

Rebel Cause

by

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Chapter One

Once Adair finished breakfast, she discovered two different things: eating did help to get rid of a hangover, and it was a lot earlier in the day than she'd thought. The servants were up and around, of course, but everyone else was probably still in bed asleep. Which made the time perfect for picking up and walking out.

But first Adair found one particular necklace among her possessions and put it on under her tunic. That way no one would see the necklace, not until she brought it out for the jeweler she meant to sell it to. It was a very expensive necklace, something her father's secretary had taken pains to tell her when she'd seemed about to refuse the gift.

The gift had supposedly come from her father on her last birthday, but it had been her father's secretary who had brought the necklace and given it to her. Her father was "very busy" and therefore couldn't bring the gift himself, but she'd been assured that her father would come to wish her a happy birthday as soon as he was free. That occasion had been three months earlier, and oddly enough her father still hadn't managed to free himself.

Adair's first urge had been to throw the necklace back in her father's face, but then she'd realized that doing so would have been stupid. That secretary had been so upset at the thought of having to give the necklace back to his employer he'd actually told Adair how much the jewelry was worth. If she sold the thing for half of its true value she'd have enough gold to live on for quite some time, and few jewelers would refuse a bargain like that.

So she'd taken the necklace with her when she'd left home, hiding the jewelry along with another couple of pieces in some of her books. She'd made sure that those books came to the palace with her, but now the arrangement had to be changed. Walking around with a single book would look perfectly natural, but carrying two or three books would certainly cause suspicion. For that reason Adair now wore the necklace, the single book she meant to carry holding two smaller pieces of jewelry.

And now I'm ready to go, Adair thought with a smile as she headed for the door out of her apartment. I'll be on foot and I'll be carrying a book, so anyone seeing me will assume that I mean to stroll around for a while and then find a tree to sit down under to read. By the time my stroll takes me off the palace grounds and into the city proper, no one ought to be around to notice.

There would also be no one around when she sold the necklace, bought herself a horse, provisions, and assorted necessities, then took to the road. With any luck at all she would be well on her way before a search of the palace made it absolutely clear that she was gone rather than hiding out somewhere. And this time she would make certain to travel a lot less openly than she had last time.

Walking through the halls showed no one but guardsmen standing their posts, more guardsmen than there had been when she'd first arrived at the palace. The increased presence made sense after the attacks, of course, and in an odd way Adair was faintly sorry to be leaving. The first attack had frightened her badly, but the second attack had provided an excellent outlet for bottled-up anger.

There had also been a great deal of satisfaction in stopping someone who enjoyed attacking people who

weren't prepared to defend themselves, Adair realized, considering the point as she walked. Whoever was behind the attacks was unlikely to give up just because the first two attempts had failed, and it would have felt good to ruin any future attempts in the same way.

But then Adair was forced to laugh at herself. She'd been really lucky to be able to stop the first two attempts, and chances were good that any future tries would show the assassins a lot better armed than the first of them had been. And they'd also probably be certain that she was nowhere around before making their attempt, so feeling disappointed about leaving was stupid.

Settling the matter in her own mind made Adair feel better, so much so that she was smiling as she approached one of the palace entrances. Going out the main entrance wouldn't have been very smart, but once outside she'd be able to make her way around to -

"Adair, what are you doing awake so early?" Mayne demanded an instant after he came through the doors Adair had almost reached. "Where are you going?"

Cursing silently in her head did Adair not the least bit of good. She'd stopped short at seeing Mayne, the last person in the world she'd wanted to run into, and it took a long moment before she had control of herself again.

"I'm going outside for a walk before I sit down somewhere to read," she answered in the coldest tones it was possible to produce, looking everywhere but at the man she spoke to. "Not that what I do is any of your business. Get out of my way."

She'd added that last because the miserable man kept moving back and forth to keep her from passing him. After three tries to get around him, Adair was completely out of patience.

"My getting out of your way won't do you any good," he responded, an oddness of some sort in his voice. "I started for the stables with the idea of riding for a while, but it began to rain again even before I was half way there. The rain is coming down even harder now, so your walk and my ride will have to be postponed for another time. Which may be for the best after all."

"Then I might as well go back to my apartment," Adair said, cursing even harder in the privacy of her thoughts. She hadn't let the fact that the day was on the gray side keep her from beginning her escape, and the idea of getting wet wasn't much of a deterrent either. But what she did need now was another way out of the palace, one that didn't have Mayne standing in front of it. She'd already turned and started back the way she'd come, but a moment later there was a big hand wrapped around her arm.

"Instead of going back to your apartment, let's go to my father's apartment instead," the miserable man said, his tone showing that the words hadn't been a suggestion. "There's something I need to say to my father, and since you're involved it's only fair if you're there when I say my piece. If he isn't awake yet, we'll sit and chat while waiting for him to get ready to start the day. There are a lot of things I want to ask you."

"I have no interest in going to your father's apartment and I certainly have no interest in talking to someone like you," Adair growled, hating the way that hand wrapped entirely around her arm. "Let go of me, and I mean right now."

"Sorry, love, but I can't oblige you right now," the monster answered as he simply moved up the hall dragging her along behind him. "I'll apologize for the rudeness later, but you really are entitled to hear what I have to say to my father. Doing things behind people's backs has never sat well with me."

Adair had no idea what he meant by that, and if she'd been given the choice she would have walked

away without ever finding out what he meant. But she wasn't given the choice, so eventually she found herself back upstairs and heading for the king's part of the palace. The hand on her arm refused to let her drag her feet, so just a few minutes later Adair found herself in the king's private sitting room.

"His Majesty is just finishing up his breakfast, Your Highness," a servant told Mayne with a bow after coming back from checking. "He asks that you take tea if you like, and he'll be with you as quickly as possible."

"Thank you," Mayne answered the servant with a nod, then he turned to Adair. "Would you like a cup of tea, love? If so, I'll join you."

Adair hated what Mayne kept calling her, but saying so wasn't likely to make him stop. For that reason she simply stood where she was, not saying anything at all. As far as she was concerned, Mayne wasn't even there.

"It looks like the lady Adair has no interest in tea, so we'll just wait for my father without refreshment," Mayne said to the hovering servant when it became clear that Adair wasn't going to answer him. "But we will wait sitting down."

And with that comment Adair was dragged over to a couch and forced to sit down next to the man who continued to hold her arm. The urge to throw the book she held directly at Mayne's head was almost overwhelming for Adair, but common sense kept her from doing it. If she threw the book, the jewelry inside could well fall out.

"I think I'd like to send you flowers," Mayne mused a minute or so after the servant bowed and left the room. "If you'll tell me what your favorite flower is, you won't have to put up with something you don't like."

It was a good thing invisible people didn't have to be answered, otherwise Adair probably would have choked trying to say five things at once. Not only didn't Adair want anything from the brute who continued to hold her arm, she wasn't about to share her likes and dislikes with him. Another moment of silence passed, and then, just as she felt that Mayne was about to speak again, he was interrupted by the appearance of the king.

"Father, good morning," Mayne said as he stood, the hand on Adair's arm trying to pull her back to her feet right along with him. But Adair had expected that kind of treatment, so she'd relaxed her body completely to keep it from happening. All Mayne accomplished with his effort was to raise her arm and pull her a short distance along the couch.

"Good morning, Mayne," the king answered, his tone definitely on the dry side. "It was really thoughtful of you to provide me with a reminder that not everyone in my realm considers me worthy of respect. Without the reminder I might have gotten a swelled head."

"In a manner of speaking, that is one of the reasons why I'm here," Mayne answered, giving up on trying to get Adair to her feet. "Adair is acting like this because of her extreme unhappiness, and I'm partially to blame for that. I've discovered that I'm in love with this woman, so I came here to tell you that I'll be accepting her invitation and moving her into my apartment. At the end of the week, our marriage ceremony can be held along with those of my brothers."

"Are you completely insane, or just drunk?" Adair demanded while the king frowned at his son. "Or maybe it's the liar in you coming all the way out. Whichever, this stopped being amusing long before now, so I'm - "

"No, you're not leaving," Mayne interrupted as he pushed Adair back onto the couch she'd started to rise from. "And if I'm lying, then you'll have no trouble pointing out what I'm lying about."

"You think I can't?" Adair returned with a sound of ridicule, hating not being able to face him on her feet. "Let's start with that absurd claim of yours that you're in love with me. In order to be in love with someone you have to know all about them and accept them as they are. Not only don't you know anything about me, it's perfectly clear that you expect me to change myself to suit your preferences. If there's any kind of love involved, it's the love you expect to feel once I'm changed into someone else entirely."

"I can't blame you for feeling like that, but what you said isn't true," Mayne returned, and suddenly he'd lowered himself back to the couch in order to take Adair's left hand. "What I can see - what I've fallen in love with - is a picture of what you'd be like if you weren't so horribly unhappy. As I said, I know I'm partially responsible for your unhappiness, but from now on I intend to go out of my way to make up for my stupidity. Once we're living together you'll find out for yourself that I'm not lying."

"Once we're living together," Adair echoed, now hating that he refused to release her hand. "We won't be living together, so - "

"But of course we'll be living together," Mayne interrupted with a laugh. "It's perfectly legal for a man to decide to marry a woman who invites him to her bed, and since you invited me last night - "

"You really are insane," Adair blurted, staring at the madman who refused to let go of her hand. "If I ever did invite anyone into my bed, that anyone would not include you. And you weren't even there last night, only your brothers were. If you try to claim you did share my bed, then your father - assuming he has any honor left - would have to have you put on trial for rape."

"Are you saying you don't remember inviting me?" Mayne asked, staring at her narrow-eyed rather than getting mad the way Adair had expected him to. "What do you remember about last night?"

"I remember drinking with my friends, and then your brothers barged in," Adair returned. "Everything after that is nothing but a blur."

"So you don't know whether or not you did invite my son," King Rodick put in from the chair he now sat in. "If everything is a blur, it's perfectly possible that you issued the invitation and he accepted."

"No, it isn't possible," Adair stated, turning her head to look at her newest adversary. "I don't happen to like your son, and even being drunk would do nothing to change that. But there's really no reason to argue about this. We can ask Elmini and Nossa if I did any inviting."

"There's a good chance those two ladies were just as drunk as you were, so let's drop the matter instead," the king decided aloud in an oddly . bland way. "We'll just wait until the end of the week, and if Mayne still feels the same way he'll be able to move you into his apartment at that time."

"I thought I made it clear that at the end of the week I'll be leaving," Adair said, suddenly in the mood to push the point. "I'm here because of a deal I made with my father, and getting married is no part of that deal. If your son is so eager to move a woman into his apartment, let him pick Dinra. She'd be there so fast it would make his head swim."

"Even insanity wouldn't be enough for someone to choose Dinra," Mayne growled, obviously close to outrage while his father chuckled. "That girl is - "

"That girl is beside the point," King Rodick interrupted smoothly. "What is the point is something you

don't seem to be aware of, Adair. If your father signs a marriage contract, you'll be married whether you want to be or not."

"Sorry, King Rodick, but that doesn't happen to be true," Adair countered, showing a faint smile. "If my father signs a marriage contract then he'll be married, not me. I never gave him permission to act on my behalf, so any action he takes doesn't affect me. That law is supposed to apply to all free persons in this kingdom, which means it applies to me."

"That law applies to all free men," the king responded in the same kind of growl Mayne had used a moment earlier. "Women aren't covered by its protections, not when they're subject to the decisions made by their fathers, brothers, or husbands. If your father signs a marriage contract, you'll definitely be married."

"And I say I won't be," Adair repeated, doing nothing to change the smile she still wore. "I'll fight those outrageous arrangements to my last breath and beyond, refusing to back down or be intimidated. I don't want to be married, and I won't be."

"How do you know that?" Mayne suddenly asked while his father growled wordlessly with anger and frustration. "How do you know you don't want to be married? Have you ever tried it?"

"I know I don't want to be married because my father wants marriage for me," Adair answered, speaking the obvious without hesitation. "My father isn't interested in my happiness, only his own, so how hard is it to know the right - and smart - thing to do?"

"Maybe it's harder than you believe," Mayne countered, now looking at her oddly. "If your father knows what you're like, and it's impossible to say he doesn't, he could well insist on marriage for you knowing you'll immediately refuse. That would mean your refusal would be playing right into his hands."

"Do you really expect me to be so gullible as to swallow that absurdity?" Adair asked with another sound of ridicule. "If he didn't want me married, he could simply have claimed to be unable to find me after I left his house to make my own way in life. That would have taken care of the burning need to obey his king, but instead he frantically sent his guardsmen to bring me back - holding his breath all the while, if his claims are to be believed. I can believe he was worried, but not about me. Tell me he'd get nothing out of it if I ended up married to one of the sons of the king."

Adair threw the challenge out to both father and son, and the way the two men exchanged a long glance answered her question in a way that their silence only underlined.

"What a surprise," she drawled, taking advantage of the fact that her hand was now free to get to her feet. "If I end up married to one of the princes, my father gets something out of the arrangement that he really wants. What a shame neither of those things is going to happen."

"Adair, stop it," Mayne said, immediately getting to his feet to keep her from walking out despite the odd quiet behind his words. "No matter how many times you say you'll refuse being married, the insistence won't help in the presence of official contracts. Once contracts are signed you no longer have a legal choice in the matter, and that's a point you can't simply ignore."

"Of course I can," Adair returned at once. "Even a million signed contracts can't force me to accept something I flatly refuse to consider, not when I'm willing to fight to my dying breath to keep it from happening. If you're smart, Mayne, you'll choose Lisni or Elmini instead of me. If you don't, you'll definitely be the one who gets stuck with Aleena."

