. Some clearly felt the sentence was just, others argued against it.

I looked at Stigand. So. The old man had upheld his end of the deal. I looked at Telek. His face was stony, but I saw satisfaction in his eyes. The honor of Staal-Ysta was upheld, Del was punished, they both got what they wanted: Staal-Ysta empty of painful reminders of deaths and births.

I released a sigh of relief. Now we could go South. Now we could go home.

"How long," Del asked, "is the exile?"

"Forever," Stigand told her.

Unsurprised, Del nodded. "I'd like to buy back a year."

It stopped all the clamor dead. Everyone stared; some gaped.

Stigand was clearly puzzled. "Buy back a year?"

Del's voice rang out clearly, carrying through the cold air. "I want the first day of my exile moved back twelve months. I will pay for it."

"Why?" Stigand demanded.

"I have a child." Del looked straight back at him. "I'd like to be a mother, if for only a year."

Telek shut his eyes.

Stigand was shaking his head. "This isn't acceptable. You gave the girl up--"

"--because I had no other choice." Her voice was quiet, but the underlying passion carried as clearly as a shout. "What manner of mother would I be without

honor? What life could I offer a child? None. And so I swore my oaths and gave her up so I could collect the blood-debt to regain my family's honor... to give Kalle some honor." She looked squarely at Telek. "I don't mean to take her from you. I mean only to share her for a year--and then she will be yours forever, undivided, while I spend my life in other lands." Bitterness crept in. "Is that so much to ask? One year in exchange for a lifetime?"

Oh, hoolies, bascha. This wasn't part of the deal.

Stigand didn't look worried, though Telek's face was gray. The old man merely smiled. "You said you would buy back the year. With what? You must pay swordgild to Staal-Ysta... what is left to spend?"

"Blood-gift," she said steadily, "for the space of that year."

Stigand's voice was gentle; he was certain of the outcome. "I say again: what? Do you mean to give up your jivatma?"

"No," Del answered quietly. "I give you a new an-ishtoya. I give you the Sandtiger."

Thirty-eight

Noise. Everyone was talking to me, talking at me: Stigand, Telek, other members of the voca, other Northerners. But it was all just noise, all of it; I walked away from it easily, pushing through the throng, and finally reached Del.

I reached out, caught one arm above the elbow, pulled her close. "We have to have a talk."

The voca had uncaged her, each man pulling his sword from the ground and sheathing it, denoting acceptance of her proposition. All but two, that is; neither Stigand nor Telek had been satisfied, but they were soundly defeated by a distinct majority, and so eventually they had plucked their swords from the ground. Del had purchased her year.

She tried once to disengage her arm from my hand, failed, gave in. Allowed me to physically escort her away from the commotion, back through the trees to the shore to where the boat was anchored.

I released her arm, knowing I'd undoubtedly left red fingermarks in her flesh that would by morning turn blue; Del is that fair.

She stood stiffly, almost awkwardly, staring resolutely across the lake to where mountains bumped the sky. Water carries sound; I heard horses in the distance. I thought I heard the stud.

Slowly I pointed to the boat. "What," I began quietly, "prevents me from getting in that boat and leaving?"

Del's tone was flat. "You don't know how to row."

"Oh, I learn pretty fast... and you have given me more than enough provocation to get in there now and do it."

"Then go," she said tonelessly.

I caught her arm again, swung her around to face me. "You know perfectly well I can't! You saw to that, didn't you? You knew once I agreed to abide by the voca's sentence I'd be trapped by my own words, and you could do whatever you felt like doing, regardless of what I wanted."

"You have a choice," she said curtly. "You aren't a prisoner. You're a student, just like all the others... no one will keep you here against your will. No one will chain you up or lock you into a lodge. At worst they'll give you a

jivatma!"

"I don't want one!" I shouted. "What I want is to get in that boat--with you--and go back across the lake, where we can collect the stud and get the hoolies out of here, right now!"

"I have a year," she said grimly. "Duly purchased and paid for."

"With my freedom, Del!" I stared at her, astonished at the depth of her resolution; her lack of compassion for me, whom she had dispensed with so readily. "You didn't even ask me!"

She swung to face me squarely. "And if I had come to you and said, so prettily: 'Please, Tiger, will you do this for me; Tiger, will you give me a year of your life?' " She shook her head. "Why should I waste my breath? I knew what you would have said."

"No you don't. You haven't the faintest idea. Because you're so wrapped up in yourself and your own needs right now, you're totally blind to mine."

"Not blind!" she cried. "I see you! But I also see Kalle. I also see my daughter--"

"--whom you gave up the day after she was born."

"Because I had to--"

"Don't give me that goat dung, Del. You didn't have to do anything of the sort. No one forced you to. No one snatched that child away from you and said you couldn't see her again until you'd avenged your family. That was you. That was you--"

"What do you know about it?" she cried. "What do you know about love and honor within a family... what do you know about responsibility to one's kin... you've never accepted any responsibility in your entire life!"

It hurt. "And how responsible were you to Kalle when you gave her up? Were you satisfying her needs, or your own?"

Del's eyes were blazing. "It was something--"

"--you had to do, I know." I shook my head. "You have every right to make harsh decisions for yourself, Del, even wrong ones, but you have no right at all to decide how others will live their lives."

"Kalle is mine."

"You gave up your rights to her."

"No."

"Yes." I sighed heavily and scratched at the clawmarks in my beard, trying to maintain patience and temper, and being hardpressed. "She has a good life with Telek and Hana--you said so yourself--why destroy it now?"

"I'm destroying nothing. I'm sharing her for a year."

"And how do you think Kalle will view that? Are you a temporary mother, coming to see her at your convenience, expecting her to give you the same love and affection she gives to Hana?" I shook my head. "How will it be for her, Del?"

Del wrenched her head around to stare angrily at the lake. I saw tears glisten in her eyes. "It's a year against a lifetime."

"And how will it be for you when that year is up, and you have to leave her forever? Do you think it will be easy? Do you think you can simply walk away, saying your time is done?"

"I'd rather go knowing I had a year with her, than go now having had nothing."

It was incredibly frustrating. "But you gave her up the day after she was born, Del! You've spent the last five years apart from her--why be so demanding now?"

"Because I was wrong." Del turned to face me again. "I was wrong, Tiger." She held herself so rigidly I was afraid she'd break. "I was so angry when I came

here I could see nothing else but the revenge I'd exact from Ajani and his men.

It was what fueled me, Tiger, during the journey here. Knowing I carried his child. Knowing that once I'd learned the sword, once I'd earned my jivatma, I could do what I wanted to do. I'd have the skills and strengths to do it."

More quietly, I said, "I understand revenge. I understand hatred. But you can't live a normal life by depending only on those emotions."

Del's mouth was flat. "I lived for five years on those emotions, Tiger. Don't tell me it can't be done."

"I said normal life, Del. Your life isn't normal. It isn't even close."

"Maybe not," she agreed. "But maybe spending a year here with Kalle will give me the balance I need."

I spread my hands. "What about Kalle? How will she feel?"

Del shook her head so determinedly her braids swung against her shoulders.

"Tiger, you don't understand. You have no idea--"

"--how Kalle might feel?" I finished. "Think again, Del."

She put the palms of her hands flat against her temples. "You don't understand," she repeated. "How could you? You yourself admitted you don't know if you've sired any children--maybe you have, maybe you haven't. You're sublimely indifferent to the possibility there might be sons and daughters of your blood scattered throughout the South." She pulled her hands away, slapping them against her thighs. "Yet you stand here and tell me you know how my daughter will feel?"

"Yes," I told her flatly. "More than you can know."

Impatiently, "Oh, Tiger--"

"I know," I told her, tapping fingers against my chest. "I know--deep inside,

deep in here--what it's like to be deserted. What it's like to grow up knowing no one claims you... what it's like having no one at all but yourself... what it's like knowing the woman who bore you dropped you into the sand like a load of stinking dung, then left you there to rot." I stepped closer to her, very close. "I know, Del. I know very well."

She stared at me, white-faced. I'd shocked her with my passion, but I hadn't changed her feelings. Too easily she dismissed mine. "It's not the same, Tiger. I'm not deserting Kalle--"

"She won't know the difference," I said bluntly. "Oh, yes, you and Hana and Telek will try to explain it to her, but she won't understand. All she will know is that you've left. That you've left her ...it's the only thing that matters.

She won't understand all the reasons behind your departure. She'll only know you've gone."

"When she's older--"

"How much older?" I asked. "It takes years, Del. Many, many years until you come to terms with it... and even then you never really do. You understand it a little better, but the hurt's still there inside." I drew in a breath. "Your own sentence is harsh. Permanent exile from Staal-Ysta, from your daughter... but have you thought about what your purchased year will do to her?"

Woodenly, "Give her time with her mother."

After a moment, I shook my head. "Hana is her mother."

"You don't understand!" she shouted. "How can you understand? You're so ruled by your own lusts and selfishness that all you can see is the threat she provides to the life you and I have shared. Well, it's finished! What is there left of it?"

"One year," I said grimly. "You made sure of that, didn't you? Way back when you

first started talking about dancing styles and the customs of Staal-Ysta... way back when you first started instructing me as if you were the kaidin and I the an-ishtoya." I nodded as she stared. "I should have seen it then. All this blather about the North... I should have seen it then. You knew there was a chance you could buy your way out of an execution by offering a blood-gift to the voca--and that gift, you decided, was me."

Del's tone was flat. "Yes."

Anger, oddly, diminished with her admission. I sighed heavily. Turned from her, faced the lake and mountains, folded my arms across my chest. "I suppose I don't really blame you. And I think that's what makes me the angriest--I do understand what you've done."

"And why?"

I shrugged. "Enough of the why, I guess. Mostly, I just feel empty. Tired, numb, empty... I feel like I've been used."

Stark-faced, Del said nothing.