"Just a minute," King Rodick said as he also got to his feet. Mayne was staring at Adair in surprise, and

the same surprise could be heard in the king's voice. "Why did you leave Dinra and Nossa out of the choice you gave Mayne just now? Do you think my sons will share whatever disapproval you might feel toward those two ladies?"

"All right, I suppose the cat's out of the bag now," Adair admitted, annoyed with herself for not watching what she said. "Some of us got together and discussed what's going on, and we came to the conclusion that you aren't just making a gesture by inviting six girls here instead of two. You want the two dukes who made demands on you to think they'll be getting what they demanded, but at the end of the week they'll find themselves out in the cold. Lisni's father will stay loyal no matter what, so that leaves three girls for your three sons. Too bad one of the three won't play the game under any circumstance."

"How many people know about this?" the king demanded while Mayne looked at her with raised brows. "You said some of you discussed this. How many does 'some of you' cover?"

"Four of us," Adair answered, faintly disturbed that her final comment hadn't been challenged again. "Dinra and Aleena are too busy being important to spend any time thinking, but the rest of us are burdened with working minds."

Adair had been about to say that she might not be the only one to refuse marriage, then thought better of the comment. If Elmini actually decided to stand with her, that would be soon enough for the king and princes to find out.

"Mayne, see Lady Adair back to her apartment," the king ordered after a moment of what looked like furious thought. "I'm going to have to see if any . awkward messages have been sent out."

"Nossa is the only one who might have sent a message, but I seriously doubt if she did," Adair said before Mayne could take her arm again. "She's sure that when she returns home unchosen, her father will decide she shamed him and will immediately marry her off to someone horrible. Isn't that a lovely way to live your life? Subject to the plans and decisions of every fool around you?"

"I'll speak to you again later, Father," Mayne said, the words more determined than hurried in spite of the king's darkened expression. "Come on, Adair, let's go back to your apartment."

With that big hand on her arm again, Adair had no choice but to go with the fool. Mayne had bowed to his father before dragging her out of the room behind him, and both men seemed to know that she would not be doing anything of the same. It looked like even fools were capable of learning if you repeated the lesson often enough.

The trip to Adair's apartment ended in her sitting room, where a couple of servants were just finishing up with dusting and straightening the room. Adair was "urged" into a chair while the servants curtsied to Mayne, then they gathered up their cloths and brooms and such and left the room. By the time the door closed behind the two women, Mayne was back from the sideboard and handing Adair a cup of tea.

"Thank you anyway, but I'm not in the mood for tea right now," Adair said, making no effort to take the offered cup. "I'm also not in the mood for company, so -"

"I'm not here right now just to keep you company," Mayne interrupted, putting the cup down on the table next to Adair's chair before taking a chair of his own only a couple of feet away. "I'm here to teach you some of the facts of life, and then I'm going to make you an offer."

He paused to sip some tea from his own cup, possibly expecting Adair to comment, but there was no need to oblige him. Once he'd said what he felt he had to he'd leave, and when he was gone Adair would be able to continue with her plans.

"The primary fact of life you seem to be missing is the fact that you're not the first woman to try refusing marriage," Mayne said after the sip, his gray eyes directly on her face. "If refusal was possible those earlier women would have managed it, but they did no such thing. Once a woman has been married to a man, that man is then free to do anything to and with her that he pleases. A man's wife can't complain about cruelty, abuse, or even rape, not when her husband has the right to do as he pleases."

"My goodness, what a surprise," Adair drawled, finding it hard to believe that Mayne seemed to be trying to shock her. "Could that be one of the reasons I don't intend to ever marry, do you think?"

"I repeat: your intentions mean nothing," Mayne stated without the anger or annoyance Adair had been expecting, that gray-eyed stare unwavering. "If, at the end of the week, you're presented with a signed contract, you can yell and complain until you're blue in the face and it won't make the slightest difference. You'll be a married woman, and your husband will have the right to do anything he pleases to you."

"That particular right goes two ways," Adair couldn't keep herself from pointing out with a tight, angry smile. "If I'm going to be hurt anyway, there's nothing to keep me from doing some hurting of my own. And maybe even doing it first, which just might keep the hurt from coming in my direction."

"From what I hear, you're good at throwing things," he answered, still strangely unbothered. "Keeping that kind of thing away from you won't be hard, so then what? Just what will you do to protect yourself or cause hurt before you're hurt?"

The anger and frustration Adair had expected to see in him suddenly appeared in her instead. She wasn't big enough or strong enough to protect herself from a full-grown man, and it was hardly likely she'd be allowed access to a dagger - or a chance to use one even if she did have the blade. That would leave her with only one option, not in the least pleasant but still extremely effective.

"If I ever find myself helpless, I'll still have the least popular way out of a situation like that," Adair finally said, bitterness now in what was left of her smile. "Marriages end when one of the participants in the marriage dies, and if I can't do the killing I can at least do the dying. There's nothing anyone can do to keep that from happening, something the women coming before me have also proven."

"So you'd ruin two lives, and all because it's beyond you to be reasonable," Mayne said, an odd kind of sadness and pain in his stare. "I won't try to claim you can be kept from killing yourself because I know it can be done if you're determined enough. But wouldn't it be easier to avoid all that trouble by making a deal with me now?"

"You expect me to trust any deal you propose?" Adair returned immediately, the sound of ridicule she made louder than usual. "You really do think I'm gullible."

"What I think you are is hurt and disillusioned because of the way your father acted," Mayne stated, his stare beginning to be very disturbing. "You've never found anyone you could trust, anyone who could be relied on to be on your side against the rest of the world. I intend to change that state of affairs, and the best time to start is right now. Do you deny you can be forced into marriage even if it isn't what you want?"

Adair wanted to say again that she was not going to stop fighting, but the words somehow seemed unnecessary. Mayne knew well enough how she felt, so his question was on the strange side.

"I'll take your silence for agreement," Mayne said as soon as it became clear that she wasn't going to speak. "You know you can be forced into marriage, and if you are you could well end up dead. Wouldn't it be easier to try marriage out first, to see what it can be like if it's done properly? Even the most pleasant experience can be soured if it's tried in the middle of screaming, fighting, and pain."

"Try marriage out?" Adair echoed, not quite believing anyone could make such an absurd suggestion. "You mean try it for two or three years, and if it isn't wonderful only then start to complain? I take back what I said a minute ago. You don't think I'm gullible, you think I'm an idiot."

"You're the one who mentioned years, not me," Mayne pointed out, putting his teacup aside to clasp his hands between his knees. "The deal I'm offering is that you try marriage for the rest of this week. I'll spend most of my time here in this apartment, showing you what being married to me would be like. If, at the end of the week, you don't agree that being my wife isn't anything like the horror you've been picturing, I'll cancel any contracts that might be involved and just step back out of your way."

"Of course you will," Adair drawled, beginning to feel really insulted. "Just the way you'll use the rest of the week to show me exactly what being married to you would be like. I'm supposed to believe you won't be on your best behavior, or that you really will let me leave if I still want to go? I very much resent the fact that you obviously consider me a moron, and what's more - "

"No, I don't consider you a moron, and I won't be on my best behavior," Mayne interrupted, the intensity in his eyes having grown stronger. "You're the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with, but not if I have to keep you chained to a wall. If you don't choose to stay with me willingly, then I don't want you to have to stay at all. And you can be damned well sure I won't be on my best behavior. What would be the point in pretending to be something I'm not? I want you to choose to stay with me, not with some false image cooked up to fool you."

Adair still didn't believe what she was being told, but saying so was proving really hard. Was there even the smallest chance that he could be telling the truth.?

"I give you my solemn word that if you really want to leave at the end of the week, I'll see that you have a horse and as much gold as you can carry," he pressed, breaking into Adair's silence. "But that means you have to do your part during the week, by letting me get to know you while you get to know me. And you have to show my father some sign of respect, or I'll put you over my knee and spank you rosy. The man is a king, and you've been nothing but rude to him ever since you got here. Whether or not you curtsy is between you and him, but I won't put up with common rudeness. I'll be back at lunchtime, when I'll expect your answer to my proposal."

And with that he stood up and left the apartment, also leaving Adair to stare after him in disbelief.

Chapter Two

Mayne strode along the hall, heading back toward his father's apartment after putting a couple of guardsmen on Adair's door. It was possible his father had already left for his office, but checking the apartment first would be easiest. If his father had left for his office, he'd -

"Okay, enough thinking about other things," Mayne muttered to himself, disgusted with his cowardice. "What you're afraid to think about is how Adair will decide, whether she'll take your deal or not. And if she refuses, how your father will take your resulting decision."

A wry smile curved Mayne's lips as he walked, an indication that he knew very well how his father would react to what he meant to do if Adair refused his deal. Forcing Adair to be his wife would hardly be any more difficult than he'd told her it would be, but that kind of life wasn't what he wanted for himself. Or for Adair. If she refused his deal, he would cancel the contract with Duke Elden no matter how unhappy that made the duke.

But Mayne's father would be more than just unhappy. King Rodick expected obedience from his sons,

and if it happened he didn't get that obedience he didn't just smile ruefully and shake his head. He'd probably demand that either Lethan or Nallis take Mayne's place as Adair's husband, so one of the things Mayne had to do was speak to his brothers. Since the two owed Adair their lives, it shouldn't be too hard to convince -

Mayne's thoughts broke off when he saw two men emerging from a room on the right at the other end of the hall. The two looked just like Lethan and Nallis, although what they were doing in a room along this hall was something Mayne didn't know. Well, that didn't much matter, not when he had something really important to talk to them about. Mayne opened his mouth to call to his brothers -and that was when it happened.

A door to the left and somewhat behind his brothers opened abruptly and four men hurried out. It took a second for Mayne to realize that the four were masked, but as soon as he saw them starting to draw their swords he knew exactly what was going on.

"Attack!" Mayne shouted at the top of his lungs as he began to run, at the same time unsheathing his own sword. "Lethan! Nallis! Behind you!"

The two men who were Mayne's brothers whirled around as they reached for swords, and then the fight was on. The attackers split two and two, obviously expecting to take their targets by outnumbering them, but things didn't work out like that. All three of the princes had been learning sword work for many years, and there were few better bladesmen anywhere in the realm.

And then Mayne reached the first pair who were trying to spit Nallis. One of the two turned away from Nallis to face the newcomer, obviously expecting to eliminate the interference quickly and then turn back to his objective, but the assassins' plans still weren't working right. The man was fairly good with a sword but Mayne was better, and it didn't take long to prove that. One lightning-fast parry opened the way for a lunge, and when Mayne withdrew his bloodied weapon the assassin dropped his sword and folded silently to the floor.

Looking up, Mayne realized he'd been the least bit slow. Nallis had ended his own opponent first, and even as Mayne watched, Nallis took one of Lethan's attackers in the back. That left only a single attacker for Lethan to cope with, and once the need to defend himself from two blades was gone, Lethan did as his brothers before him. Lethan went on the offense, but just as he was about to skewer the assassin, Nallis used his hilt to hit the man on the head from behind and knock him out.

"Sorry, brother, but we really should save at least one of them for questioning," Nallis said, ending the glower Lethan was sending in his direction. "There's no doubt you had the win, so."

"All right, yes, you're right," Lethan gruded, staring down at the unconscious assassin as guardsmen came running. "It would have given me a lot of pleasure to stick this slime, but we need some answers more than I need passing pleasure. Thanks for that very timely warning and helping hand, Mayne. There's a good chance we might have won anyway, but their sneaking up behind us could have been something of a problem."

"Something of a problem," Nallis echoed with a laugh as he leaned down to clean his sword on the assassin's tunic. "We didn't know they were there until Mayne shouted, so yes, without Mayne's warning we would have had something of a problem. Let's take a look at the faces of our attackers."

The guardsmen who had appeared were now checking the bodies Mayne and Nallis had made, and the first three assassins were definitely dead. Mayne took a moment to clean his own sword before resheathing it, then he joined his brothers in looking at the four men who'd been unmasked. One of the dead looked vaguely familiar to Mayne, but Lethan spoke before Mayne had the chance.

"I've seen that one before," Lethan said, pointing to the same man. "If I'm remembering correctly, he was a troublemaker who was thrown out of the palace for trying to force people into a sword fight. It's too bad we didn't save him for questioning."

"Too late now," Nallis said, showing not the least sign of regret over having bested the dead man. "All we can do is hope that the one still alive was as enterprising as that female assassin. All right, guardsmen, let's get the unconscious one to the questioners. I think the questioning will go best if he's already strapped down when he comes to. Lethan, you and Mayne can tell Father about this while I go along to make sure nothing unexpected happens before this man is questioned."

Mayne saw no reason to argue that decision, and Lethan clearly agreed with him. They watched as four of the guardsmen picked up the unconscious assassin and carried the man behind Nallis, who led the way toward the next cross corridor. The rest of the guardsmen were already in the midst of preparations for disposing of the bodies, so Mayne and Lethan left them to it.

"Nasty business," Mayne commented once he and Lethan were far enough away from the guardsmen that their conversation would be private. "And since you two weren't near your own apartments there weren't any guardsmen close enough to be of use. Would you mind telling me why you and Nallis were in that room?"

"I suppose I might as well," Lethan answered after a brief pause, a sigh behind the words. "Nallis and I have something of a problem, and we wanted to talk where we were certain not to be overheard. Neither of us is willing to accept Aleena as a wife."

"Ouch," Mayne said, knowing perfectly well that he'd also flinched. "That is a problem, and one I can really sympathize with. I think I'd rather be disinherited than have to accept Aleena as a wife, but that's largely because I have my heart set on Adair. But I thought that you and Nallis were willing to marry any way Father wanted you to."

"Well. That decision came before we got to know the girls better than we did," Lethan said, still extremely unhappy. "If you want the actual truth, it's just me who has the problem. I spent hours last night talking to Nossa, the two of us going to her apartment's sitting room after we left Adair's. Nossa is an absolute delight, and all I can think about is seeing her again. Nallis did the same with Elmini, and he said the two of them got along so beautifully that it felt as if they'd known each other forever. But Elmini is acceptable, while Nossa is."

"Meant to be passed over," Mayne finished when Lethan didn't. "I suppose we should have known that Father's plan would fall apart due to unexpected complications, and he should have known it as well. Obviously Nallis is supporting you, but how determined are the two of you really? Are you actually going to refuse to obey Father's orders?"

"Nallis and I had it pointed out to us that if we spend our lives doing nothing more than obeying someone else's wishes, we might as well not have lived." Lethan's expression had turned painfully wry, with more emphasis on pain than any possible amusement. "That idea shocked us, but after thinking about it for a short while we discovered that we agreed. We're talking about choosing women to spend our lives with, not to take to some party for a single evening's entertainment or boredom. I still love and respect our father, Mayne, but I just can't throw away all chance of happiness because he's angry at two of his dukes."

"I hate to say it, but I agree completely," Mayne admitted with his own sigh. "Adair is absolutely determined not to cooperate with being married off, and if the plan I'm in the middle of now doesn't work to change her mind I'm going to cancel our marriage contract. I meant to tell that to Father as soon as I

saw him, but considering the fact that you and Nallis also have something to say I think we'd better wait."

"Yes, that sounds like the best idea," Lethan decided after considering the point for a moment. "Right now we have an assassin to distract all of us, so not telling Father how we feel until later makes a good deal of sense. Not to mention the relief that choice brings me. Do you think we'll ever get old enough that we'll stop feeling like boys in Father's presence?"

"You stop feeling like a boy when you truly know yourself to be a man," Mayne answered with something of a smile. "That isn't easy with a father like ours, but if something is easy then anyone can do it. I like to think that we're not just anyone."

Lethan made a sound of some sort, but what the sound meant wasn't something Mayne could figure out. Not that it mattered. Their father's apartment was only a short distance ahead, and it was guaranteed that King Rodick would not be happy to hear that there had been another assassination attempt against two of his sons.

Adair sat staring at the closed door for quite some time, her mind whirling so fast that nothing in the way of rational thought was able to come through. Of all the insane suggestions anyone could possibly make, the one Mayne had just presented to her had to be at the top of the list.

"Practice being married to him for the rest of the week?" she muttered, finding that she was shaking her head. "He must be insane, completely out of his mind, a total madman."

But what if he actually means it? the question came, from where Adair had no idea. He wasn't lying when he said I could be forced into marriage with very little trouble, and that no matter how much yelling and screaming and refusing I do. So why would he lie about offering me a deal? Just to put off the explosion for the rest of the week? I don't understand what he's after.

And not understanding wasn't the only thing giving Adair trouble. Mayne had said he would not be on his best behavior, and he'd even gone so far as to threaten to punish her. If his aim was to talk her into a deal he had no intention of honoring, why would he be that brutally honest?

Her thoughts continued to whirl around and around, even when she went to get more tea. Without realizing she was doing it, she'd finished the tea in the cup Mayne had given her. She hadn't been going to touch the tea, not when he might have put some kind of drug in it without her seeing him do it, but she'd finished every drop in the cup and there didn't seem to be any drugs.

But that didn't mean he wasn't lying for some purpose she didn't know about. Taking one sip of the fresh tea brought that unpleasant possibility to mind, an idea Adair knew she would be stupid to just shrug off and forget. If the purpose was to keep her quiet until the end of the week, the deal Mayne had proposed would accomplish that end. She would step forward and demand her freedom, and Mayne would laugh and tell her she was dreaming.

And yet it was just barely possible that he'd meant every word he said. Adair was forced to admit that possibility even as anger rose high in her. His father would certainly hate the idea of letting her go, but maybe Mayne had enough courage to face his father without backing down. If he didn't, her scorn and loathing toward him just might make Mayne save her the trouble of killing herself.

"Assuming I'm still here for any of that to matter," Adair murmured, suddenly realizing that she'd been left alone. The rain was coming down hard outside her sitting room windows, but taking a rain cape just wasn't possible. If someone saw her strolling along just carrying a book, they would assume she was on the way to somewhere pleasant to sit and read. If she had a rain cape with her. No, she'd just have to put up with getting wet until she had some gold in her hands and was far enough away from this place.

Picking up her book took only a minute and walking to the door even less time, but that was as far as she got. The two guardsmen outside her door looked around when she opened that door, and one of them moved at once to block her path.

"You have the prince's apology, my lady, but he would prefer if you waited for his return in your apartment," the guardsman said with no inflection at all. "He'll be back to escort you to lunch, and also to finish your earlier discussion."

The man sounded as if he'd memorized the words he'd spoken, but memorized or not he'd ended Adair's escape even before it really began. All she could do was nod and close the door again, then silently curse Mayne and his messages. Putting guards at her door just wasn't fair.!

The anger stayed with Adair as she stalked back to her chair and the cup of tea she'd left, but a couple of sips later her anger began to dissolve. The whirling in her mind had settled down to a fairly clear summation of the situation now facing her, but maybe "settled down" wasn't quite the best phrase to use. Nothing had been settled, but her options had been made a good deal clearer.

If Mayne had been lying to her, there was really nothing to worry about. Either her heated refusal to go along with the marriage prodded him and his father into doing something foolish, or she would find her own way out of the trap. If her choice was between lifelong capture and death, she would choose the easier fate without hesitation.

But if Mayne was telling the truth, if he really meant he wanted to spend his life with her willing presence beside him, how could she just turn her back on him? She knew very little about the man, but he seemed to know how hard it would be for her to trust anyone - and clearly wanted to make himself the exception to that rule. If he was telling the truth then he did care enough about her to make things easier for her, so -

So she really had no choice but to find out if he was telling the truth. And to find out more about what he was like. Could he be attracted to nothing more than her looks? If not, was there something wrong with him for being attracted to a hell-raiser? And even if there wasn't anything wrong with him, would she be able to get past her hatred of marriage?

The new set of questions and confusion-making demands held Adair's attention for quite some time, easing up some only when she realized the jewelry was still hidden in her book and the necklace still around her throat. If, at some time in the future when no one was watching, she felt the need to try walking away, the escape would be accomplished much more easily if no one realized she'd tried to escape earlier - and what she meant to use to live on.

Taking off the necklace and freeing the brooches from her book was quickly and easily done, and then she went into her bedchamber to put the jewelry away with the rest. She was on her way back to her chair and the newest cup of tea when a knock came at the door. Without thinking she called out permission to enter, but it wasn't one of the door guards who'd knocked.

"I'm sorry I'm late getting back, but there was an . incident," Mayne said with a smile as he walked in and closed the door again behind him. "Are you ready to go to lunch?"

"Sure," Adair said, but she could feel the frown that his words had brought. "What did you mean by an 'incident.' Don't tell me there was another attack? Who was it against this time?"

"There were four assassins with swords, and they attacked both of my brothers," Mayne answered after an instant's hesitation. "We killed three of them, but the fourth was knocked unconscious in order to be questioned."

"Good thinking," Adair couldn't help saying with a lot of satisfaction. "Even if the man doesn't know anything, his fate could well make the next chosen assassin decide to leave instead of trying. Did the man know anything?"

"He knew who hired him, but it wasn't anyone we knew," Mayne said, his smile returning as he studied her. "I was afraid the idea of questioning an assassin would upset you, but you seem about as far from upset as it's possible to be. Or maybe it's just that you don't know what questioning really entails."

"Just because I joined you in using the word 'question' instead of 'torture' doesn't mean I don't know what goes on," Adair answered with a humorless smile. "I don't really like the idea of torture, not when if you hurt someone badly enough they'll say anything just to stop the pain, but with assassins it doesn't really matter. They're the ones who start the process, so they can't complain when they're the ones being hurt instead of their target."

"And that's something else we agree about," Mayne said with a better smile than hers. "I knew we liked the same kind of tea, and now I know we feel the same way about torture. Once we start to really get to know each other, I'm betting we'll find a lot more items to add to the list. But I think I'd better mention something to you before we leave for lunch. It concerns what you said to my father earlier, about the guesswork you and your friends made in relation to who marries whom."

"You mean the part of the discussion that actually got your father wild instead of just annoyed?" Adair asked, fighting not to smile broadly with success achieved. "What about it?"

"To begin with, I'd like to ask you not to mention the idea to anyone else," Mayne replied, apparently missing Adair's amusement. "You ladies may have been bright enough to figure out my father's intent, but so far the courtiers haven't done the same and we'd like to keep things like that. Do you think the other ladies will also agree to keep quiet in the same way?"

"Since I can't speak for them, I'll have to ask," Adair put, but now she was the one studying Mayne. "Why do I have the feeling there's more to the matter than you're saying?"

"Probably because you're really bright," Mayne answered ruefully. "There is more, but first I need to ask: have you come to a decision about the deal I offered? I've spent the last few hours wondering, and now I'd like to know."

"I spent the last few hours trying to make up my mind," Adair admitted, finding it impossible to move her gaze from his face. "I finally came to the decision to take you at your word - but I do have to warn you. If it turns out that you're lying just to get a few days of peace and quiet, I will make you regret it."

Pure delight had covered Mayne after the first of her words, which was why Adair had added the warning. She still didn't really trust the man, and he seemed to know it.

"Since I'm not lying, I have nothing to worry about," he said as he briefly touched her face with his fingertips, the delight still with him. "We're going to spend the next few days getting to know each other, and at the end of the week you'll know exactly what kind of man you'll be getting as a husband. And I'll know what it will take to make my wife happy and keep her like that."

"Which doesn't mean you'll like what it takes to keep your wife happy," Adair pointed out, refusing to ignore real life the way Mayne seemed to be doing. "Even if we were madly in love, which we aren't, that doesn't mean we'd like each other. Have you thought about that part of it?"

"I've found that life is sweeter if you handle problems if and when they come up," he countered, clearly amused. "Worrying about things that might never happen is a waste of time and effort, and we don't have

all that much time left before the end of the week. Let's forget about the possibility of our not liking each other, and simply concentrate on having a good time. If week's end shows us that we really hate each other, we'll just shake hands and go our separate ways."

Adair felt the very strong urge to ask what would happen if one of them fell in love while the other didn't, but that wasn't something she felt able to discuss right now. Not when chances were excellent that Mayne would be the one who couldn't abide what she was really like.

"And now I need to ask you not to repeat what I'm about to tell you, not to anyone," Mayne went on. "You were right when you said there was something else going on, and that something else will probably cause explosions when my father finds out. Nallis seems to have found Elmini very much to his taste, but Lethan feels the same way about . Nossa."

"You're joking!" Adair blurted, understanding at once what the problem was. "Not that I can blame Lethan, but - Your father will have a fit."

"Maybe even two or three fits," Mayne agreed. "Nallis intends to support Lethan by joining him in refusing to consider Aleena under any circumstance, and I'm going to back the two of them. I thought you ought to know what was going on in case my brothers and I end up in the dungeons or executed."

"Because all of you have decided to stand firm," Adair said with a nod. "What do you think will happen when - not if, but when - your father points out that political matches don't have to be even slightly pleasant?"

"Lethan and Nallis have both decided that they won't let politics ruin their lives," Mayne said with a shrug. "If I hadn't already staked my claim to you, I'd be standing with them saying the same thing. Aleena is a man's version of a fate worse than death. Let's go to lunch."

Adair tried not to laugh at that as they left her apartment, but the attempt was an abysmal failure. Aleena was a mindless female who made no effort to stop being mindless, so she had no one but herself to blame for the way people saw her.

By the time Adair and Mayne reached the dining room, half the people there had already gotten their food from the buffet. The two newcomers took their places on line, but Adair spent more time fighting laughter than deciding what she wanted to eat. Mayne stood behind her murmuring comments about the various courtiers, and most of the comments were at the very least scandalous.

After lunch they took a short walk around the halls before returning to Adair's apartment and sitting down to talk. At one point Mayne spoke about his childhood after his mother had died, and the lonely emptiness he described was very much like what Adair had felt. Neither of them had been all that close to their mothers, but they'd still felt their loss sharply.

Hours went by as they talked, and before Adair knew it the time had come to dress for dinner. Mayne took her hand and kissed it before he left, and Adair had to hurry in to take a bath to keep herself from thinking about that kiss. She and Mayne did seem to share a lot of likes and dislikes, but her growing feelings for him seemed to have only a little to do with that. He was so funny, and open, and strong.

For once Adair was grateful for the presence of the servants. If not for them she would have ended up sitting all night in cold bath water, missing dinner and anything else that might happen. But the girls got her out of the bath, dried her, dressed her, and fixed her hair. Oddly enough there was no argument about the blue gown she'd chosen, not when so many of the court ladies had now returned to the same style.

When Adair left her bedchamber, she had a surprise waiting. Mayne sat in a chair dressed in his own

dinner clothes, and when she appeared he rose to his feet with a smile.

"How about that?" he said softly as she approached him, his gaze locked to her. "Not only does she come out looking gorgeous, she doesn't even keep me waiting long. We'll definitely have to do this more often."

"Do what?" Adair asked, fighting the smile that tried to take her over. "Have you sitting and waiting for me?"