Idly I rolled a stone out of its pocket in the ground. Bent, picked it up, tossed it out into the lake. Watched it fall, heard its splash. Saw the rings ripple out from its passage. "I can't stay here."

She drew in a deep, uneven breath. "There may be an honorable way yet. I think if you spoke to Telek, or maybe even Stigand, they could find a way to release you from the year."

It brought a blossom of hope. Then it faded. "A way for me to buy myself out of my sentence?" I smiled and laughed a little. "But what have I to sell? What have I to trade?"

Del turned from me abruptly. Stared blindly out at the water, then just as

abruptly swung back. "I want that year with Kalle. But I also want it with you."

Well, I suppose that's something. But I'm not sure, now, it's enough.

Thirty-nine

It was sundown. In the North, the colors are different. Here the sun moves behind snow-flanked mountains and sucks the daylight with it. But because much of the day is gray and blue and ivory, the colors of sunset are muted. It simply fades to deeper blues and bleaker grays, until the sun is replaced by moonlight, holding luminous court against pallid black.

We gathered near a dolmen on the island: Stigand, myself, Telek. For questions and explanations, hoping for solutions. None of us was happy.

Stigand was wrapped up in a warm green cloak, white braids corded with gold.

He'd shrugged the folds up near his head, warding his neck against drafts.

Gloomily, he stared past me to the dolmen, sucking the teeth he had left.

Telek was little better. He still wore deep brown and warm sienna. His mood was decidedly darker.

"She won't be moved," I said. "She has made up her mind."

Telek's mouth twitched in wry displeasure. "Del always was stubborn."

Stigand's tone was querulous. "She has no respect for our customs."

"That's not true," I retorted. "And you know it, old man."

We had gone beyond the sometimes troublesome courtesies of strangers, being faced with the same unhappy reality we each had hoped to avoid. It cut through the need for banalities like a shearing knife, showing us the brighter colors of

need in place of duller conversation. We wasted no time now.

Stigand sighed, snugged his cloak closer. "The others are adamant. She has bought her year, they say, with her gift of the Sandtiger. A worthy addition, they say, to the ranks of an-ishtoya."

I scratched through beard to chin. "I might have thought I'd at least be a kaidin."

Telek smothered a brief laugh. "Yes, well--undoubtedly. It was not intended as an insult. But you have no knowledge of our styles, other than what Del has taught you, and that in itself is what gives you the an- honorific rather than making you merely ishtoya. It is something, Southron; be thankful."

I looked at him squarely. "No. What I am is disgusted." I pulled the borrowed cloak around me, swathing myself like a Southron sandbat. "I don't belong here. I don't want to be here. What I want is to go back across that lake and get my horse, so I can go home again. Down South, where I belong. In the Punja, where it's warm."

"Would that I could send you," Stigand muttered.

"You will be here a year," Telek told me patiently, ignoring the petulant comment. "There will be much to do. I doubt you will remain a mere an-ishtoya for long--with your Southron skills already in place, you will surely be elevated more quickly than most to the rank of kaidin--and then you may teach worthy students."

I grunted. "I don't want to teach. I'm a sword-dancer; I dance."

Stigand worked something out of his teeth, spat it onto the ground. "It is a waste of time--ours and theirs--when students choose sword-dancing over the more honorable rank of kaidin."

Telek sighed. "Sword-dancing is also an honorable profession," he said patiently. "Your own son chose sword-dancing over the rank of kaidin, Stigand... don't let your prejudice get in the way."

The old man spat again. "My own son was a fool," he said curtly. He looked at me searchingly a moment, then his face twisted in uncertainty. "Do you know?"

I frowned. "Know what?"

"That Theron was my son."

It rocked me. All I could do was stare in shock at the old man, whose son I had killed in the circle to keep him from killing Del. Theron, who had come South to find the an-ishtoya and give her the choice of meeting him in the circle, or going North to face the voca.

Whose dead jivatma I had presented to his father.

"No," Telek said, "why should you? Unless Del told you, which seems unlikely; Del says very little very much of the time."

I reflected aloud there were times Del said entirely too much altogether.

Stigand grunted. Telek smiled.

"I'm sorry," I told the old man. "Had I known--"

Stigand didn't let me finish. "Did he die honorably?"

The dance was fresh in my mind. No, Theron had not died honorably because he had cheated. He had reuquenched, as Del called it, making his jivatma doubly dangerous. Doubly powerful.

"Yes," I lied, "he did. It was a good dance."

Stigand sighed deeply. "Theron always was a stubbornly headstrong boy... much worse than all the others."

I glanced at Telek, raising brows in a silent question.

"Stigand has--had--eight sons," he said quietly.

Well, that was something. At least I hadn't killed the only one.

Telek's smile was very bland. "And I'm one of them."

Hoolies! Here I was standing alone in the trees in the dark with the father and brother of a man I'd killed. Not something to make a man feel particularly welcome.

Uneasily, I stirred. "I didn't have much choice, you know. It was a dance to the death."

Telek nodded. "Theron knew that when he left here looking for Del."

Stigand's tone was glum. "She always was better than Theron."

Telek nodded. "And he always resented it."

I cleared my throat. "About our problem with me leaving Staal-Ysta...?"

Father and son wore identical expressions of annoyance.

"There must be a way," I said flatly, equally annoyed. "Find me a way."

Telek glanced briefly at Stigand, who said nothing; looking gloomy. "Del promised you to us for twelve months, and the voca accepted."

It was all I could do not to shout at them. "Look. I'm a Southroner, not Northerner... I can't be bound by your voca or your customs if they interfere with my personal lifestyle. Del didn't warn me about what she intended to do, so I was never given a chance to refuse." I shook my head. "This is not my place. I don't intend to stay here."

Telek's expression was grim. "You agreed to abide by the results of the trial."

I nodded vigorously. "Yes--before I had any idea Del intended to sell me back into slavery--" I broke it off before my desperation could begin to show. "There must be some way, Telek. An honorable, Northern way to set this Southron sword-dancer free."

After a moment, Telek looked at his father. Stigand looked no more pleased.

"You're asking for a special dispensation," he growled.

"I don't care what you call it. I just want to get out of here."

Telek scratched his jaw. "Perhaps there is a way. Even so, have you thought of the consequences?"

I frowned. "What consequences?"

Telek didn't mince any words. "It means leaving Del behind."

I looked directly at Stigand. "Talk to the voca," I said. "Find me a way to leave."

The old man sucked a tooth and spat.

Waiting drives me sandsick. So does inactivity. Generally, when faced with the former, I turn to banishing the latter with as much force as I can muster, seeking out opponents to meet me in the circle. Only this time, I couldn't. I had no sword.

I asked, of course. I thought surely someone could give me the loan of a sword. But no one would. I was told--politely, of course--that only the an-kaidin could choose a sword for me. When I protested that I had to have something, if only to keep in shape, the declaration was repeated. Students were incapable of selecting the right sword for themselves; the task fell to the kaidin or an-kaidin. Since I had none yet officially assigned, I'd have to wait.

Waiting, again.

I could make no headway no matter how much I protested, so at last I demanded someone to row me across the lake to the other side, where I could at least ride the stud. This was agreeable. And so they gave me Del.

Silence is an odd thing. It can be uncomfortable or relaxing. Peaceful or disturbing. Companionable or hostile. But the silence that reigned as Del rowed

me across was none of those things, being composed of an absolute absence of communication. I thought of all the things I wanted to say, yet said none of them. I hadn't sorted them out.

I jumped out as the boat was grounded. Two of the settlement children had brought the stud and another mount, a gray--signals from the island negated the need for hiking down the lakeshore to the corrals--and I took his reins immediately, not bothering to see what Del was doing. Anchoring the boat, most likely... but I didn't wait. I strode through the barrows and dolmens of Staal-Kithra, leading my horse, and climbed the steep path overlooking the lake. The stud was snorty and inquisitive, shoving a demanding muzzle beneath my arm and nibbling. Absently I scratched the underside of his jaw, not really giving him the attention he craved. Instead I looked down at Staal-Kithra, watching the woman accept the reins to her borrowed mount. She peered up at me, shading her eyes; I gave her nothing in return.

Del came up, of course. As I had, half-climbing, half-scrambling, trying to stay out of the way of a horse in a hurry to reach the top.

The gray was a gelding, a dark steel-colored horse with a frosting of darker dapples, pale mane and tail, smudgy muzzle. Like the stud, he wore winter hair, made oddly shapeless beneath the weight. Del brought him over, gave him rein, let him graze as she moved to stand beside me.

For the first time since I've known her, I didn't want her there.

The day was bright, clear, cold. Wind ruffled my hair, stripping it out of my eyes and giving me an unobstructed view of the island in the water.

"I don't belong there," I said.

Del's tone was quiet, inoffensive. Yet the words offended me. "You belong

wherever you want to."

"I don't want to belong down there," I told her curtly. "It isn't my place. I'm an old horse, Del. You can't take me to water and expect me to drink every time, just because you say so, especially if I know the water is tainted."

She looked at me sharply, braids swinging. "Tainted! Staal-Ysta isn't--"

"It is," I said firmly, "for me. It's not what I want, Del. It's what you want, maybe what you need, but it isn't what I desire. I'm a Southroner. I have no intention of changing myself just to fit into your world. Down South I have my world, and that's where I'm going."

Wind put color back into her face. "Then--you've spoken to Telek and Stigand."

"Yes."

"Have they found you a way to be excused from the year?"

"Not yet."

She nodded. "What happens if they don't? Will you go anyway?"

I turned abruptly, shutting off the conversation. Led the stud away from the overlook. "I came up here to ride, Del, not to talk. If you want to ride, fine... if not, just wait for me down below." I swung up. "Unless, of course, you'd rather make me swim."