"Why not?" Mayne countered, taking her right arm and wrapping it around his left. "Right now it's the most delightful occupation I can think of. The delight will probably fade after two or three years, but by then I'll have found something else about you to delight me. Shall we go?"

"I think we'd better," Adair answered dryly. "I'd hate to see the servants fall over dead trying not to giggle."

Mayne's eyes widened as he glanced around, apparently only now seeing the way Adair's girls were choking while trying not to laugh. The girls obviously thought that what Mayne had said was a riot, but Adair didn't really mind. She had enjoyed the comments, almost as much as she enjoyed holding to Mayne's arm.

They left her apartment then, but rather than go directly to the gathering room near the main dining room, Mayne led her to the small room she'd been taken to the night before. As they walked in she was laughing at something Mayne had said, but the laughter died when she saw the painful expressions on Lethan and Nallis where they stood behind their father. Obviously, the two men wished they had their choice of woman to laugh and joke with, but the time for that apparently hadn't arrived yet.

"Good work, Mayne," the king drawled, and Adair looked over to see the man smirking at her. "It's about time you took her firmly in hand. If a man wants a woman for his wife, he has to show he can handle her."

"Handling me isn't hard," Adair answered at once without thinking. "It just takes intelligence and good manners, which ought to explain why some people can't manage the feat."

The king's smirk disappeared while Lethan and Nallis flinched, and Adair didn't have to look up at Mayne to know he wasn't pleased. But she hadn't been the one to start the exchange, so no one in that room had anything to complain about.

"All right, I'll admit what I said was the least bit . provocative," the king gruded after a moment of silent glowering. "You have my apology, young lady, and now it's more than time we went in to dinner."

Lethan and Nallis quickly showed their enthusiastic agreement with the idea of leaving the room, the two following right after their father with Adair and Mayne coming last. A glance showed Mayne looking . disappointed, Adair thought, but she had no idea why that was. What could he possibly be disappointed about?

The question might well have stayed with Adair longer, but once their small procession entered the gathering area and went directly into the dining room, Adair found the answer to a different question. She'd wondered why she and Mayne had gone to the small room instead of directly into the gathering area, and sight of the bowing, curtsying throng provided the reason. Walking along behind the king meant she wasn't in the crowd setting an unwanted example.

Adair smiled to herself, forced to admit that the idea was clever. King Rodick had apparently realized

that making an issue of her not curtsying would lose him more standing than he gained, so he'd taken steps to avoid the situation. If Adair was part of his entourage rather than in the crowd.

Reaching the main table showed that the seating arrangements had been changed again. Or mostly changed. Next to the king's place was Lisni, with Adair coming to her right, Mayne to Adair's right, then Elmini. Nallis had been put next to Elmini with Dinra to his right and Aleena next to Dinra, Lethan and Nossa at the end of the table. Dinra and Aleena looked smugly pleased, and that also made Adair smile. It would be interesting to see how pleased the two "important" girls would be at meal's end.

When the fairly leisurely meal was over, Aleena and Dinra weren't pleased at all. In spite of the rather obvious efforts of the two, Nallis and Lethan had spent more time talking to Elmini and Nossa than to the obnoxious pair. Dinra was furious and Aleena outraged, and they left the dining room as soon as the king rose to signal an end to the meal.

Adair noticed that Lisni also disappeared, which was decidedly odd. She'd meant to ask Lisni what she and the king had talked about the whole time, but wasn't given the chance. Lethan and Nallis took Elmini and Nossa back to the gathering room to dance for a while, and despite the rather quiet way Mayne had passed the meal he did the same with Adair. He held Adair very close as they danced, something she didn't find at all objectionable, but finally the time ended and he escorted her back to her apartment.

"I'm sure you've noticed that your servants have been sent to bed," Mayne said when they walked into Adair's sitting room to find it empty. "I also arranged for them not to come back until you ring, to spare you as much embarrassment as possible. If, after I spend a couple of nights here, you find you're not embarrassed after all, you can just change the orders I gave."

"I'd . forgotten that you meant to stay," Adair got out after the strangest sensation flashed through her. "Won't it be easier if we don't - "

"No, it won't be easier," Mayne interrupted even before she finished what she wanted to say, his hand coming gently to her face. "Lying together is part of being married, and I've been very much looking forward to making love to you. Unfortunately there's something else I'll have to do first, but that can't be helped. I gave you my promise on the matter, and going back on a promise of that kind isn't a good idea."

"What are you talking about?" Adair asked, seeing that he really did look unhappy. "What kind of promise did you make?"

"I promised to spank you if you were rude to my father," Mayne answered, and sad or not his gaze had no doubt or hesitation in it. "You knew that and were rude to him anyway, so now you have to get the spanking."

By that time Adair's jaw was down to the floor, mostly due to the fact that he clearly meant what he'd said.

Chapter Three

"How can you complain about me being rude to your father when even he admitted he was rude first?" Adair finally managed to demand. "Are you saying you think I don't have a right to defend myself if the person doing the attacking is your father?"

"Not at all," Mayne denied, putting an arm around her shoulders to urge her in the direction of her bedchamber. "If things had stayed the way they began, what passed between my father and you would

have been only your business and his. But things didn't stay the way they began, not when he apologized to you. You did notice his apology, I think."

Adair would have enjoyed saying she hadn't noticed anything of the sort, but that would have been a stupid lie rather than just the ordinary kind. She'd already mentioned that the king had admitted to being rude.

"So we both know you noticed my father's apology," Mayne continued once it was clear that Adair had no intentions of arguing the claim. "You were given an apology, but not only did you make no effort to give one in return, you didn't even acknowledge that you'd been apologized to. If that isn't your definition of rude, I'd like to know what is."

"I . don't do well with apologies no matter which way they go," Adair muttered as Mayne ushered her through the door into her bedchamber. "Almost no one ever apologized to me for what they said or did, so I got into the habit of not offering apologies of my own. I guess the least I could have done was say something to show I appreciated your father's gesture."

"The most disturbing part of this is the fact that you don't really know what you should have said or done," Mayne told her with a headshake as he stopped them both to look down at her. "For that reason your spanking won't be as bad as it might have been if you'd been rude on purpose, but we can't just forget about punishing you. You've never been punished for being rude before this, have you?"

Adair simply shook her head, confusion making it impossible for her to come up with any kind of words. She wanted to demand that he leave, demand that he forget about doing anything at all to her, but his entire attitude. He was actually paying attention to her, truly concerned about what had and hadn't happened in her life.

"No, I would have bet gold that you've never really been punished," Mayne went on, his hand coming to stroke her hair gently. "If you care about someone, you help them learn what they need to know to get along in life. Until now no one has ever cared about you in that way, but those days are over. From now on if you do something you shouldn't you'll be punished, which ought to help you to learn not to do those things as quickly as possible. Let's get started now so the time will be behind us and we can go on to more pleasant pursuits."

Adair had never in her life felt so completely off balance and unsure, which meant that Mayne was sitting down and pulling her across his lap almost before Adair knew it. Most of her wanted nothing to do with being punished, but that was just an automatic reaction. A large and growing part inside her was crying with relief to know that someone was finally paying attention to her. That someone actually cared about what she did and didn't do, that they wanted to help rather than ignore her -

"Have I mentioned that I admire these silken underthings you wear?" Mayne asked, dragging Adair out of her thoughts as the drawers he so admired were opened and moved down to her knees. "They look better under your gowns than ordinary drawers would, but they're still perfectly respectable. Adair, there's something I need to do, but you won't enjoy the experience. Can you simply take my word for the fact that the . discomfort you feel will eventually be to both our benefits? You won't understand what I mean until everything is over and done with, so you'll have to trust that I'm not lying to you. Can you do that?"

Talk about being shocked! Adair lay face down across Mayne's knees, her bottom bare and completely vulnerable, but he'd stopped what he was doing to ask her to trust him! Trust was something else Adair was not very good at giving, especially when she'd been warned that she would not enjoy what would be done to her. But then she realized that he could have done whatever he pleased to her without asking,

and that fact couldn't be ignored.

"I . guess you could say I'm already trusting you," she finally managed to get out as she stared at the carpeting beyond the chair Mayne sat on. "Will whatever you're going to do be all that terrible?"

"I hope not, but then I've never had the same done to me," he answered. "I just know that it will make our eventual lovemaking better for you, and that's why I want to do it. If you need the help you'll know it's available, but if you don't then you'll never have to go through the same again. With that in mind, let's get right to it."

Adair gasped when her nether cheeks were parted by Mayne's fingers, and then there was something small being pushed into her bottom. She'd expected whatever he did to be painful, but instead of pain she felt . oddness. The thing inside her bottom made her want to move around, made her want to -

"Oh!" Adair exclaimed when a hard smack landed on her bare backside. The spanking was starting, but with the thing inside her the sensation was nothing like what she'd felt the first time Mayne spanked her. She couldn't keep herself from squirming hard, and she even tried to move a hand back to protect herself. But her gown was bunched up at her waist, blocking her arm and keeping it from being of any help protection-wise, which meant the spanking just continued.

And in no time at all Adair was babbling out disjointed sounds that should have been words while that hand just kept smacking and smacking her bottom. Flashes of heat swept through her like lightning, almost drowning out the sensation of growing heat in her backside. The kicking of her legs, even as restricted as it was with her drawers around her knees, made everything worse, but she couldn't stop kicking. Every movement made things worse, but Mayne's hand connecting with her bottom without stop made refusal to move impossible.

The spanking went on for what seemed like forever, until Adair's bottom ached with every smack of Mayne's hand, and those smacks were hard. Small pain sounds had started to force their way out of her throat, half-swallowed shouts of "Ow! Ow! Ow!" that she had no choice about, and then, suddenly, the spanking was over. She had actually been put back on her feet before she realized that, awareness coming only when she found she was being led slowly toward the bed.

"Oh, please, I can't, please!" Adair babbled in protest as she was led along by one arm. Not only was the movement terrible, but her drawers hadn't been pulled up again. They lay mounded between her knees and her ankles, making her take small, quick steps which in turn made her gown rub even more against her aching bottom. She was hobbled, but she was still being made to walk.

"Be brave, love, it isn't much farther," Mayne murmured even as he refused to stop. "Just another few steps, just a few more feet, that's it, you're doing fine."

"But I'm not doing fine!" Adair wailed as she bounced more than walked. Most of the bounce was because of the ache in her bottom, another movement she would have refused to make if she could have. She was dying, dying.!

And then Mayne suddenly swept her into his arms, leaned down, and kissed her. She'd never really been kissed before, certainly not like this, but some hidden or buried part of her knew exactly how to respond - and made her do it instantly. Her arms held chokingly tight to Mayne's body while her lips kissed him back, the passion exploding from inside her seeming even stronger than his own. She tried to devour his mouth as he did the same with hers, and even the way she continued to bounce where she stood did nothing to ruin the joint effort.

An effort that made Adair's head spin and swim, a madness that destroyed every normal thought in her

head. She was caught up in a whirlwind of sensations that quickly began to tear at her, her overall discomfort becoming a shrieking ache. She heard a moaning that went on and on, a sound that became more shrill as desperation became a part of the sound, and only when Mayne finally ended the kiss did Adair realize that it was she who was moaning.

"Yes, love, all right, I know," Mayne murmured as his hands went to her gown. "You need easing, and I need to give it to you. Let's get ourselves out of these clothes and then we can each see to the other's need."

Mayne had taken off his swordbelt even before the spanking started, but getting them both out of clothes was still too long a process. Once her gown was open Adair was able to pull it off and toss it away, but getting out of the bunched-up drawers wasn't quite as easy. She had trouble maintaining her balance as she fought with the drawers, but when Mayne lifted her under one arm and then took her shoes off the problem was solved. Without her shoes the drawers came off, and then Mayne picked her up in his arms and put her on the bed.

Adair was only just able to keep from crying out as her tender bottom touched the bed, but leaning up on her feet ended a good part of the difficulty. The remaining trouble came from the way she felt, but then Mayne was between her knees and doing something with his body and hers. Adair was too scattered to really know what was going on, but as soon as something thrust inside her she understood that that was exactly what she wanted.

And then Mayne had gathered her in his arms again and began another kiss even as whatever was inside her began to stroke in and out. Adair moaned in delight at the feelings the stroking brought her, feelings that rose higher and higher even in spite of the ache in her bottom. Whatever he was doing it was marvelous, and as Adair joined in the kiss again she fervently hoped that the marvelous feelings never ended.

In a way, the marvelous feelings didn't end for quite a long time. The stroking carried her up to the sky before letting her fall, but the fall was even better than the rise. Adair shuddered and trembled with pure ecstasy, and by the time she became aware of the world again she found herself on the way up to the sky a second time. She rose and fell two more times, but the last of those times Mayne seemed to share the fall. At the end of it he kissed her briefly, then moved away to collapse on the bed next to her.

"That was . incredible," Adair finally whispered once it was possible for her to speak again even though movement continued to be beyond her. "I don't know what it was, but I'd certainly like to find out."

"That was the lovemaking I told you about," Mayne answered with a chuckle, and then he was leaning over her to her left. "It was just as incredible for me, so allow me to say that you have my undying gratitude for trusting me."

"Will it have to . start with a spanking again if we do it a second time?" Adair asked as he raised her left hand to kiss it. "My bottom still hurts quite a bit, now that I'm aware of ordinary things again."

"If we do start with a spanking next time, the spanking won't be quite as hard unless you need to be punished again," he answered, showing something of a sad smile. "Getting punished is supposed to hurt, otherwise you have no real reason to stop doing what you were punished for. You do understand the point, I hope?"

"Of course," Adair responded with a wry smile. "If you feel strongly enough about what you did and mean to do it again, you have to know what to expect when you do. If you don't feel that strongly, you have to decide if continuing with the actions is worth what those actions will bring. I know just how that goes."

"You're talking about something other than being spanked," Mayne said, his light-eyed stare more than a little serious. "What have you done in the past that you had to decide not to do again? Or do a second time?"

"Everyone hated it when I tried to keep myself from being ignored," Adair said after a very brief hesitation. "They told me it was my place to sit quietly in a corner somewhere and not bother my father or anyone else, but they couldn't explain why other people were allowed to have a life while I wasn't. Telling me that girls aren't supposed to do anything but what they're told made no sense, and when I said so they were so outraged they stopped talking to me. But they couldn't stop seeing what I did."

"And that made them work even harder at ignoring you," Mayne said with a nod that actually seemed angry. "Well, if there's one thing I won't be doing, it's ignoring you. Not now and not ever. Your father may have preferred his sons to associate with, but that's his loss."

"Actually, my brothers probably would have preferred to be ignored," Adair said, finding his anger so warming that she couldn't keep from touching Mayne's arm. "My brothers were schooled and trained until they were ready to collapse from exhaustion, but they weren't allowed to collapse. My father kept a very close eye on their progress - or lack of progress - and made sure they were punished if they started to falter. I remember Dalrin once demanding to know what they were being trained for, but instead of being answered he was punished for asking."

"Even though it was a damned good question," Mayne said, now looking surprised. "Did he ever get an answer?"

"Not that I know of," Adair said, finding it difficult to shrug while lying down. "A couple of years ago I asked Dalrin why he and our other brothers stayed, and he looked like he wanted to hit me. Then he muttered something about not having anywhere else to go and stomped away. I thought about his answer for a while, and only then understood. He and my brothers hadn't reached the point where anywhere was better than being at home. The only thing I couldn't decide was whether or not I envied them."

"Because you had reached that point," Mayne said with a nod, that distant anger back again. "I'd also be willing to bet you have more courage than your brothers, which proves that your father is doubly a fool. But as I said, his loss is my gain. Now I have a question for you: would you rather I slept right here, with you, or went back to my own apartment for the night? If I stay and someone finds out, you'll almost certainly be embarrassed."

Adair considered the question for a moment, then she shook her head.

"If I cared what other people thought of me, I would have spent my time sitting quietly in a corner," she said, making no effort to avoid the light-eyed stare coming down at her. "The only real question to consider is whether I want you to stay, and I do. If we're going to practice being married, we ought to do it properly."

"Yes, we certainly should," Mayne agreed, his sudden smile lighting up his whole face. "Why don't you get under the covers while I turn down the lamps, and then we can snuggle together. You do know that snuggling is a major part of married life, I hope?"

Adair laughed softly at that comment as she got to her hands and knees. Getting under the covers was easier that way, and once under she lay down on her side facing where Mayne would be lying. He turned down the lamp next to the bed last, and when he got under the covers with her Adair learned his definition of snuggling.

It meant being held in his arms as if she really were precious to him, a sensation even more marvelous

than the lovemaking had been. It was finally possible to think about sleep in that position, the dark making things easier for her. Mayne's naked body had been incredibly beautiful to look at, but she hadn't had the nerve to look as long as she'd wanted to. Or to ask to touch it all over.

Maybe tomorrow or the next day she'd find a chance to mention that.

Before he left the room, Mayne kissed Adair gently on the forehead to keep from waking her. She'd been mostly awake earlier in the morning when they'd made love again, but now she was back asleep with the most satisfied look on her face. If Mayne had had the choice he would have just stood and watched that expression for the next hour or two, but he was expected at the breakfast meeting his father had set up yesterday.

After closing the bedchamber door softly behind him, Mayne walked to a chair and sat down for a minute. It was still fairly early so he had the time, and he wanted to enjoy thoughts of Adair for as long as possible. She was even more wonderful than he'd expected, and he grinned when he remembered the way she'd sleepily asked if she could touch his body. Obviously she hadn't wanted to intrude, not yet knowing what was and wasn't an intrusion between married people.

In actual fact she didn't know much about dealing with people in general, and that truth took all amusement from him. When it came to arguing or defiance she was fully experienced and knowledgeable, but when it came to the nicer kind of interrelationship between people she was all but lost. Such an incredibly wonderful woman, and she'd spent most of her life unwanted and ignored.

Rage rose up so fast in Mayne that he nearly choked on it, every bit of the emotion aimed at Duke Elden Cantlen. From what Adair had said the man hadn't been a decent parent even to his sons, and it enraged Mayne to think that he'd believed the duke's claims of concern about his daughter. In all probability, Duke Elden wasn't concerned about anyone but himself.

Which meant it might be a good idea to find out why Duke Elden had maneuvered Mayne into signing that marriage contract early. Most likely the man had been worried that neither Mayne nor his brothers would want to marry Adair, and that was why he'd played his little game. Even though the duke had to believe that only political expediency and not personal preference would be involved.

Mayne got to his feet and headed for the door into the hall, his still-angry thoughts dissatisfied with the idea of Duke Elden's actions being nothing but ordinary caution. There was something about the idea that felt wrong, and he'd have to -

The hall door opened suddenly when Mayne was still a number of feet away from it, but it wasn't servants who entered. Two men came in, and each man wore a long scarf wrapped around his head. The ends of the scarves were arranged across the faces of the men, hiding their features from anyone who might see them. If it became necessary to be less conspicuous, untucking the tucked-in end of the scarf would turn the two almost completely ordinary.

But at the moment the men weren't looking ordinary, and it only took a second for them to realize that and overcome their apparent surprise. They must have been expecting to find him still asleep, Mayne realized, but his being awake didn't keep the two from drawing their daggers. They'd come to kill, but as Mayne ignored his sword and drew his own dagger, he knew his own aim wasn't the same. He meant to take at least one prisoner for questioning, preferably two.

The assassins came forward confidently, obviously thinking that the two of them would surely be able to best a man who was alone. Someone else in Mayne's place would have had more of a problem, but Mayne and his brothers had been well and thoroughly trained in how to defend themselves even against

greater numbers. And the dagger was one of Mayne's favorite weapons.

The assassin on Mayne's left stabbed high while the one on the right aimed lower, but it was clear that the two hadn't practiced attacking together. Their timing was just enough off that Mayne was able to block the high blow with his left arm while a slash of his dagger forced the assassin on the right to break off his attack and flinch back.

And that reflexive move backward gave Mayne the fight. The assassin's movement had put him off balance, which gave Mayne the chance to kick into the man's privates. Even as the assassin gasped in pain and folded to the floor, Mayne's dagger-filled fist was on its way toward the other assassin's face. The scarf over that face did nothing to stop Mayne's fist from connecting hard, and then the second assassin was also falling to the floor.

"Two down and none to go," Mayne muttered, not even winded as he headed for the door. He stuck his head out into the hall and shouted for guardsmen, then stood watching his former attackers until the guardsmen came running up.

"These two tried to kill me," Mayne told the men as they crowded into the sitting room. "I want these cravens taken directly to questioning rooms and chained down, and then two of you are to stay with each man until the questioners and I arrive. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Your Highness," the senior guardsmen acknowledged with a bow, his expression showing how angry he was. "My men and I will make sure that these go the same way as the others, the same way all assassins should go. The two obviously followed you here and attacked when they saw you were alone, but it didn't do them the good they hoped it would."

"No, it didn't," Mayne answered, making sure not to correct the guard officer's mistake. The assassins couldn't have followed him to Adair's apartment last night, not when they didn't attack until this morning. There was something odd involved in this, but Mayne didn't have the time to think about it. The location of the breakfast meeting he'd been on his way to had just been changed, but so far he was the only one who knew it.

Once the guardsmen had dragged out the two assassins, Mayne left two men on the door in the hall and then went looking for his father and brothers. The guards on Adair's door hadn't really been necessary, but Mayne felt better having them there. If any other assassins assumed he was still in the apartment, the guardsmen would keep the slime from going in to look for him.

"You're late, Mayne," his father said mildly from where he sat when Mayne walked into the room. "That isn't like you, so I'm assuming that you had a late night to account for the tardiness."

"Actually, it was more a matter of a crowded morning," Mayne answered, ignoring the grins his brothers wore. "For a while there I was feeling left out, but this morning I was attacked by two assassins. I was able to stop them without killing them, and now they should be in questioning rooms waiting for us."

"Again!" his father growled while his brothers lost their amusement and got to their feet. "But this doesn't make any sense! I've had my people watching that man Jeblin, the one who hired and sent that last group of assassins, and he hasn't contacted anyone yet. That's what I meant to tell all of you during this meeting, along with more details about the arrangements made."

"It's possible Jeblin hired the newest ones before your people started to watch him, Father," Lethan suggested with a frown. "If that turns out to be true, it might be a good idea to arrest Jeblin and find out what other hiring he's done."

"Since the man is being watched, let's hold off on arresting him," Mayne said as his father considered Lethan's suggestion. "We agreed yesterday to give Jebbin as much rope as possible in order to find out who he reports to. He's the one behind Forril, the man who hired the first assassins, and probably considers himself safe since Forril hasn't been arrested yet either. But first we really need to hear what these newest men have to say."

"Yes, that does have to come first," Mayne's father decided, but he sounded as though he were fighting to hold his temper. "Mayne, do you want a cup of tea before we go down? Breakfast can wait until we get back."

"Tea is exactly what I want right now," Mayne agreed before going toward the small buffet set up at the side of the room. "As soon as I have the cup filled, we can head down to the questioning rooms."

And seeing those two questioned won't bother me one bit, Mayne thought as he poured his tea. If Adair had been up and awake she might have walked me to the door, which would have put her directly in harm's way.

Which would have gotten those two assassins killed instead of captured, so it was a double good thing that Adair hadn't been there. The assassins had needed to be kept alive, but once the questioning was over.

Mayne smiled, and knowing the smile wasn't very nice at all didn't bother him a bit.

Chapter Four

When Adair woke up the second time she was alone, Mayne having gone to that breakfast meeting he'd told her about before the lovemaking. She hadn't really been all that awake earlier, which turned out to be a good thing. When she'd asked about touching Mayne's body, he'd laughed softly and told her she was welcome to touch any part of him she cared to.

She'd done exactly that, enjoying the hard feel of him all over, and then she'd enjoyed the lovemaking. The second time had been just as marvelous as the first, and afterward she'd fallen asleep wrapped in a sense of satisfaction that she'd never experienced before. She'd definitely have to thank Mayne for proposing his "deal."

Laughing softly, Adair got out of bed and went to take a bath. Once she was dressed in tights and tunic and short boots she rang for a servant, but not to order breakfast. The clock said it was almost lunchtime, and all she wanted right now anyway was some tea. Once she'd had the tea she'd think about lunch.

After her second cup of tea Adair's appetite stirred, making it easy to decide to go to lunch after all. She'd been hoping that Mayne would get back from his meeting soon enough to join her for lunch, but it was possible he meant to meet her in the dining room. With that in mind she put aside her empty teacup, then left the apartment.

Adair was already a few steps into the hall and on her way before she noticed the two guardsmen at her door. The men saw her leaving but didn't say a word, so Adair simply shrugged to herself and just kept going. She had no idea why there were guardsmen on her door again, but if they weren't there to keep her from leaving then she could ask about them later.

Almost everyone had already helped themselves from the buffet and now sat at tables, so Adair chose her own meal and had one of the servants follow her with a cup of tea. After leaving the buffet she meant

to find an empty table to sit at, but her first glance around showed Elmini and Nossa waving to her from the table they sat at. Since Mayne was clearly nowhere in the room, Adair smiled and went to join her friends.

"What's going on?" Elmini asked as soon as the servant had put down the cup of tea in front of the place where Adair now sat and had gone back to his station. "You're actually smiling, Adair, and that isn't like you."

"She means we're glad to see you looking happier," Nossa put in with a small laugh when Adair frowned at Elmini. "Smiling is lots better than looking like you're just waiting to be executed."

"Yes, I suppose it is," Adair allowed, grudging a smile when Elmini grinned to show she'd said what she had just to tease. "I made a deal with Mayne, and so far I'm not sorry I did. If the deal actually happens to work out I'll tell you all about it, but right now I'm just."

"Waiting for the deal to fall apart," Elmini said when Adair's words simply trailed off, her grin having disappeared. "Unfortunately, Nossa and I know just how that feels, Nossa especially. Nallis and I have been getting along so well that I'm certain something will happen to ruin everything, and Nossa - "

"And Nossa finds that she likes Lethan much more than she should," Nossa said when Elmini's words broke off, her own smile filled with pain. "I know Lethan won't go against his father's wishes and I don't really blame him, but I wish I had the strength to tell him not to talk to me again. When this week is over I'll be going home, and he'll be - "

"Married to someone else," Adair finished, closing the circle as she touched Nossa's arm in sympathy. She'd promised Mayne not to say anything about what he'd told her, but Nossa looked so miserable that she had to say something. "But that might not happen if Elmini and I stand together. If the king forces Lethan to marry Aleena, the rest of us can refuse to do any marrying of our own. What do you say, Elmini? Personally, I can't see myself being happy while a friend of mine is miserable, but you might not see it the same."

"I see it exactly the same," Elmini stated, her smile looking delighted. "I had the impression you weren't in the mood for a fight any longer, but happily I was wrong. Do you think we ought to say anything to Nallis and Mayne?"

"Let me think about that," Adair answered, intending to speak to Mayne anyway. "We'll want to present a completely united front in this mess, but that could turn the king stubborn instead of cooperative, which would just make things worse."