Del held the gray back as he tried to follow the stud. I saw the conflict in her face: surprise, anger, guilt... then all poured swiftly away. Her flesh was hard as stone. "I did the right thing."

"Right for whom, Del? Yourself? Maybe. Kalle? No. Me? Most definitely not. But then, you weren't thinking of me. You weren't even thinking of Kalle. You were thinking of Del."

"Don't you think I should?" Her shout rang across the mountains. "Don't you think it's time I stopped thinking only of my murdered family and thought of

myself instead?"

"Maybe," I agreed, "but maybe you should think of me, too, before you sell me back into slavery." The stud was filled to bursting with energy. It was all I could do to rein him in. He crowhopped, pawed, sidled, gnawed the bit in his mouth. Letting me know how he felt. "Del, I don't doubt it's easier for you simply to ignore my feelings by saying you've done it all for Kalle; maybe you did, in some weird, twisted way. But it doesn't change the fact you've made me a prisoner of a lifestyle I don't want."

"It's only for a year?"

"Too long," I flung back. "Sixteen years a slave with the Salset was too long for me. Four months a slave in Aladar's mine was too long for me. This is slavery, too, Del, because you gave me no choice. You just decided this was what you would do, without even bothering to ask me."

"I had no choice!"

"That's goat dung, Del, and you know it." Bitterly, I paused. "Well, bascha, you made your choice--and now you have to live with it. But I sure as hoolies don't."

"Tiger--"

"No." I reined in the fractious stud. "One moment more arguing this with you is entirely too long, too... so I propose we end it."

"Tiger--wait?"

I reined back, swung the stud, looked down at her. Waited, as she'd asked.

"Tiger--" Del came across wind-wracked turf, leading the gray. She came up to the stud, to the stirrup, put a hand on my leg. "Tiger, I swear... I swear I didn't plan it. It's not why I rode with you, slept with you--I've used you,

yes, and I don't blame you for being angry... but I swear I did none of those other things simply to buy myself time with Kalle. But when I saw her, saw what she could be even without me, I couldn't bear it anymore. I had to do something to find a way to buy some time with my daughter."

I shook my head. "But you did know, Del. Maybe not what seeing Kalle would do to you, but you knew there was a chance you could buy your way back into the voca's graces by offering them a new an-ishtoya." The Northern term came out bitterly.

"You asked me to come, to be your sponsor... and you did it knowing full well I might wind up in exactly these circumstances." Del's face was ravaged. "Tiger, please--" I shook my head. "You told me once I loved you. Maybe so. Maybe I do. But right now, with all of this, I find it very hard even to like you." Del, too shocked, said nothing. I turned the stud loose and rode.

Forty

We met again at the dolmen, again after sundown. Stigand looked gloomier than ever, and Telek, who had spent most of the day with the voca, looked decidedly weary. Also disgusted, which didn't augur well for the results of the meeting.

I folded my arms beneath the borrowed cloak. "The others said no, I take it, to a special dispensation."

In uplander, Stigand muttered something beneath his breath. Then he muttered more loudly, this time in Borderer. "Fools, all of them. Why should they care about one Southron sword-dancer, who has no respect for our ways?"

It stung me more than I'd expected. "I have respect for your ways," I told him

defensively. Then I thought about my situation. "At least--those I can respect."

Telek's expression was serious. "Will you listen to what I must say?"

His tone chilled me. "Yes."

He turned slightly, staring at the dolmen. "Prospective students come to Staal-Ysta from all over the North. Most are turned away following a period of probation because they do not measure up." He flicked a glance at Stigand, sucking teeth sourly. "Those who do pass probation are admitted to the rank of ishtoya. After that, providing they prove themselves worthy, they become an-ishtoya."

He paused. I told him I understood, wishing he'd get on with it.

Telek continued as laboriously as before. "Once the an-ishtoya is judged worthy by his or her an-kaidin, he or she is given a jivatma and gains the rank of kaidin. This may take as many as ten years, perhaps even longer. Many students give up. Many fail to complete the training. Some decide to become sword-dancers, like Del, like Theron, therefore depleting the kaidin ranks even more."

I frowned. "What are you trying to say?" .

Stigand glared at me. "Staal-Ysta survives for teaching. Without students, there is no reason for being."

Telek's tone was solemn. "Of late, fewer and fewer students are worthy enough... fewer and fewer of them make rank past an-ishtoya. We need good students. We need those who will make good teachers."

I nodded, comprehending all too well. "And so the voca doesn't want to lose a single student, not even a Southroner made one against his will."

Telek's tone was smooth. "You would bring honor to Staal-Ysta."

I wanted to say something rude. Instead I shook my head, scowling out at the dolmen. An alien sense of futility and despair welled up inside me. What in hoolies was I doing here? Why didn't I just leave? They couldn't keep me here. Not against my will. Del had pledged me; I'd committed myself to nothing. As if reading my feelings, Telek turned to his father. "Stigand--it's late, and growing colder. It does old bones no good to stay out here when it's unnecessary. Why not go to bed and let the Southroner and me discuss this more fully?"

Stigand smiled slowly. "'Said the fox to the hound of the hare.' Very well, I'll go... just remember yourself, Telek. Yourself and your kin."

The old man faded into the darkness quickly, more easily than I'd have imagined for a man of his age, and with that obscure quote. I looked at Telek, frowning my question.

He smiled, pulled his own cloak more closely, nodded. "Indeed, now we may talk openly. Stigand is the oldest of the voca; he carries the most responsibility, and appearances are important. I am the youngest and carry the least. But if it can be made to appear as though Stigand knew nothing of my plan, his power may have more value than ever. And he will approve."

"What plan?"

Telek shrugged. "Even though you are judged worthy of the an- honorific due to your Southron ranking, it's mostly out of courtesy. For anything more, you'd have to prove yourself, just like all the others." He sighed. "This is the North, after all; we're not anxious to give a Southroner the rank Northerners must earn,"

My frown deepened. "No. Of course not."

"How good are you?" he asked. "I mean no disrespect, but the Southron style is

not well known here. When you say seventh-level, it has no meaning as we judge things. But Stigand has heard of you because Stigand hears of everyone, and Del has spoken for you."

Ordinarily I'm quick to claim my superiority in the circle. But Telek was so serious and the question sounded like there was more to it than just what showed on the surface.

"I'm good," I said. "Very good. And if it's any help, Del and I have yet to prove which of us is better."

"And you did beat Theron." Telek's smile was thin, sharp as a knife.

"Why?" I asked. "Why is it so important?"

He looked directly at me. "For you, what would be the easiest way to earn your freedom?"

"In the circle," I answered promptly. "Just tell me when and where."

Telek laughed, teeth gleaming in the moonlight. "I thought so. Well, perhaps we have found the simplest solution of all. Southron... if I can get the voca to agree to a dance."

I shrugged. "Easy enough. Appeal to their pride. Appeal to their honor. Make it Southroner against Northerner... style against style... technique against technique." I smiled. "Make the stakes high enough."

"I thought to," he agreed. "Perhaps something that makes it worth dancing for." He rubbed his bottom lip thoughtfully. "Something simple... something elegant... something obvious. We could make the voca as thirsty for it as a drunkard for wine."

A man after my own heart. "Have you any suggestions?"

Telek nodded. "Let me be very plain: if you were a kaidin, the voca would no

longer have any say about your dispensation. Del couldn't offer you against her year with Kalle. You would be a man who had earned rank as we do, following our customs, and the voca would be made helpless by their own adherence to custom. They would have to give you that dispensation."

"Fine," I agreed dryly. "How do I get to be a kaidin without spending five or ten years here?"

Telek didn't flick an eyelash. "By beating a chosen champion in the circle."

I stared. Then I laughed. "If it's that simple, why haven't other students tried the same shortcut?"

"Others have. All have failed."

I nodded thoughtfully. "That's the trick, then? Defeating a champion selected by the voca?"

Telek's expression gave nothing away. "But not just any champion. One who well understands your position... one willing to lose a little face in the short run if only to save some in the long one."

Hoolies, he wanted to throw the dance. "Not exactly the honorable thing to do, is it, Telek?"

Quite abruptly, he was angry. "She threatens my family, Southron... she offends my lodge and my woman. That is the dishonor; this is the means to expunge the taint."

The change in him shocked me. But only because I'd been blind. Telek was every bit as dedicated to Kalle's welfare as Del, and maybe with more right. I should have seen it sooner; he would help me get free, but only if I in turn helped him.

After a moment, I nodded. "So Del is the issue."

His voice was clipped. "Del is your price. Do you think I can't see it? You were

made for one another, you and the an-ishtoya... you are blades of the same temper, the same edge, quenched in the same blood, regardless of where it was spilled. And if I have to bring dishonor on myself to rid Staal-Ysta of her, I will do it; it will be worth it. As for you? Take her with you. You want her. Take her. Win the dance and take her--as an-kaidin, I can nominate you for ritual elevation gained through a sword-dance. One I will challenge you to; I understand the situation better than any, do I not? I comprehend the need for defeat. I will give you this victory, here and now, beforehand, if you will rid me of Delilah."

"What I understand," I said softly, after a moment, "is that I killed your brother."

Telek's head came up sharply. "Do you think I want revenge for that?"

I laughed, though it held no humor. "It is a possibility. You trick me into a circle on the pretext of winning my freedom, and you kill me. Honorably. All in Theron's name."

Telek's voice hissed. "This is not because I want revenge--that is Del's personal song." He shook his head, speaking more quietly, clamping down on his emotions. "No. I want her gone. This is not a dance to the death, merely until one of us yields. The loser, of course, will be me; if losing to you in the circle guarantees she'll go from here, I'd do it a thousand times."

"So," I said, "if I win--when I win--I become a kaidin on the spot and am therefore free to go where I wish, with no obligation to Staal-Ysta."

"And you take Del with you," Telek agreed. "Don't you see? With you elevated to kaidin, you are no longer a bargaining stone. Del has nothing with which to buy her year; the voca will deny her the year with Kalle."

Quietly, I said, "And then, of course, they reinstate her immediate exile."

Telek's eyes didn't waver. "Isn't that what you want? Isn't that your price?"

"Maybe," I said, "maybe. And maybe I don't have one."

The Northerner laughed. "You are a Southroner. A sword-for-hire. You sell your soul to the highest bidder. In this case, the bidder is me... and my coin is the an-ishtoya."

I took a deep breath to calm myself, found it difficult. "So much offered for honor," I said. "And yet I think you've thoroughly compromised your own."

It struck home. "What of you?" Telek demanded angrily. "What does it say of your honor when you accept the terms?"

And I would. I wanted out of here that badly. Del wouldn't thank me, I knew, but I hoped one day she'd understand. And I'd tell her the truth, too: I believed it would be better for Kalle. As I believed it would be better for Del, no matter what she felt. Besides, she'd used me for coin before; two can play her game. And I'm a fast learner. "When and where?" I asked curtly. Telek's smile was delicately contemptuous. "First, there is the matter of a sword."

"I'm listening."

"Are you? Then listen well: I have a jivatma." In my head, a tocsin rang. "I don't want a jivatma," I said pointedly. "I want a sword, just a sword--a hilt with a blade attached. Can that be arranged? Can you just loan me a sword?"

Telek's smile was slow. "Go and see Kem." A ripple ran down my back. "I don't want ajivatma." Telek nodded, still smiling. "Go and see Kem. Tell him what you need."

Forty-one

He looked me dead in the eye, saying nothing. He read me, I knew, with a look--and then peeled back all the layers and looked deeper, deeper, until I shifted uncomfortably.

He didn't smile. "Let me see your hands."

Sighing, I held them out, palm down, showing him the sunburned backs all pitted with ore flecks and other assorted scars, courtesy of slavery.

He caught them before I could protest. His own were huge, but his grasp was gentle. He did nothing other than hold them. Oddly, it was as if he weighed me as a man by their feel.

"Over," he said, loosening his grip.

Accordingly, I turned them. The palms were tough, callused, more like hide than hands. Once again he held them, studying them, and then once again looked me dead in the eyes.

"You should believe," he told me flatly. "You of all people. Haven't you felt the essence ever since you crossed the border? Haven't you smelled it?"

I blinked. "What?"

"The essence," he repeated. "Magic has a smell, a taste, a feel all its own.

Some of us feel it more than others. Some of us are more deeply troubled."

Slowly, he nodded. "I think you are one of them."

I started to protest, to ask him what in hoolies he was talking about, but he ignored me altogether, releasing my hands and moving on to another subject.

"I can give you a sword," he said, " 'just' a sword, as you want... but it won't stay that way. None of them do. But this one, matched to you..." he shrugged.

"You will have to learn quickly, if you are to control it."

I looked at him through a gauze of acrid coalsmoke. "Telek said--"

He didn't let me finish. "Telek told you to come to me for a jivatma." He nodded. "That's what I do: make jivatmas. At least, I do the Shaping--you will do the Making, the Binding, the Naming... all the rituals."

It all sounded very confusing. "All I need is a sword. A plain sword, nothing more; don't you make any of those?"

He shook his head. "I make new blades, unnamed blades, but full of raw potential. Once blooded, they are jivatmas."

My disbelief was rude, but I couldn't hide it. "Are you telling me every sword in Staal-Ysta is a bleeding-blade?"

Patiently, he explained. "No sword is 'normal' here, merely potential as yet untapped. My purpose is to find and shape the potential, matching it to the warrior. All come to me for that purpose; it's what I was born to do."

I sighed, too tired to argue. "I need a sword. Just give me a sword. I'll take what I can get."

He dipped his head. "Then I will make you a sword."

Kem was, of course, a Northerner, and--like all of them--tall, broad, well-built, very blond and very strong. But he was not ishtoya or an-ishtoya, kaidin or an-kaidin. He was the swordsmith, the man who probably received greater respect than anyone in Staal-Ysta.

And now here I was in his smithy looking at lumps of iron.

His Borderer was curt. "Don't look: touch."

Twelve lumpy bundles, now bare of wrappings. I saw grayish, pitted metal, like bread dough only half-kneaded. Kem had lined them up in double rows of six, waiting for me to touch them.

The smithy was small in comparison to the lodges, though mostly dwarfed by the equipment stuffed into it. Anvils, bellows, tongs, tubs and hammers and grinding stones, and countless other things, all jammed in corners and against the walls as well as hanging from rafters.

Kem waited. His face was broad and pitted as the iron, seamed and pocked with scars. His blond hair was dulling to gray, pulled back in a single braid. He wore only a thin wool shirt, trews, boots and leather bracers.

Kem smiled, showing crooked teeth. Idly he crossed his big arms and waited, patience personified.

I knelt. Touched the lumps, one by one, humoring the man. Until I reached the eighth.

Kem saw my face. Smiled. Nodded. Then lifted the lump from the hardpacked floor.

"So," he said lightly, "now I am neither a fool nor a liar, but a man who knows his trade." He set the eighth lump onto his largest anvil and left it there, then one by one wrapped up the other eleven and put them away in a trunk.

"It was warm," I said in surprise. "The others all were cold."

"Warm, cold; it makes no difference. The iron knew your touch."

"But I'm a Southroner!"

Kem shrugged big shoulders. "Do you think it cares where you were born? You touched it, and it knows. Just like the magic knows your name, your presence--your own essence."

"It's only a lump of iron."

"Much more than that, Southron... it's sky-born, from the gods, and full of wild magic." Kem's tone was stolid. "Once we're done, it'll be far more than a lump, and the magic will be harnessed. It'll be a bleeding-blade."

I watched him kneel at the edge of a shallow pit. It was filled with glowing red coals dusted by fine gray ash. Carefully he raked them, teasing them hotter yet. Suspiciously, I asked, "What do you want me to do?"

"Hold that lump of iron. Cherish it like a woman. Caress it with your breath."

"What?"

"You heard me, Southron. Do it."

I had some knowledge of how swords were made, and this wasn't part of it. But Kem didn't seem the type to tease for the hoolies of it, having no sense of humor, and so I picked up the lump of iron and cradled it against my abdomen.

"Is that how you fondle a woman?" Kem still knelt by his pit.

"You don't really--"

"I do. Breathe on it, like I said. Put your mark on it, like a cat."

I looked at him suspiciously, searching for a jibe at my expense, but saw nothing in his blue eyes except utter peace and endless patience. Scowling, I stared down at the pitted, knurled lump of metal in my hands. Then lifted it to my mouth and fogged it with my breath, feeling more than a little ridiculous. It was warm in my hands, much more than cold metal, with a silky texture that belied its pitted appearance. I found myself searching for flaws, as if I really could find them before the blade was made.

In disgust, I made myself stop. But my skin was somehow attuned to it, wanting to touch it more. Uneasily, I wondered if it had anything to do with Kem's mutterings about essence.

"Bring it here," he said. I carried it over, then put it into the coals as he indicated. He raked it covered, then sat back. "What do you want in a sword?"

I shrugged, thinking it obvious. "True temper. Proper balance. A keen, sharp edge that holds."

Kem's eyes didn't waver. "What do you want in a sword?"

His tone stopped me cold. He wasn't being facetious. He really wanted to know. I thought it was some sort of test, maybe, and I wanted badly to pass.

"All the things a good sword should have," I told him. "I want a sword I can trust, of course--one with a strong but flexible blade, cutting cleanly every time without snagging or turning on bone. One that knows its master, unceasingly seeking to please." I shrugged, not knowing how to explain it. "One that is mine in my hand, unlike any other, with a personality much like my own." I smiled wryly. "I've handled many swords; they all have certain tricks. I want one that understands mine."

After a moment, Kem smiled. "Maybe you are a sword-dancer."

"Just give me a sword," I suggested cheerfully. "A sword, a circle, an opponent...that is my world, smith. And now you're a part of it."

Kem nodded thoughtfully. "This may work after all."

When the lump was hot enough, he lifted it from the pit with tongs and placed it on the anvil. Then he took up his hammer. "You may hold it," he said. "It's your job as much as mine."

I held the tongs while Kem worked the iron. We fell into a ringing rhythm: hold, hammer, reheat; hold, hammer again. It was important, Kem explained, that the temperature remain fairly constant, not too hot and not too cool, or the soul of the metal would be ruined.

The noise was deafening. And then, slowly, I became accustomed, beginning to like the sound, which had a song all its own. I thought of the Canteada. Heard the echo of their music. Knew it was in Kem. Knew it was in the sword.

Maybe, even, in me?

I thought abruptly of Del's singing, to key her bleeding-blade.

A shiver ran down my spine. "Can you leave out the magic?" I asked.

Kem nearly missed his stroke. The rhythm returned again, but I saw the furrow in his brow as he stared at me over the hot lump of iron, sweat-faced, flushed red from reflected heat. "When we are done with this, it will be much more than a sword. And you will be much more than a sword-dancer."

The hairs on the back of my neck rose. "A kaidin, yes, I know... but only if I quench it."

Kem waved me away and returned the lump to the coals. "You are a fool," he said. "And I am a fool as well, for wasting my time on a man who doesn't appreciate what Northern sword-magic is... or what he himself can be."

It was the end of whatever rapport we might have built. Over the next two days I watched Kem hammer the lump into a bar, then begin to fold it. He took thin iron rods and twisted them around the bar, then hammered them all together, then twisted and hammered again. I lost track of how many times, though I'm sure Kem knew. He was a man who knew his art.

The hammering continued. But now the lump was more than a bar, and the bar was more than itself. There was a shape in the iron, though it lacked its final form.

"Do you see it?" Kem asked.

"Point, tang--yes."