"They can't get any worse for Lethan," Elmini commented while Adair began to eat. "If the king refuses to change his mind, Lethan gets stuck with Aleena. And I almost forgot to tell you: after you and Mayne left the dancing last night, Dinra and Aleena came back and insisted that Nallis and Lethan dance with them."

"Which they really couldn't refuse to do, not after all the time they'd spent with Elmini and me," Nossa added, obviously trying not to laugh. "Elmini and I almost choked while we watched, because laughing out loud would have been too mean. Dinra was dancing with Lethan, and she did everything but knock him down and ravish him."

"Aleena showed much more decorum with Nallis," Elmini put in, and her grin showed that she, like Adair, had a lot less compassion for the men. "At no time did Aleena try to knock Nallis down. She just kept trying to get him to knock her down. When she rubbed her body on Nallis, the poor man looked like he was about to panic."

"Can you blame him?" Nossa countered. "I've heard that if an unmarried woman invites an unmarried man into her bed and he accepts, they're all but married even before any contracts are signed. Nallis looks to be a normal, healthy man, which means he was probably pushed into being tempted to accept Aleena's invitation. If that isn't enough to make a man panic, I don't know what would be."

Elmini agreed completely while Adair thought about the matter of invitation. Mayne had tried to say that she had invited him into her bed, and when that didn't work he'd come up with his deal. It looked like Mayne really did want her to be his wife, a thought that was very warming. If it didn't turn out that he'd proposed the deal for another reason entirely. Adair had too much experience with people doing what seemed to be good things at first, only to find out later that doing good for her wasn't any part of the effort.

"You're right, Dinra, she can't know how ridiculous she looks," Adair heard in Aleena's voice. The two girls had come over to the table without Adair noticing their approach, and it looked like they were finally getting around to saying something nasty about her clothes.

"Not just ridiculous, Aleena," Dinra corrected in her sleek and nasty way. "She also looks shabby and low-class, a truth she ought to be hiding instead of flaunting. But even if she were in a day gown like the rest of us, she'd still be as common as dirt in spite of her father's position."

The two were talking to each other rather than to her, so Adair just kept eating her food as if nothing was being said. Not responding at all ought to drive them into furious anger, she knew, but before that happened Elmini put her own oar in.

"I hope you don't mind, Adair, but this morning I asked the servants to find me some tights and tunics like yours," Elmini said, also acting as if Dinra and Aleena weren't there. "The outfit looks so delightfully comfortable that I can't resist trying it for myself."

"You know, that's a great idea," Nossa put in, also looking at no one but Adair and Elmini. "I'm sorry I didn't think of it myself, but they do say better late than never. I already have some short boots with me, for strolling around outside, of course, and -"

"Who do you two think you're fooling?" Dinra interrupted to demand, glaring back and forth between Nossa and Elmini. "You're supporting this common little tramp without thinking, pretending you want to be like her even though no woman in her right mind would want that. Has she told you yet why she missed breakfast entirely and was even late to lunch? I wouldn't have believed it possible, but I think she was busy enjoying herself. Is that right, Adair? Were you enjoying yourself?"

"Not the whole time, Dinra," Adair answered with a smile even though she had no real idea what the girl was talking about. "I was enjoying myself only part of the time. For the rest I was sleeping, but come to think of it sleeping undisturbed is enjoyable. Looks like you were right after all."

"You're disgusting," Dinra snarled, and Adair noticed that Aleena looked just as confused as the rest of them. "I should have known you'd enjoy it, but you can be sure I won't make the same mistake again. Next time you won't even be able to pretend you enjoyed yourself, you have my word on that."

And with that she stormed off, Aleena hurrying to catch up after a very brief hesitation.

"What was that all about?" Elmini asked as they watched the two other girls leave the room. "Dinra's digs are usually much easier to understand."

"I . think she expected something bad to happen to Adair, and because it didn't she's now furious," Nossa suggested hesitantly. "I also think that Aleena had no idea what was going on either. Nothing bad

did happen to you this morning, I hope, Adair? Please tell me you aren't just pretending to be all right."

"No, I really am fine," Adair assured her at once, also speaking to a suddenly-worried Elmini. "I did spend most of the morning sleeping, and then I drank tea until my appetite woke up along with the rest of me. What do you think was supposed to happen to me that didn't?"

"Very frankly, I'm much happier not knowing," Nossa said, disturbance clear in her pretty green eyes. "As petty and vicious as Dinra is, anything she comes up with will be really awful."

"But that's why we do need to know," Elmini pointed out, no happier than Nossa - or Adair. "So how do we find out?"

Adair didn't know the answer to that, but it suddenly came to her that there might be an even more important question. If she wasn't the one who was hurt this morning, then someone else must have been. The only one among their number who was missing was Lisni, and Adair's insides twisted at the thought of her friend having been hurt in her place. She would have to ask if the others had seen Lisni yet today, but first Adair had to swallow down a lot of fear and guilt.

Mayne joined his father and brothers in going to the questioning rooms, not really noticing that he was leading the way instead of following. The two assassins had been put in two of the rooms, and Mayne entered the first room without hesitation. When he finally glanced behind him, though, the only one standing there was Lethan.

"Father and Nallis have gone to the second room," Lethan said softly as he watched the assassin being prepared for questioning. "That way we can compare stories once the two start to talk."

"You're all wasting your time," the assassin said from where he lay being chained to the table, speaking primarily to the questioners. He still seemed to be in pain from the kick Mayne had given him, but he'd been struggling ever since he'd been uncurled from the floor. "I won't tell you anything, so you might as well just execute me."

"Being dead is a good deal easier, isn't it?" one of the questioners answered mildly, staring at the man while the others finished up chaining him. "Unfortunately for you, though, death won't be coming to you very quickly. If you're serious about not being willing to speak, you'd best take your courage firmly in hand. You'll find yourself needing that courage very badly."

Mayne saw the assassin pale just a little and pull at the chains holding him in place. The scarf had been removed from his head and face, but no one had come forward to say they recognized the man. One of the guardsmen had said he thought both men looked familiar, but placing them wasn't something the guardsman had been able to do.

Once the assassin was firmly chained down, the other questioners began to cut his clothing away. The one who had spoken simply watched, and when the man's body was completely exposed and the questioners began to pick up various instruments, there was an interruption of sorts. A terrified shriek rang out from somewhere close by, most likely from the next room where the other assassin was. The one on the table jumped at the sound and paled even more, but the questioner who'd spoken earlier simply smiled.

"What a shame that your saying nothing will be wasted effort," the questioner commented, faint amusement in his smile. "If your associate hadn't also been taken alive your intention might have been enough to frustrate us, but as it is. We're going to begin now, so you'd best get that grip on your courage that I mentioned."

And begin they did. The man on the table closed his eyes and clenched his fists, but Mayne was able to see that every slice of a knife and every touch of the heated tongs brought the man a great deal of pain. The assassin began to moan and thrash around, but oddly enough it was the screams coming from the next room that seemed to affect his determination the most. While the screams kept coming the man almost looked as if he were adding to his courage with the sound. But then the screaming stopped.

"Oh, dear," the questioner who apparently did all the talking said, still wearing his faint smile. "I think your friend has run out of courage, which is truly a shame. He's now talking as fast as he can to keep the pain from starting again, but you certainly don't have to do the same. Even though the next part of you we concentrate on will be your manhood - "

"No, not that!" the assassin screamed, writhing so hard in the chains that his wrists and ankles bled almost as much as the open wounds on his body. "You can't do that to me, not when I didn't want to accept her orders in the first place! But she said she'd have her father order me castrated but kept alive if I refused, so I had no choice! I couldn't just walk away, not with my family in their reach, so I had no choice!"

"Of course you had no choice," the questioner agreed, the hand he held up stopping the other questioners from continuing with the torture. "I'm sure I would have done the same in your place. What were the exact orders she gave you?"

"We were supposed to knock out or terrify any servants who were around, and then we were supposed to rape the girl," the assassin babbled, obviously paying little or no attention to what he was saying. "We were also supposed to beat the girl some, but not seriously and not on her face. Body blows that wouldn't leave all kinds of marks. We didn't want to do it but she refused to let us refuse. If not for that man who was in the sitting room we wouldn't have been caught - "

"But you were caught, and now you're paying the price for someone else's villainy," the questioner said when the man's words broke off abruptly. "Do you think that's right, that you and your friend be made to suffer while the one who's really responsible gets away free and clear? If you keep shielding her, all she'll do is laugh and twiddle her fingers."

"She will laugh, the bitch!" the man snarled, still writhing on the table. "She's always been given her own way, and always laughed when someone had trouble because of something she did! But not this time, even though telling probably won't do any good. At least this time everyone will know that the bitch Dinra gave the orders, so you won't be able to say you didn't know the next time she does something like this. But my family! They'll hurt my family if they find out I -Please don't tell them, please!"

"If you'll tell us where your family can be found, we'll get them safely away," Mayne found himself saying as he stepped forward, then he turned to the head questioner. "Give the information to the guardsman I send in here, and then get someone to treat this man's wounds before he's put in a cell. The questioning is over."

The head questioner simply nodded, so Mayne went out and found a guardsman to send into the room. The guardsman was also told that when he had the location of the man's family, a squad was to be sent to bring them to the palace. Only then did Mayne head for the second questioning room, a silent Lethan following behind.

"Did you get anywhere with yours?" Mayne's father asked as soon as Mayne walked in. "Ours passed out after doing a lot of screaming, and we're having trouble waking him up again. Why are you two looking so grim?"

"I don't know about Mayne, but I'm sick to my stomach," Lethan said before Mayne could get a word out, his voice uneven. "Part of what's making me sick is that I believe everything that man told us. I hate

the idea but I don't disbelieve it."

"We were told that these men were sent by Dinra to rape and beat Adair," Mayne added, partial shock keeping the flaming anger he felt distantly from coming any closer. "We have nothing but that other man's word, but I'm with Lethan. The whole idea makes me sick, but I believe he told us the truth. If I hadn't been in the sitting room when they came in - No, I can't bear to think about what would have happened."

"That's where I saw these men!" the guardsman behind the king suddenly blurted. "They're part of the lady Dinra's entourage, and they were hanging around the practice courts because they had nothing else to do. I noticed and remembered them because that lady was the only one to get here with an entourage."

"I think I'm feeling more than just ill," the king said after hearing out the guardsman, his own voice tight with anger. "Let's wait until this one wakes up, and then we can get his confirmation of the story. Not that I really need more confirmation. It just seems like a good idea to wait a short while before going to speak with the 'lady' Dinra."

Mayne knew just what his father was talking about. The anger and fury had pushed their way through the shock, and Mayne knew that if he saw Dinra right now there was no telling what he would do to her. He had to calm down as much as possible, just to be sure he didn't kill the female with his bare hands.

It took another couple of minutes before the questioners managed to rouse the second man. He came out of unconsciousness still terrified and ready to start screaming again, his heavy, rapid breathing showing that very clearly. But even before the man really began to look around, Mayne stepped closer to the table.

"If you'll tell us the truth, we'll send men to bring your family to the palace and safety," Mayne said, the man he spoke to now staring at him wide-eyed. "You have my word that we won't let innocents be harmed because of vindictiveness and evil intentions, but you have to tell us the truth right now."

The man on the table began to cry, but after a moment he began to speak as well. He was terrified of what would happen to his family, Mayne gathered, but the man knew he would find it impossible to hold out much longer. He clung to Mayne's promise as he stumbled through a repetition of what the first man had said, confirming a truth none of them had really wanted to hear.

"Have his wounds tended and then put him in a cell for now," the king ordered quietly when Mayne turned away from the man on the table. "Guardsman, take a squad and follow the directions this man gave us. Gather up his family and bring them to the palace, making sure they aren't harmed. I'll have decided where to put them by the time you and your men get back."

"Yes, Your Majesty," the guardsman he'd spoken to answered with a bow, and then the man strode out of the room to follow his orders.

"Now let's go and speak to a certain young lady," the king said to Mayne and his brothers. "As soon as we're done with her, I'm going to begin an investigation into how her father is treating his people. If Duke Lemish was acting as he should, Dinra's threats would have been laughed off instead of being a lever to make men obey her."

"I hate to say it, but this happening may have been a very lucky thing," Nallis put in as they left the room. "Duke Lemish wants the chance at more power by having his daughter married to one of us. Being able to show how badly he's doing with the power he already has will be a damned good reason for not allowing him even more."

Mayne saw his father nod in agreement, just as Mayne himself agreed - to a small extent. The fact that Adair had been put in danger still threatened to make him lose control of his fury, but beyond that the incident had been nothing but good luck. Things could have turned out very differently if he hadn't had a breakfast meeting to get up early for, or if he'd left just a few minutes too soon.

The walk to Dinra's apartment was, for the most part, silent. It was well past lunchtime, but no one except for a few servants were in the halls. Half a dozen guardsmen strode along behind them, all of them wearing odd expressions when Mayne glanced back.

The guardsmen knew they were all about to confront the daughter of a duke, which had to make them wonder what, if anything, would be done to the girl. Truthfully, Mayne was wondering the same thing. His father was in charge, of course, but if his father tried to simply send Dinra home then he and Mayne would be having words.

Oddly enough the doors to Dinra's sitting room stood partially open, and when Mayne's group got close enough they could hear angry words being spoken.

". thought the chore I gave them was simple enough, but obviously they were too incompetent even to complete a simple chore," Dinra's voice said with familiar anger. "I don't know where they are right now, but wherever it is they won't get away with disobeying me. My father will have them hunted down, then he'll have their families killed right in front of them. The same thing that will happen to you two if you don't do any better."