He grunted, still hammering. The rods were no longer visible, having been worked into the bar. The blade was a solid thing, showing no signs of its lumpy, gnarled origins or its slender, twisted cousins.

He let it cool, stopped hammering. Then picked it up and gave it to me. "Take it to bed with you. Every night until it's done."

"Do what?"

"To bed," he said, "each night. It's part of the Binding ritual; the sword must know its master."

The unfinished blade was warm in my hands. "Am I supposed to couple with it, too?"

Kem didn't crack a smile. "Just bring it back each morning."

I took it to bed with me. I brought it back each morning. The ritual was carried out, even though I felt like a fool.

The balance was magnificent, even without hilt, grip, pommel. Unwhetted, it still lacked edges, but the promise was inherent. The thing was alive in my hands, smooth and warm and alive. I stared at the blade in amazement. "So," Kem remarked, "the skeptic begins to believe." I shivered, wanting to wipe hands on woolen treads. But not daring to before him. "In your skill, absolutely. In other things, I'm not sure." He took the blade away. "It's time we made it steel."

Once again he heated the blade, this time until it blazed white-hot. Kem covered it with coals, left it alone, manned the bellows when I didn't. "Almost a sword," he crooned. "Not so long, now."

It was night, and very late. I heard the whir and wheeze of the bellows, Kem's droning uplander mumble. Dragged myself out of sleep and stood up from my place by the door. "How long now?"

"Not so long, now." He took it out of the coals, set it on the anvil, began to hammer the edges, packing them to hold. And then he put it back in the coals and covered it one last time. "When it comes out, it'll be done. And then I will give the blade to you, and you will take it to the lake, and you will quench it in the water."

Flesh prickled. "How quenched, Kem?"

He laughed silently, showing crooked teeth. "Not that kind, Southroner. This is the gentle quenching. A baby's first bath. Not the true quenching, or bleeding yet; there will be time for that later."

I was immensely relieved, but too embarrassed to show it. "Easy enough just to dip it in the lake."

Kem's gaze didn't so much as waver. "And while it is being quenched, you will ask the Blessing."

That I knew something of; even my Southron sword, Singlestroke, had been blessed during its making. But it hadn't been asked by me. The shodo had simply done it.

"I don't understand."

"The Blessing," he repeated. "You will ask it of the gods while the blade is in the water. It must be quickly done; if you leave it in too long, the blade will cool too much."

I sighed, humoring him. "What happens if the gods don't bless it, Kem?"

He shrugged. "Then the steel will be flawed. The sword will fail you... probably when you most need it."

I scratched through beard to chin. "I don't believe in gods."

The Northerner just nodded. "Tell them that," he suggested. "I'm sure it will amuse them."

In the end, I took the hot blade to the lake, dipped it into the water, squinted against the steam as I held onto the tongs. Black water roiled and bubbled, sucking the heat away.

Ask the Blessing, Kem had said.

Well, I owed the man that much.

"Gods," I said aloud, "I don't know what to say. I don't know what to ask, other

than this Blessing. So why not give it to me, if only to please Kem?"

It was, I thought, enough; I lifted the blade from the water. The steel glowed wine-red. It smoked in cold air.

I took it back to Kem.

He nodded, pleased. "Now," he said, "into that trough; the water isn't so cold."

I saw the trough he indicated, a long iron pan filled with water. I set the bar into it, let it rest, handed the tongs to Kem. "What now?"

"We wait," he said succinctly.

We waited. And then at last Kem stirred and used the tongs, plucking the blade from the trough. "Done," he said, "for now. All that's left is the Shaping... the Whetting... First Keying when you blood it."

"First Keying," I echoed. "What is that?"

He looked down at the blade. "You quench your jivatma in flesh and blood... that is the true quenching, the first blooding, when the magic is first roused, first acknowledged and harnessed. But it's in the sword, not in you--you need a way to tap it... a way to focus yourself. That's what the singing is for--to focus you as you tap the power. You key the sword to tap it, or else the magic goes wild."

I wanted to scratch the back of my prickling neck. "But if you don't sing, it's just a sword... right?"

He sighed. "They have taught you nothing."

"I'm a Southroner, remember?"

Kem picked his teeth. "You can't key it until it's truly blooded in living flesh. Quenching rouses the power, keying it controls it. But if you want only a whisper of power, not much more than simple sword skill, you don't bother to sing."

I thought back to all the times Del and I had sparred in practice circles. Never had she keyed the sword, not even a little; I couldn't remember her singing. Only against the enemy. Only when she needed the power.

I remembered the question he hadn't answered. "What is First Keying?"

Kem bit off a nail. "You can't key until it's blooded; it doesn't know you till then, not as it needs to know you. So the magic is wild. But the first song you sing thereafter becomes the focus for First Keying; after that the power is yours."

My interest rose considerably. "So, if I don't sing--even if I kill someone in the circle--the sword never becomes a true jivatma?"

Kem spat out the nail. His tone was very gentle, as if he spoke to a child. "You may pink someone in the circle, and the sword will remain unblooded. You may even cut him severely; the sword will remain unblooded. But if you kill anyone, anyone at all, you have quenched the sword, and the sword becomes a jivatma, with the dead man's skills and attributes; a piece of the dead man's soul." He shrugged. "If later you sing to key it, that soul is yours to tap... that and the Northern magic."

It seemed clear enough. So long as I could get South and sell it without having to kill anyone, I could keep the sword a sword. And even if something came up and I did have to kill someone, I'd never, ever sing while doing it. The jivatma would never be keyed.

I peered suspiciously at the blade. It was steel, no longer iron. With a bright, shining skin like nothing else in the world. The edges were blunt as yet, but visible, waiting for the rest.

"Take it," Kem said.

Warily, I took it. No tongs, just the blade. It was cool from the water, but I

felt the deeper warmth, like blood running through veins. I swear, there was life in this sword. Sweating, I rang it down on the anvil. "I don't want this thing."

Kem's face didn't change. "You have made it yours."

I felt distinctly queasy. "I don't want it. It's not a sword--it's more than a sword... have you lied to me? Is that thing already a jivatma?"

Slowly he shook his head. "It's not a jivatma yet. It's hardly begun to live... but what life is there is yours."

I badly wanted to back away but refused to show so much. "A sword is a weapon, a killing instrument, a tool designed to take life. Not to live on its own. It's simply a piece of metal--"

"And so it is," Kem agreed. "This sword is only half-made. You needn't fear it yet."

"I don't want to fear it at all!"

He stood bathed in the dim red light of coals, and the glow from a single lantern set high in a corner. "It's too late to turn away now. It would be like killing a child who's only begun to live."

"It's a sword--"

"--in need of a name," Kem finished quietly. "It doesn't know itself yet. It only knows what you've given it: a taste of what life is."

I felt the prickle on neck and arms. "Something's wrong," I said sharply.

"There's sorcery in the air!"

He looked at me piercingly, not even asking how I knew. Only, "Where?"

"--something wrong--"

In the distance, I heard screams. Faint, small screams, warped by water and

echo.

Kem heard them, too. "The settlement!" he cried.

Forty-two

I was out of the smithy and running, heading through trees to the lakeshore, where boats bobbed on the water. The screaming was clearer now, and the squealing of frightened horses.

I was not alone for long. Kem was there, and others, pushing off in boats. I waited, looking for Del; saw only Telek.

"Where is she?" I asked.

"With Kalle." He bent to free the rope.

I blinked. "Why? It's not like Del to ignore someone's need for help."

Telek straightened, holding the rope. His gray eyes were almost feral; his tone precisely even. "I told her not to leave the island. That if she wants to stay with Kalle so much, she should stay with Kalle."

I shook my head. "That's not fair. No matter how you feel about her, you're still depriving Staal-Ysta and the settlement of a good sword."

"Get in the boat," Telek repeated. "There is no more time to waste."

He was right, much as I wanted to argue. I clambered into the boat, sat down, watched grimly as Telek pushed off and jumped in. He settled the oars and began to row, heading us diagonally across the lake toward the shrieks and screams.

By the time we reached the settlement, there was nothing left to fight. People clustered in groups, talking about the attack. Some carried wounded into lodges

for tending. Others gathered together the bodies, preparing for funeral rites. I saw the marks on the bodies. I knew what had done this.

"Hounds," I told Telek on the way to the corrals.

"Beasts, I call them the hounds of hoolies--I don't know what they are. But they've followed Del and me for weeks."

His face was stark. "After they left us."

I glanced at him sharply. "These hounds? Are you certain?"

His expression was bleak. "We've said nothing, because up till now we've been safe. The beasts can't swim, so Staal-Ysta has been a haven. And they left us weeks ago, trailing other prey... we believed them gone for good." He shook his head and frowned, looking around at the carnage. "They ignored the settlement before, watching Staal-Ysta only, as if there is something there... something that draws them. They want something specific--"

I nodded. "I think they want her sword."

It stunned him. "Her jivatma? Why? What use would hounds have for it?"

"I think they've been sent by someone." Briefly, I told him how they had dogged our trail, herding us, driving us toward the North. And how they had responded to Del's sword when she'd keyed it in the canyon.

When I was finished, Telek nodded. "You may be right," he agreed. "If indeed there is someone behind the hounds--someone who has sent them for whatever purpose--" He started to shake his head, then snapped it around to stare at me in shock. "It is her sword! It must be! Because up until tonight, none have been here at the settlement."

I frowned. "I don't understand."

He was impatient with my ignorance. "We elevated two an-ishtoya to kaidin only

three days before you and Del arrived. Their swords were not yet blooded... they were preparing to ride out with their sponsors to blood them in the circle; this was their last night here. They came to spend it with their families--off the island: here." His face was intent. "But maybe it isn't just Del's sword. Maybe it's any jivatma at all--and that's what drew the beasts tonight."

I shook my head. "But if the swords haven't been blooded yet--"

"The magic is still in them," he snapped, distracted.

"Just not roused, not harnessed by blooding... a sorcerer, knowing jivatmas, would also know that. It wouldn't stop him from sending the beasts--if that's what he's after."

I could be as terse. "Then I suggest you find those new-made kaidin as soon as you can. See if they're here. See if their swords are here."

Telek looked at me in dawning shock. And then he turned on his heel and ran.

We'd reached the corrals. Some of them had been broken down and emptied as the horses panicked and ran, but others remained standing, poles and brush left intact. In one of them was the stud.

I felt the knot in my belly loosen. "So, old man, you survived... still too tough to kill."

I unlatched the gate, slipped in, slapped milling horses out of my way, let the stud come up to me.

I scratched the stud's jaw, glad to touch him again; it gave me an unexpected peace. "They want something," I mused aloud; he flicked black-tipped ears.

"Those hounds of hoolies want something. They've been very patient, but I think they're tired of waiting." I patted his hairy neck. "Yes, I think they'll be back... there are more jivatmas here, and one due to leave very soon."

Telek was back, and panting; his breath was white in the air. "They're gone,"

gasped, "both of them. Them and their swords."

I reached to my neck and slipped the thong over my head, handing him the ward-whistle. "Give this to someone here who is responsible. It will keep the hounds away; it's what allowed Del and me to get through. I'll need it again soon, but for now it should keep the settlement safe."

Telek frowned, looking at the whistle. "What do you intend to do?"

I tugged the stud's ears; smiled as he pulled away. "I intend to beat you in the circle, Northerner, and then leave Staal-Ysta." I shrugged. "Maybe get in a little hunting."

There was a new respect in Telek's eyes. "You will leave with your own jivatma.

If that really is what is drawing the beasts--"

"--then I can draw them away." I smiled. "I guess you can say it's my way of making up for a dance that isn't a dance; I want to buy my deliverance somehow.

Honorably. This is one way to do it." I shrugged. "Besides, I figure it's one way of helping a lot of people I know: you, Del, Kalle... a Borderer woman and her children... even a horse-speaker from the uplands." Again, I shrugged.

"Something to do to pass the time."

Slowly, he shook his head. "I didn't expect it of you."

"No, probably not." I grinned. "Of course, people have been misjudging me for years."

But Telek didn't laugh. He didn't even smile.

One night later, I faced Kem in the smithy. Faced him and my sword.

"It will cut water," Kem said. "Cut it cleanly, like flesh or silk, and make it bleed; even water."

He had fit blade and hilt together, melding them into one, so that the sword was

a single unit. All was washed with silver, though steel underneath: hilts, grip, pommel; a twisted rope of silk somehow turned into metal. Its color was moonlight and ice.

In my hand, it was an extension of myself. The balance was as pure as any I've ever known, so fine and clean it carried me instead of the other way around. And it was warm in my hand, like flesh.

Del's sword, to me, was cold, but she'd said to her it was warm. I wondered if this was the same: hoarfrost to everyone else, sunlight only to me.

"Of course," Kem said pointedly, "it isn't ready yet."

I looked at him over the blade. "What do you mean, 'isn't ready'?"

He tapped his anvil. "Lay it here. This will take only a moment."

Suspicion flared instantly. "What do you mean to do?"

"There is the Naming, yet. Right now, it's an unnamed blade. Left so, it's not worth its Making. Here." He tapped the anvil again.

Slowly I set down the sword, oddly reluctant to take my hand from it. Then Kem drew his knife, motioned me forward, took hold of my left hand and turned it over, palm up.

"Wait," I blurted.

"This isn't the true bleeding," Kem said patiently. "I've explained all that, remember? This is part of the Naming,"

I held my silence as he nicked deeply into the fleshy part of the heel between thumb and wrist. When blood flowed freely, he nodded, then guided the hand to the sword. Carefully he held the sword in place, then slid my hand the length of the blade, smearing it with blood.

And again, when he turned it over. The steel shone bloody and dull, moonsilver sheen now obscured.

He grunted, gave me a rag. "Blank." Graying brows knitted a moment. Then he heaved a weary sigh, as if I'd disappointed him. "Well, it comes of being matched with a man who doesn't believe."

I frowned down at the sword, stopping the nick in my hand with the rag. "What's it supposed to do?"

"Once Made, once Bound, once Blessed, there is a heart in every blade... a soul known only to it. And it shows itself in the runes."

I recalled the alien, twisted shapes carved into Del's blade. The runes were alive to me, never the same; everchanging. But my blade was blank as blood.

"Does it have a name, now?"

Kem looked straight at me. "If it does, you'd know. Since you don't, it doesn't."

"Will it ever have a name?"

"Probably once it's blooded. Or maybe when you finally come to believe; the sword will tell you, then." He shrugged; his tone was one of delicate contempt.

"But you don't want to blood it. You don't want to believe. You'd rather leave it unnamed, and only half alive."

I felt a twinge in my belly: guilt, resentment, acknowledgment. "So long as it serves me in the circle, that's all I require," I told him flatly. "Down South, skill is the only magic. We don't depend on other things."

Kem put hands on hips. "I don't care what customs are down South. This is a Northern sword." He gestured sharply. "Take it to the lake. Wash it free of blood. My work is done; from now on it's in your care, inadequate as that may be."

Not a courteous man, Kem. But then, I hadn't expected it. I was a stranger to

him, and Southron, and yet I bore the rank of an-ishtoya. Accustomed to Northern students come begging for a jivatma, my indifference to the magic was startling as well as disturbing.

And it probably bruised his ego.

I lifted the sword yet again; yet again marveling at the silken texture of steel, the uncannily perfect balance, the life that cried out in the blade.

Singlestroke, too, had been made for me, to precise specifications, but even that noteworthy sword felt as dross to gold compared to Kem's masterwork.

As if reading me, he shook his head. "I was the Maker, yes; the rest is all from you. The Binding, the Blessing... whatever else you choose to do. This sword will be whatever you wish it to be. It will be you, growing out of whatever things have shaped you over the years. No other may use it once it's blooded, because it will guard itself against them, turning only to you."

"If it becomes a jivatma."

Slowly, Kem shook his head. "You dishonor this sword. Southron. Pray gods it doesn't dishonor you."

Disagreements aside, he'd made a marvelous sword. Not knowing what else to do, I asked him his price for the work, knowing full well I couldn't pay it. But he said he would take nothing; that his magic was from the gods and they repaid him well. His life was here on Staal-Ysta; all his wants were attended to. He needed nothing from me save respect for the weapon I carried.

I thanked him, left him, went down to the lake in darkness to wash the blade free of blood.

And there Delilah found me.

"So," she said, "it's done."

Still I knelt by the water. "No. Not all of it. I have no intention of blooding

it. All I want is a sword."

"It's far more than that."

I dried the steel carefully with the cloth Kem had given me for my hand. "Only if I let it."

"Tiger--" Del knelt beside me, clenching hands against wool-clad knees. "You must understand what you've done... what manner of responsibility you've accepted. I know you don't intend to ever name this blade, or make it into a true jivatma, but you may have no choice. You may be forced--and the results could be disastrous."

I shook my head. "I'm going to use this sword in the circle here to prove my worthiness to be named kaidin. And then I will go home." I didn't look at her, tending carefully to the drying. "South, Del, where I intend to sell this--or trade it--and get me a Southron sword."

After a taut moment of shock, Del shook her head. "The sword will never allow it."

"Oh, hoolies, Del--are you sandsick? This is a sword, not a person! Not something that dictates my life!" I turned on my heel, still kneeling, and looked at her in frustration and exasperation. "It's a piece of steel, no more." My protests made no dent in her wall of superstitions. "You should know it's unlikely you will reach the South without having blooded this blade. And if that's so, you may have no choice in the instrument of its naming--Tiger, don't you see? We are taught to choose an enemy carefully, because the blade, once blooded, assumes the characteristics and attributes of that enemy."

"Then how in hoolies does everyone manage to blood their swords in the proper enemies?" I demanded. "What happens if they kill the wrong person? What if they

kill an unskilled laborer? Wouldn't it weaken the sword?" I shook my head. "All this superstitious nonsense... what keeps an enemy, knowing about these magical swords, from sending out a halfwit to throw himself on the sword, thereby rendering it nearly useless?"

Del's jaw was tight. "When a newly-made kaidin goes out on his bloodying journey, a sponsor goes with him. If there is killing to be done, he takes care of it.

Until the new sword is blooded."

Well, it did make sense. And took all the angry bluster right out of me. I rose, stroked the cloth across the blade once again, felt the fabric separate neatly against the edge. Like silk. Like water. Like flesh.

"Of course, you didn't need a sponsor. You'd already blooded your sword." I looked at her. "And you keyed it as well; how else would you get his power? How else would you gain his skills?"

White-faced, Del thrust herself up from the ground.

"Listen to me, Tiger... if you go out there tomorrow and kill a squirrel, that is a true bloodying, and your sword will take on whatever habits that squirrel possesses. Do you see?" Her expression was earnest and intent. "What kind of a legend would the Sandtiger be if he took a squirrel into his sword?"

I don't know why it struck me so funny, but it did. I started laughing, and I couldn't stop. It echoed out over the water.

Del spat out a concise comment in uplander, probably something to do with disrespect, noise and idiocy, but by then I didn't care. I just laughed, nodded, turned back toward the lodges.

"You thrice-cursed son of a Salset goat!" she cried. "Can't you see I'm trying to help you?"

I swung back and stood very still. All the laughter was banished. "If that were

true," I told her, "you'd come with me now. Tonight. You'd leave this place behind."

Her posture was awkwardly tense, lacking characteristic grace. "I have given you my reasons again and again. It is your choice to disagree. But it is my choice to make. No one can make it for me, unless he wears my boots. And you decidedly don't; maybe you never will."