"Please, my lady, just tell us what you want done," a weary and hopeless male voice answered. "Trace and I know well enough what will happen if we fail."

"You'd better," Dinra said, vindictive satisfaction now in her voice. The king had stopped their group just short of the doors, obviously waiting for Dinra to condemn herself with her own words. "The slut Adair has thumbed her nose at me for the last time. At first I meant to wait until I was named one of the brides before having her taken care of, but that fool Mayne has been paying too much attention to her. He certainly won't want to marry her, but he might interfere by giving her his protection. What I want you to do to the little slut is - "

"That's enough," King Rodick said, stepping into the doorway to interrupt Dinra. "What you want no longer matters, girl."

"How dare you intrude on a private conversation?" Dinra actually demanded, just as if she were the sovereign rather than Mayne's father. By now Mayne could see the girl, standing in the middle of the room with her fists clenched in fury. "When my father hears about this, he'll do more than just tell you - "

"Arrest her and bring her along," the king ordered the guardsmen with them, then he turned to the two men who had been listening to Dinra. "You two come along as well. Once I get this female started on the first of the punishment she's earned, I want to hear about what Duke Lemish has been doing to you and the rest of the people supposedly under his protection. Whatever it is, you have my word that he won't be doing it for very much longer."

Mayne could see that the two men had been considering trying to keep Dinra from being arrested. As soon as they heard what the king had to say, though, the tension they'd been filled with seemed to drain out of them.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," one of the men said as they both bowed, his voice showing him as the one who had spoken earlier. "If you really do mean to rescue our people, Trace and I will do everything we can to help."

"Good," the king said, then he turned and led the way back out of the sitting room. Dinra had been screaming and struggling against the guardsmen who held her, but except for dragging her along, everyone was ignoring her tantrum. Mayne walked with his brothers, grimly pleased that he and his father weren't going to be having unpleasant words.

Dinra did a lot of ranting and raving and trying to keep from being taken to where the king wanted her, but none of it did her any good. It took a bit longer than it should have, but eventually she was dragged into the punishment room where the female assassin had been questioned. The king directed the guardsmen to put Dinra in the stocks, then he turned to Mayne.

"Thanks to you, I had no trouble figuring out what should be done with the girl," Mayne was told in a low voice. "When she isn't being punished I'm going to keep her in a dungeon cell, which will certainly add to the punishment."

"That sounds as if you mean to have her switched or strapped more than once," Mayne observed after returning his father's smile. "How long do you intend to have the punishment continue?"

"Until the end of the week at the very least," King Rodick answered, no longer amused. "Whether the punishment continues beyond that time depends on Dinra herself. If I see her reach the point of regretting what she did, I'll probably show her mercy. If the only thing she regrets is getting caught, the punishment will continue until the reality of what she did sinks in. Do you think I'm being too hard on her?"

"Too hard? No." Mayne's answer came at once, nothing of hesitation behind the truth he spoke. "I know how you feel about treating women, Father, but I'm afraid I've been picking up some of Adair's views on equality. If the decision had been mine, I would have found it very hard not to have her shown exactly what it was she tried to have done to someone else. A man's punishment for something like this would be a good deal worse."

"You might have found it hard not to have her raped and beaten, but I don't believe you would have gone that far," the king answered, a faint smile back on his face. "Your Adair would probably have had no trouble ordering that punishment, but women are a good deal more ruthless than we poor men. If any kind of clemency is to be shown, we're the ones who have to do it."

"Let me GO!" Dinra shrieked as Mayne nodded his agreement with a wry smile. "You can't do this to me, you bastards, you can't! When my father finds out, he'll kill you all!"

Mayne joined his father in looking toward the stocks, where Dinra now stood bent over the padded bar with her head and hands held captive and her skirts raised high. She still wore nothing in the way of drawers, making Mayne wonder which of his brothers she'd meant to try seducing next.

"We have the first men you sent to harm the lady Adair, girl," King Rodick said, loudly enough to stop the noise Dinra was making. "We also heard you in the midst of trying to send even more men to do the same, so your guilt has been firmly established. Now it's time for you to pay the cost of your willful nastiness, and your father will do nothing to stop it or even avenge you. The responsibility for what was planned is yours, and now the punishment will be the same."

"Don't you understand that you can't do anything to me?" Dinra demanded, apparently not hearing - or not understanding - what she'd been told. "I'm much too high-born, much too important, much too good for anyone to do anything but worship and obey me. And I'll also soon be a princess, then a queen. Trying to make me believe you'll do anything at all to me is a waste of time, so tell these fools to unlock this horrible device right now."

It wasn't possible to see Dinra's face, but the absolute assurance in her voice was very disturbing for

Mayne - and for everyone else, if their expressions meant anything. Mayne saw that his father was about to say something else, but it wasn't Dinra the king spoke to.

"Start her out with the strap," King Rodick said to the man in charge of punishing kitchen girls who had come to help out again. "Thirty strokes to begin with, and then we'll see what she has to say."

When Dinra had been speaking, the man had looked bothered. Once the man heard the instructions given him by his king, though, Mayne saw the man straighten his shoulders with a smile. High-born or not, the man seemed to believe that a girl who earned punishment ought to be given that punishment. Now that his beliefs had been confirmed, he fetched a strap and then positioned himself behind Dinra.

"I told you to unlock this thing!" Dinra was shouting, much the same thing she'd been saying all along. "This is an outrage, and you can bet I won't just forget about it and - Ow! What are you doing?"

The last words were more shrieked than shouted, undoubtedly because of the first stroke of the strap against her bare backside. The following strokes brought screams of "No! Stop it!" and other, less polite, comments, but the man wielding the strap paid no attention. His arm just kept slapping that strap across Dinra's behind in an easy, rhythmic way, each stroke making the girl bounce and jump in an effort to escape the punishment.

But Dinra's days of escaping punishment were finally over. The girl was still screaming curses as the strap brought an expected redness to her bottom, making Mayne wonder how long it would be before she was beyond using words.

Chapter Five

"I just noticed something strange," Nallis murmured to Mayne. "It was harder to watch that assassin being strapped than watching the same thing being done to Dinra. Since the assassin was after my life, I wonder why that is."

"Probably because the assassin did the dirtywork herself rather than hide behind others," Mayne answered in the same murmur. "You may not like what someone is doing, but if they do it personally you have to give them grudging respect at the very least. Ah, now she's just screaming. I was wondering how long it would take before she stopped that cursing."

Nallis smiled without saying anything, probably because he'd been wondering the same thing. The red in Dinra's seat was slowly growing darker, she bounced and kicked with every stroke, and now she simply screamed even when the leather strap wasn't hitting her behind. The man doing the strapping was being very methodical, putting less than his full strength into each stroke. But even less than his full strength had obviously brought an ache to Dinra's backside, and now the ache had clearly grown sharper.

They all stood watching the strapping until the full thirty strokes had been given Dinra. Half way through the punishment the girl had clearly tried not to jump when the leather struck her, having learned that movement made her pain worse. The only problem was, Dinra hadn't found it possible to hold still when a stroke reached her aching bottom.

At that point Dinra had begun to cry, but Mayne could see that everyone else in the room was just as untouched by her tears as he was. The strapping went on, stroke by measured stroke until the end, and by then the girl was having true hysterics.

"Let's go back to the meeting room," Mayne's father said as he turned away from the sight of Dinra. "The girl will be put into a dungeon cell now, and it's come to me that we've missed lunch as well as breakfast."

"I'll want something to eat right after I set my plans regarding Duke Lemish in motion."

Mayne also had something to talk about, a revelation of sorts that had come to him while he watched Dinra getting her backside strapped, but there was still time before the idea needed to be mentioned. Taking care of Duke Lemish really was a priority.

The two men they'd taken from Dinra's apartment went to the meeting room with them, and the story they told was as far from pleasant as it was possible to get. Apparently Duke Lemish's men served him to keep their families safe, safe from a fairly large core group of personal guardsmen who were willing to do anything for gold. The hundred special, fully trained guardsmen were enough to keep everyone else in line, and when the king heard everything the two men were able to tell him he just nodded.

"And none of you could chance plotting against Lemish, not when the lives of your families would be lost along with your own if he found out," the king said. "What I want to know right now is this: if you and the rest of your friends didn't have those hundred special guardsmen to worry about, how many of you would support Lemish anyway?"

"No more than a handful, if that," Argol, the man who had done most of the talking said, getting a nod of agreement from Trace when he glanced at the other man. "We were ready to be loyal to our duke and said so, but Duke Lemish just laughed and said he wasn't fool enough to depend on loyalty. Fear was what kept men in line, he said, and that's what we've been living with for years."

"But now the practice is at an end," the king said, turning to the guardsman officer he'd sent for. "Put together a small escort to take these men to the place where General Ambos is camped with his men. I'll have written orders for your men to hand over when they get there in just a little while."

The officer bowed and took the two men with him, and as soon as the three were gone Lethan smiled without much humor.

"Obviously it's a good thing you prepared for trouble from Duke Lemish, Father," Lethan said with a shake of his head. "With General Ambos and his men camped almost on Lemish's doorstep, the duke ought to be in custody by tonight or tomorrow at the latest."

"I'm going to have Ambos send in those two men to prepare the way, and then follow up with an 'official' visit an hour or so later," the king said from his writing desk, where he'd taken out paper, ink, and a pen. "Those two should also be able to sneak in a large enough contingent of fighters before the visit to make sure nothing goes wrong. One of you order in some food while I'm writing out these orders."

Mayne was closest to the bell-pull, so he got up and called for a servant. The servant arrived as quickly as always, bowed once he'd been given his orders, then left just as quickly. By that time a guardsman from the group going to General Ambos had arrived, and once the king added his seal to the orders he'd been writing out the guardsman was able to take the sealed document and leave.

"I'm glad there's a contingent of guardsmen in the kitchens," Nallis commented once the waiting guardsman had left. "I'm hungry enough to chew walls, but with all the attempts on our lives I'd get indigestion at sight of the food if I didn't know it was safe."

"Speaking about attempts on our lives, there's something important we need to discuss," Mayne said as his father rose from the desk with teacup in hand. "There's a good chance most of you missed the point with all the extra nonsense thrown in, but the two who attacked me didn't attack me. They were simply trying to get someone out of their path to Adair."

"By all the gods, I did miss that," Mayne's father exclaimed as he stopped short on the way to the chair

he meant to sit in. Lethan and Nallis had also made surprised comments, showing that Mayne had been right in what he'd said. "But why do you consider that so important, Mayne? If it wasn't assassins after you this time, next time it surely will be."

"I'm sorry, Father, but I'm afraid I don't agree," Mayne said, aware of the way his brothers stared at him. "It came to me that the assassins attacking Lethan and Nallis with swords had no interest in me at all, except for wanting to get me out of their way. If all of us were really at risk, those four assassins would certainly have tried to take advantage of my being on the spot, but they didn't."

"Why not?" Lethan demanded, Nallis looking as if the words had been taken out of his mouth. "Why would someone want us dead but not you? Could Nallis and I have both insulted one of your more ardent supporters?"

"I've decided that that's the wrong question, Lethan," Mayne said with a shake of his head. "The proper question is, what's the one major difference between you two and me? Father, do you see it now?"

"Unfortunately, I do," the king answered while Lethan and Nallis simply looked confused. King Rodick reached his chair and sat slowly, then voiced a sigh. "Right now the major difference is that you're married, Mayne, while your brothers are still single. If your brothers died, you would automatically become my heir."

"And then, Father, I think it would become your turn to die," Mayne said grimly while his brothers cursed in low voices. "I'd get to live a bit longer, a good day or two after I was crowned, maybe even as long as a week or a month. But certainly not long enough to produce heirs of my own, which would leave my widowed queen all alone."

"Alone, but not for long," his father agreed, the beginnings of rage showing in his hazel eyes. "Your widow's father would consider it a matter of duty to come to the palace and take over, most certainly with plans to be crowned and seated on the throne already made. That absolute whoreson! I swear by all the gods that he'll be days dying, if not weeks!"

"There is one amusing point to all of this," Lethan put in, but his tone was closer to grim than amused. "It was Adair who stopped the two assassin attempts that were most likely to succeed, and I would have loved seeing Duke Elden's face when he heard about that."

"He probably had fits," Nallis said, just as grimly amused as Lethan. "But this is the best example of poetic justice I've ever come across. He used his daughter without telling her what he was doing, so she ended up wrecking his plans without even knowing she was doing it."

"Not that she wouldn't have wrecked his plans even faster if she'd known," Mayne put in with satisfaction. "And now I even understand why he maneuvered me into being the one to punish her before we left for the palace. Duke Elden wanted to make sure that Adair hated me, so when she finally found out that he was responsible for my death she would feel nothing but satisfaction and possibly even a bit of gratitude. What a shame he was too stupid to take just a few minutes the morning we left to come here to add a touch of reality to his story about caring for Adair."

"He was probably so deep in arranging his assassination plans that he couldn't spare even a minute," the king said in a growl. "But now it's my turn, and it won't take very long for General Zellis to move his part of the army from near Duke Finlor to Duke Elden's holding. I won't have Duke Finlor to worry about until the end of the week, when he'll find out that his daughter Nossa won't be one of the brides."

Both Lethan and Nallis looked at Mayne then, but all Mayne did was shake his head just a little. This definitely wasn't the time to discuss a change in the plans their father had made, not if they didn't want a

war on their hands.

"As soon as the army is in place, Father, you might want to have Duke Elden's employees arrested," Mayne said. "It won't help to neutralize Elden if his people are still paying assassins."