It was, I knew, a jab at my profound lack of interest in fatherhood. Well, I'd give it to her; I wasn't wearing her boots.

"You know," I said lightly, "I wonder if anyone has asked Kalle what she thinks of this."

The moonlight was harsh on the marks of tension graven into Del's face. "Kalle is five years old."

I shrugged. "I remember when I was five. Very clearly; what about you?"

Del didn't answer. Del swung around and departed.

I looked after her into the darkness. "Ask her sometime," I said.

But nothing answered me.

I walked back alone to Telek's lodge, having introduced myself to my sword.

There was nothing of ritual or magic about it, being little more than some time spent learning the steel. I'd found it ridiculously easy to do so, almost too easy; the sword was clearly mine. And clearly, it knew it, too.

My harness was in the lodge, in the compartment I shared with Del. I intended to go in, sheathe it, then go to sleep. But voices distracted me. I paused before the door, heard men talking quietly in the trees directly to the right of the wooden lodge.

It wasn't my business. I might have ignored it. But the voices belonged to Telek

and Stigand, and my name was in their mouths.

Silently I moved into the trees, hiding myself in shadow. I couldn't see them, but I didn't need to; all I wanted was to hear them.

Telek's tone was strained. "--wins the dance, he'll go. And he'll take Del with him. It's easiest this way."

Stigand was obdurate. There was nothing old about the way he sounded. "He killed Theron. Dishonor enough, don't you think? Shall we allow him to heap more on us?"

"But a dance to the death serves nothing. If he loses, our cause is lost, because he can't take her with him, and she stays."

Stigand made a sound of derision. "Are you a fool? Are you blind? If he loses, he dies... Theron's death is therefore avenged, and the an-ishtoya loses her bargaining stone. There is nothing left with which to buy her year. The voca will exile her immediately." The tone was thick with satisfaction. "It's already been decided, Telek, as of this morning. The dance will be to the death."

So, Theron's death did rankle. There would be no simple exhibition in the circle, no clearcut pitting of Southron against Northern to see if I was worthy of elevation. No, nothing so simple as that. It was to be vengeance after all, and a chance to send Del away in dishonor, a blade without a name.

And a mother without a child.

I gripped the newborn sword. I felt its warmth, its strength; felt the promise of power unkeyed, untapped, straining to break free. Wild magic, indeed; it needed harnessing. Demanded a proper song.

And suddenly I was frightened, because I knew what I could do. It would be the ultimate victory. The ultimate revenge.

Del had done it once. Why not do it again? He was not my an-kaidin, but most

distinctly an enemy. If not precisely honored.

Something deep inside told me it was an ironic sort of justice.

I smiled down at the sword. Thinking: Telek will be shocked.

And so will the old man.

Forty-three

I basin-bathed in icy water, then put on the clothing borrowed, ironically, from Telek: blue-black tunic and treads, silver-tipped fur gaiters, silver-bossed bracers and belt. All I left off was cloak and brooches, putting them aside for later. After the dance was won.

I buckled on my harness with its weight of Northern steel. Before, with Singlestroke, I'd worn the straps and sheath without even thinking, because it was second nature. Then, once I'd been left with broken steel, I'd carried Theron's dead jivatma because I needed a sword, chafing at the need.

But now the weight was different. Much less, because, oddly, it felt a part of me. And much more, because I knew the truth of the sword; that--blooded, keyed, invoked--it could prove--would prove--the most devastating weapon a man could hope to own.

Or hope not to own.

Skepticism is healthy. It keeps you from growing vulnerable to words of manipulation. Disbelief, in its place, is also occasionally healthy, because the proper amount keeps you honest. But when I put my hands on the twisted-silk hilt

and felt the growing impatience in the sword, the power and strength and life suppressed only by my denial, I knew there was no more room for disbelief. It's difficult admitting you're wrong. Even more difficult admitting it when you have scoffed and otherwise ridiculed the truth with blind, unremitting determination, so blithely confident of your own infallibility. But then one day--or one night--the truth is put into your hands, and you realize those stories and songs and legends told by Northern strangers are truths after all, and that no one has lied to you.

Not even the Northern bascha, who has lied about so many things for so many different reasons.

No. Not so many. Two.

One: fear of execution; facing such a verdict from such men as Staal-Ysta's unpredictable--and bloodthirsty--voca, I too would have used whatever was at hand--even, I thought, Del.

Maybe.

Maybe?

Hoolies, I don't know.

And two: fear of losing Kalle; fear which was, perhaps, misplaced, since she'd voluntarily 'lost' Kalle long ago, but maybe not, because the very existence of the child now promised endless possibilities.

The possibilities that now drove Telek to dance to the death with me; that, and his father's desire for vengeance.

My hands lingered on harness straps, fingertips caressing the supple leather.

Telek came quietly to stand beside me.

"It's time," he said softly.

I turned. Looked directly into his eyes. They gave nothing away. I hoped mine

didn't, either.

"Tiger." At the end of the post-lined corridor, by the door, waited Del.

Black-clad, braid-wrapped Delilah, wearing a deadly jivatma.

Deadlier than mine, since the soul--the pure power--in my sword was as yet untapped by blood and song.

But for how long?

It is intoxicating: power. In and of itself, but also the knowledge that it lies so closely to hand.

All it requires is death, blood, a song.

Hoolies, I want to go home. Back where I belong; where I understand how things work, things without much magic other than simple tricks and sleight of hand; back where swords are swords, clean and bright and deadly, with no recourse to such power as Boreal, who summons, at Del's whim, all the terrible, awesome strength of a Northern banshee-storm.

I'm a Southroner. What do I want with banshee-storms?

What do I want with this dance?

A chance to go home again. A chance to be warm again.

And now a new and frightening desire: A chance to blood my sword. I walked out with Del. It seemed a fitting thing.

Stigand himself drew the circle in the turf, cutting through winter-brown grass to hard dark soil beneath. It was in the very center of the oblong field where Del had faced the voca before, surrounded by the lodges, where all the others had gathered to watch: men, women, children; some warriors, some not, but all witnesses. Just as they gathered now.

The old man finished. Nodded. Gestured for me to put my sword in the very center

of the circle.

I stripped out of harness and unsheathed the new-made sword. In morning light it was momentarily bright white, unblemished, free of runes that marked it named and blooded. But the blinding light faded. There was no color to it other than that of newborn steel.

Shortly, there would be blood. And, maybe, runes?

I discarded the harness. Walked silently to the center, put down the unnamed sword, turned and walked away. To stand just outside the circle.

Stigand nodded briefly, then pitched his voice to carry. "We have before us the Sandtiger, Southron sword-dancer, who has been pledged to live in Staal-Ysta a year. But he contests this pledge, claiming he knew nothing of it and therefore is not bound by it. His claim has some merit." The faded eyes looked at me, showing me nothing but neutrality. "The an-ishtoya, known as Del, pledged the Sandtiger in order to delay for one year her permanent exile for the murder of her an-kaidin. In good faith, the voca accepted that pledge. But now the validity is called into question and must be settled in the circle."

I looked at Telek, standing with the other members of the voca. His sword peeped over his shoulder.

Stigand went on. "It's the decision of the voca that a champion shall be named to dance against the Sandtiger. It's the decision of the voca that this dance shall decide the following: that should the Sandtiger win, he will be elevated to the rank of kaidin and may leave at any time. But should the champion win, the Sandtiger agrees to abide by the original decision and remain here for one year."

At this moment, Telek expected me to be very calm, too relaxed, not anticipating the truth. Undoubtedly he intended to come at me instantly, hoping to catch me

off-guard, so he could kill me easily.

No, I don't think so.

Stigand droned on again. "This champion shall represent the best we have to offer: strong, proud, determined, dedicated to upholding the honor and customs of Staal-Ysta even against a sword-dancer as devastating as the Sandtiger."

That was for my benefit; I didn't bother to smile.

"This champion shall, if need be, die in ritual combat to uphold the honor of our ancestors and the gods."

Telek's smile was wry as he listened to the pompous statement. I wondered idly:

Are gods impressed with such?

"This champion shall present herself before us: the an-ishtoya known as Del."

Herself, not himself. Del. He said Del. He meant--Del? Had the old man gone sandsick?

No. No, of course not. He knew precisely what he was doing.

And now, so did I.

"No," I said calmly, "that wasn't the agreement."

It sent a tremor through all the spectators. Telek stepped forward quickly.

"This man came to me and asked me to purposely lose the dance, so as to give him his elevation and free him to leave Staal-Ysta. He deliberately called the honor of Staal-Ysta into question, as well as my own." His tone was thick with contempt; he was doing it very well. "I agreed for the sake of the moment, so I could discuss it with the voca. It was decided to let the dance go forth, but with a new champion. One whose honor is already lost."

"Then how can she uphold the honor of Staal-Ysta?" I snapped. "If she has none, she can hardly be champion!"

Telek inclined his head. "This is a way of gaining it back. Commonly done, I believe, even in the South. A service done for someone can cancel a debt, regain employment... certainly regain honor."

I looked at Del for the first time. She was staring in horror at Telek.

Stigand took over again. "Let it be so, then, as decided by the voca: Del shall act as champion, representing the North and Staal-Ysta, the place that gave her succor in her extremity. Should she win the dance, her exile will be commuted; she will be free to come and go as she pleases."

A shiver ran down my spine. For all of that, she would do it. For honor and freedom and Kalle.

"Let it be so: Should the Sandtiger win, he gains the rank of kaidin and his freedom from the pledge made by the an-ishtoya. But if he loses, he stays."

It didn't sound so bad, when compared to what Del stood to lose. One year.

That's all, out of however many I had left. It would be easy enough just to give Del the victory and stay the year, if only to avoid this dance.

But Del would never stand for it. And I wasn't sure Stigand would, either. I knew if Del did win, they'd find another way of getting rid of her, probably permanently; they had shown their true colors. They wouldn't let her stay here with Kalle. They'd contrive yet another way to rid themselves of the an-ishtoya. And I wouldn't be here to stop it.

Which meant I had to win so I could get her out of here.

While she tried to beat me.

"Del," Stigand said, "will you accept your place as champion?"

Her tone sounded merely controlled, but I knew how to read it. She was decidedly unhappy. But also just as determined to do what she had to do. "Yes. I accept."

"Then place your sword in the circle."

I watched her walk out of the people to the circle. Black clothing, blonde hair, white flesh; too white. All the color was gone from her face.

She stepped over the curving line, moved to the center, placed Boreal on the turf next to my unnamed blade.

Mutely, she turned and walked back out, then swung just outside and faced me, taking off her harness.

Mouthing: "Tiger, I have to."

All I did was nod; she didn't need anything more. We knew what each of us would try to do, and using every skill we knew.

Probably even some tricks.

Del dropped the harness to the ground. Her hands were empty; her eyes were not.

Blue, bleak eyes, full of realizations.

She had brought us to it. And now maybe I would end it, forcing her to yield.

"Prepare," Stigand said.

I saw her body change. I saw her manner alter. Del was a sword-dancer; no matter what she felt, the dance was most important so long as she was in the circle.

There would be no weakness displayed, no matter what she thought. No matter how she feels, facing me for real.

It nearly made me smile. Now, maybe we'd know. Maybe once and for all. We'd find out which of us was better.

But I didn't think it was worth it.

"Dance," Stigand said.

This was what we lived for, both of us, this; sword-dancers and -singers born of hatred and prejudice and the desire for revenge; shaped by pride and need and a desperate determination.

Both of us.

Dance, Stigand had said.

How we danced, Det and I.

Danced.

Sweated.

Bled.

She rained blows: I turned them aside.

She painted the air with exquisite patterns: I slashed neatly through them.

We thrust and feinted and parried, each of us; searched for openings and weaknesses in a dancer who provided nothing but consummate skill, combining strength and power and speed, dexterity, wit, flexibility. And other things unnamable; the intangibles that separate the good from merely adequate, the superb from very good.

Until, eventually, it comes down to Del and me. No more than that, because no more is necessary; just Del and me; Delilah and the Sandtiger, clean and pure and proud: Southron strength against Northern quickness. Masculine power against feminine finesse. To artistry and artfulness, seeking out the chinks.

Patterns broken, blows turned aside.

Parried thrusts and lightning ripostes.

Even hacking and slashing, eventually, when it seemed the only way.

Like mine, Del's breath ran ragged. We neither of us had been North long enough to adjust, although Del was closer than I. Certainly close enough to sing; all I tried to do was breathe.

She could, I knew, sing me out of the circle. And would, if I didn't stop her; I could see the song beginning. She was turning to her jivatma, tapping some of the power. Not a lot, I knew--she didn't want to kill me--but drawing as much as

she needed to win.

I had none to tap. My sword was screaming for blood, screaming for life, and I couldn't give in to it.

So, I was left with only one way to stop her: to blunt her personal power and replace it with my own twisted version, one built of innuendo, of lies, of suggestions, all intended to force mistakes she'd otherwise never make because Del never makes mistakes.

But now she'd have to, if I was to win this dance.

And I had to win this dance.

I watched her closely, moving all the while. We teased one another with blades, scraping, tapping, sliding, coyly promising nothing we wanted to give. With Del and me, sparring, there is always a sexual element, a vicarious intercourse, because we are so well matched, in bed and out; the dance becomes a courtship as much as ritualistic combat.

But this time it went far deeper. We each of us needed a gratification the other wouldn't, couldn't, didn't dare give.

Yet now there was something more. Something growing. I sensed it before I knew it, and when I knew it, it frightened me. What I felt was anger.

Not really at Del, at this moment, because this moment was only the dance. But at the stupidity that put us here, dancing against one another for the pleasure of Telek, Stigand and others, who wanted both of us gone. Who wanted both of us dead, and were willing to cheat to win.

Anger. Now, at Del, who had so determinedly ignored my personal needs to tend only to her own. Who had so easily put me back into bondage, not thinking what it might do.

Quiet, abiding anger. Until it grew. Until it passed out of me into my sword and into my dance, and reached out to touch Del.

Our patterns grew more intense. Our engagements more demanding. And anger slowly increased, robbing me of comprehension outside of the driving need to win.

How many times had Del and I met in the circle, sparring? How many times had we stepped out again, not really knowing who was better, but inwardly claiming superiority?

Hadn't Del even done it aloud at the kymri?

It had never been decided. Now, maybe, it would be.

Time to end this farce.

She hung back, legs spread, flexed, always moving, at least a little, never stopping at all, never giving me time to judge. Beneath the silver bracers I knew her wrists were iron, yet prepared to paint with steel.

I needed my breath to fight, but words can be just as effective. And as few as possible, designed to cut her open and destroy her personal song.

I let my anger flow into my tone. "Recognize this?" I asked. "Listen, See if you do."

Across the circle, she opened her mouth as if to sing, but I beat her to it.

"The an-ishtoya who wants freedom--"

Del didn't so much as flick an eyelash.

"--the an-ishtoya who needs to blood a jivatma--"

Still no response. Her expression, as always, was fierce. But this time she meant it for me.

"--who will do whatever is required--"

She darted in, tapped my blade, dodged back again.

Hoolies, I hate her speed. She leaves me in the dust.

"--to regain what was lost."

It got through. Something flickered in her eyes. I cut the wound deeper yet.

"Sound familiar, Del? Are you seeing yourself?"

Clearly, she did. I saw the startled shock in her eyes, and dawning acknowledgment.

One final blow: "I'm taking you out of here. To the South once I'm done, where I can have it all: jivatma, power, Delilah." I paused for effect. "Once I've put you in your place."

It worked. She was furious, too furious for total control. Instantly I followed up my advantage, meaning to shatter her guard.

Trouble was, I tripped on ragged turf. It was only a slight misstep, but more than enough for her. The advantage became Del's.

She broke through, thrust, cut into me, just above the wide belt. I felt the brief tickle of cold steel separate fabric and flesh, sliding through both with ease, then catch briefly on a rib, rub by, cut deeper, pricking viscera. There was no pain at all, consumed by shock and ice, and then the cold ran through my bones and ate into every muscle.

I lunged backward, running myself off the blade. The wound itself wasn't painful, too numb to interfere, but the storm was inside my body. The blood I bled was ice.

"Yield!" she shouted. "Yield!" Shock and residual anger made her tone strident.

I wanted to. But I couldn't. Something was in me, in my sword; something crept into blood and bones and sinew and the new, bright steel. Something that spoke of need. That spoke of ways to win. That sang of ways to blood--

"I'll make you," she gasped. "Somehow--" And she was coming at me, at me,

breaking through my weakened guard and showing me three feet of deadly jivatma.

"Yield!" she cried again.

My sword was screaming for blood.

You may be forced, she had said, and the results could be disastrous.

I shouted aloud, denying it. Trying to control it; knowing I could not. The sword was far too powerful.

So this is what it is, I thought fleetingly, to have a jivatma, even unnamed:

power, strength, an incredible dedication.

Like Del's.

Hoolies, what would it be if I blooded it?

And that was precisely what it wanted.

Wild magic, Kem had warned. Unsung, unkeyed, unharnessed. And now I paid the price.

But not as dearly as Del.

Forty-four

He stood at the edge of the overlook. Below him lay Staal-Kithra, lumpy with barrows, dolmens and passage graves; the glass-black lake flanked white on white, stark peaks against bleak sky. And Staal-Ysta herself, in the center, floating black on black on winter water, with rack upon rack of bare-branched trees punching wounds in the sky, like swords.

He turned, and the bright, rich cloak unfurled; furred back again to lap at the heels of his boots. He strode free, to the bay stud who waited, and patted him,

rubbing the dew-speckled muzzle buried in twin spumes of steam.

And then strode away again, carrying the sword.

He took it to the edge, unsheathed and naked of runes, and set the tip to the ground, and thrust, driving it into turf, into soil, into the heart of the North.

Silently, he knelt. Slowly, stiffly, on one knee only, the right; left foot planted flat, holding himself rigidly upright. He reached out both large hands and trapped the hilt in them. The wind whipped back his cloak.

It was a cold, bitter wind, thrusting fingers into bronze-brown, too-long hair; scraping nails along the right cheek laid bare by sandtiger claws that showed even through the beard, cutting four curving lines from cheekbone to jaw.

An icy, vengeful wind, bordering on banshee.

The hilt, as always, was warm. The twisted, silk-skinned hilt, promising him power.

He listened, holding the sword. And he heard the song, if only faintly. Little more than an echo thrumming on memory. And then he knew: Canteada. Their song was in his head.

Their song was in his sword. He had only to learn how to sing it.

The stud, bored, snorted. It roused him; he rose, pulled the sword from the ground, then stopped very short.

Runes ran down the blade. Clean, newborn runes. Telling him a name.

The color was gone from his face. He stared at the runeworked blade, gripping the twisted hilt. And then looked down at Staal-Kithra, Place of Spirits; the place of deaths and births. Mouthing the newborn name.

"Samiel," he said. "Now we're even, Del."

Carefully, he cleaned the blade on his cloak, then took it back to its sheath and harness, hanging on the saddle. He put it away, sliding it home, hiding the glory of sky-born steel.

He swung up, suppressing a groan; hooked the cloak out of the way so it wouldn't foul on gear or harness, or irritate the stud, who required no excuses.

Once more, only once, he glanced back. Then gathered reins and spun the stud, digging divots in turf and dirt. Destroying all the pawprints.

"Come on, old man," he said. "We've got the hounds of hoolies to hunt... and now a sword to catch them."

He turned the stud loose and went east.