"That's a good point, Mayne," the king agreed, getting up to go back to his desk. "I'll get General Zellis's orders written out, and then I'll be able to enjoy my food when it comes. But until Elden is in custody we won't say a word about this to anyone."

Mayne joined his brothers in nodding their agreement, all of them well aware of the fact that speaking at the wrong time just might result in Elden being warned. Since that was the last thing they wanted, they would be certain to keep the secret close.

But Mayne couldn't help wondering just how happy Adair would be to learn that her father was under arrest. Her feelings for the man were laced with bitterness and disappointment, but Duke Elden was still her father. If the king did have Elden tortured to death, a perfectly legitimate execution for someone who had plotted the deaths of the entire royal family, just how badly bothered would Adair be? Bothered enough to ruin their life together?

A tingle of fear ran up and down Mayne's spine, and there was nothing he could do to chase the fear away.

Adair forced herself to finish most of her meal after Dinra and Aleena left, but finally she pushed her plate away and looked at Elmini and Nossa.

"All right, I need to ask this before my appetite is ruined for the rest of the year," Adair said, gaining the immediate attention of her friends. "We agree that Dinra's horrible plans, whatever they were, didn't affect me, but that could mean a mistake was made and someone else was hurt in my place. Have either of you seen Lisni yet today?"

"Good grief, no!" Elmini exclaimed while Nossa simply gasped. "I didn't even really see much of Lisni yesterday, except at dinner. We'd better go and make sure she's all right."

There was no need for anyone to say that twice. All three of them got quickly to their feet, but once they were out in the hall Adair realized that she didn't know where Lisni's apartment was. Since the other two girls were also at a loss, they had to find a servant who could give them directions. Finding the right servant took a few minutes, but finally Adair and the others were led to the proper door.

"Thank you," Adair said to the servant, stopping him just before he knocked on the door. "We'll take it from here."

The servant seemed puzzled, but rather than argue he just bowed and walked away. Adair waited until the man was out of sight, and then she turned back to the door.

"Good thinking," Elmini said as Adair made herself knock in spite of the fear-tinged reluctance filling her. "If the worst has happened, Lisni might not want anyone but us knowing about it."

"And maybe not even us," Nossa put in gloomily. "If something horrible happened to me, I might feel too ashamed to want anyone knowing about it."

"But friends share things, even pain, and that makes the pain a little less," Adair said, knowing she was right from her own experiences. "I've knocked twice and there's still no answer, but I'm going in anyway. If you two would rather wait out here - "

"No," Elmini said at once, holding up one hand. "If I'd had someone to share my pain with over the years, the memory of that pain might not haunt me so badly now. I'm going in with you."

Rather than speak, Nossa simply nodded, making the decision unanimous. Adair smiled briefly at each of them then turned, opened the door, and led the way into Lisni's sitting room. As expected there were no servants in the room, but Lisni sat in a chair with a cup of tea, and the look on her face was pure surprise.

"Girls, what are you doing here?" Lisni asked as she put aside her cup and stood. "Is everything all right? Why do you all look so . strange?"

"If we look strange, it's because we're worried about you," Adair said as she moved closer to Lisni.

"Dinra said something that made us believe she'd arranged to have me hurt, but since nothing happened to me I became worried that someone was hurt by mistake in my place. Lisni, are you sure you're all right?"

"No, I'm not really all right, but Dinra has nothing to do with the way I feel," Lisni said after something of a hesitation, sitting down in her chair again and giving all her attention to reclaiming her teacup. "I appreciate the fact that you ladies were worried about me, but you can't do anything more to solve my problem than I can."

"Actually, it so happens we have other problems to work on as well," Elmini said as she came up to stand to Adair's left. "We expect to solve those problems by standing together, but maybe what's bothering you won't need such extreme action. Are you sure you can't tell us about it?"

"Sometimes just sharing the disturbance is enough to make you feel better," Nossa offered as she came to stand to Adair's right. "Even if your problem can't be solved, won't it help if you just feel better about it?"

"You know, I think I could use a little sympathy right about now," Lisni decided aloud, her smile on the wry side as she looked up at Adair and the others. "Why don't you ladies get yourselves some tea and then take chairs. As soon as you're settled with the teacups out of your hands, I'll tell you what's going on. If you end up fainting, at least you won't spill the tea or sprawl on the floor."

Adair exchanged glances with Elmini and Nossa, but the other girls obviously had no more idea about what Lisni meant than she did. With that in view they wasted no time getting their tea and finding chairs, and then they were staring at Lisni and waiting for her to explain.

"All right, here it is," Lisni said with an expression that looked almost amused. "I'm still not completely sure how it happened, but - I seem to have fallen in love with King Rodick."

When Adair's jaw hit the floor, it had the company of two other jaws. It wasn't hard to tell that Elmini and Nossa were as stunned as Adair felt, and now Lisni was smiling.

"The idea isn't all that outrageous," Lisni said, just as if one of her guests had put the complaint into words. "I told you that I prefer older men, and the very first night we were here I spent dinner speaking to the king. He seemed to enjoy the conversation as much as I did, and that's why I went to see him the second night, when you three started to do all that drinking. I asked him to let Adair leave here, before she took to drinking all the time or did something else that would end up killing her."

"That was really lovely of you," Adair said with a smile, meaning every word. "Most people would think of themselves first, and then do nothing that might lose them whatever edge they might have with someone powerful. But let me guess: the king refused to let me go, and that caused you two to argue."

"Actually, we didn't argue," Lisni said with a sigh. "Rodick told me there were reasons why he couldn't do as I asked, otherwise he would never have been able to refuse me. He asked me to wait until the end of the week before blaming him for refusing, and the only thing I could do was agree. He walked me back to my apartment after kissing my hand, but I could tell he was badly bothered about something. We sat next to each other during dinner last night as well, both of us obviously enjoying the conversation, but by the end of the meal he looked even more disturbed."

"But that doesn't explain why you didn't show up for breakfast or lunch," Elmini pointed out when Lisni paused in her story. "Did the king say or do anything after dinner to upset you?"

"He just escorted me back to my apartment," Lisni answered with a shake of her head. "I read for a while and then went to bed, but when I woke up this morning the upset moved in with a vengeance. I spent all night dreaming about Rodick, you see, but not in the way I most wanted to. In my dreams I kept trying to get his attention, but he never even turned my way. He just kept turning his back."

Lisni's words broke off then, and Adair could see that she fought not to cry. Elmini exchanged a painful glance with Adair while Nossa watched Lisni with pity plain on her face, and Adair couldn't stand the pain.

"All right, let's think about this," she announced as briskly as possible to get rid of her own urge to cry. "I know about bad dreams, Lisni, because I've had more than my share of them. But that means I also know bad dreams most often reflect how we feel, not how things really are. If the king has let you be seated next to him at dinner twice and even kissed your hand once, that has to mean he isn't entirely disinterested."

"Of course!" Nossa exclaimed while Lisni frowned at Adair. "You're perfectly right, Adair. If King Rodick wanted nothing to do with Lisni he would have had her seated somewhere else, but he didn't. It isn't as if he's just being polite because she'll be marrying one of his sons, after all. He has to know even better than we do that she won't be marrying one of his sons."

"It occurred to me that the king might be trying to keep from insulting her father, but that doesn't wash," Elmini said with a distant look in her eyes, her voice less excited than Nossa's and more contemplative. "Seating her next to the king once would show respect for Duke Rayl, but that isn't what was done. And the only reason he would kiss her hand is because he wanted to. Or maybe because he wanted to do more but refused to let himself go that far."

"Why would he hold himself back?" Adair asked while Lisni stared at Elmini with raised brows. "I mean, even I know that men like younger women on their arms, to show how manly they really are. And since the queen died about ten years ago, he doesn't even have a wife's feelings to consider. When it comes to women, he really can do anything he likes."

"But not if that anything makes him feel foolish," Nossa, rather than Elmini, answered. "I once heard my father talking to some of his male friends about a girl they'd seen at the ball the night before. They made a bunch of comments that must have been coarse because of the way they laughed, but when the laughter died down my father shook his head. He said the girl might be arousing to look at, but he'd never be able to let himself be seen in public with her. He'd feel as if he were associating with one of his daughters."

"But what if he found himself falling in love with her?" Elmini pounced, pointing at Nossa. "If he was decent enough not to want to take advantage of a girl young enough to be his daughter, finding himself getting more and more interested would be very disturbing for him. He might consider it wrong to feel things for her, but still can't deny himself the chance to talk to her once a day."

"And the more he felt for her, the more disturbed he would get," Adair added, finding it impossible not to

join in the general enthusiasm. "That means he's vulnerable to coercion, but what can Lisni do to coerce him? Knocking him down and then making love to him doesn't sound very practical."

"It's also not very subtle," Elmini pointed out with a grin while Nossa giggled. "Most men seem to respond badly to being forced into things, but luring them in seems to work just fine - after the right preliminaries. Lisni, does the king know how you feel about older men? I mean, have you ever mentioned that you find no interest in men your own age?"

"Why, no, I never said a word," Lisni admitted, now on the wide-eyed side. "It didn't seem quite right to mention other men when I was talking to someone I really liked."

"Then that's what you have to do the next time you talk to the king," Elmini said, back to being serious. "Don't just blurt out how you feel, find a time to make a passing comment on how silly you think men your own age are and then say something else about a different topic. If you want the man to feel encouraged, you have to give him that encouragement."

"And I think you ought to say or do something to let him know how you feel," Nossa added while Lisni considered the first part of the advice she was being given. "I don't know how you would do that without making him think you're trying to ensnare him, but that's probably a point you'll have to be very careful about. My brothers seem to think that women are interested in them only because of their position in life, so a king must be even more suspicious."

"Isn't that just like men?" Adair felt compelled to add. "They risk their lives to win the highest place there is to get, then they spend all the rest of their time too worried to enjoy what they've earned. When you're afraid that people want you only for what you can give them, how can you possibly be happy?"

"One of the things you can do is make it possible for people to get what they want without you," Lisni said, the first words she'd spoken for a while that were more confident than bothered. "If the people around you don't need your help to get what they want, you can be sure they're around because they like you. Girls, you really have helped to make me feel better, and I want to kick myself for not talking to you sooner. Will you think I'm crazy if I say I love you all very much?"

This time Adair joined the others in assuring Lisni that they didn't she was crazy at all. They all left their chairs to share a common hug, then they went back to their tea feeling a good deal better.

"Now I'd like to hear more about what Dinra said," Lisni decided aloud once they were settled again. "I agree that she can't be trusted not to do something really awful, so I think we ought to tell someone. Adair, do you think Mayne will take a warning seriously? He's been hovering around you a lot lately."

"Yes, I think Mayne will take a warning seriously, so I'll be sure to talk to him later," Adair said, oddly reluctant to go into details about Mayne's "hovering." Instead she repeated what Dinra had said in the dining room, and the four of them discussed the matter until it was time to start getting ready for dinner. They left a much happier Lisni to return to their own apartments, and when Adair walked in she found Mayne relaxing in her sitting room.

"I was worried when I couldn't find you earlier, but then I learned you'd gone with the other girls to visit Lisni," Mayne said at once, putting aside his teacup to get to his feet. "Did you all have a nice visit?"

"Yes and no," Adair answered, very aware of the presence of servants in the room. Her first urge had been to go to Mayne and put her arms around him, but she couldn't bring herself to do that with people watching. "One of the things we talked about was what Dinra said to me in the dining room after lunch. She seemed to be threatening me with something, and even though I feel foolish worrying I can't quite dismiss her nastiness. If she can find a way to hurt me, I think she'll do it."

"Not any more she won't, but I'm still not prepared to take chances," Mayne said as he moved closer to Adair. "You may have noticed the guardsmen on your door, guardsmen who'll be there as long as you have this apartment. Dinra did try to hurt you, but I'm happy to say that her try didn't work."

"I'd like to know more about that, but first there's something else I need to tell you," Adair said, joining him in moving closer. "And for this I think we'd better send the servants away."

Mayne's brows rose high, but instead of arguing or asking any questions he just dismissed the servants. Once they were gone, Adair put a hand to his arm with a smile.

"Thank you," she said, feeling an odd, crazy tenderness toward the man. He'd taken her word about the need to send the servants out, something no one had ever done for her before. "What I wanted to tell you is this: Lisni is in love with your father, and there's a good chance he feels the same way about her."

Mayne had been about to put his arms around her, but hearing what she had to say stopped him in mid-motion. He stared down at her wordlessly for at least a minute, then shook his head as if to shake off shock.

"I have no idea what to say about that," he finally managed to get out. "My father has had no one to share his life with for a very long time, but Lisni is young enough to be his daughter. And he's old enough to be her father."

"Lisni doesn't like younger men," Adair supplied with a wry smile. "She doesn't see your father as a father, just as a man she's very attracted to. Do you think your father will be able to get past his prejudices about younger women, or is he likely to ruin both their lives?"

"I don't know," Mayne admitted, clearly at a loss. "I'll have to think about this, and maybe even talk to my brothers about it. Yes, definitely talk to my brothers, and that as soon as possible. I'll be back to escort you in to dinner."

And with that he gave her a quick kiss and left the room, closing the door behind him. It wasn't until then that Adair realized he hadn't told her any details about Dinra, but there was nothing she could do about it now. Instead she went into her bedchamber and got ready for dinner, but had to leave for the dining room alone. Mayne didn't catch up until she was just about to step into the gathering room, so there was no chance to question him.

But there were two things Adair noticed as soon as dinner was announced: Lisni was seated next to the king again, and Dinra wasn't seated anywhere at all.

Chapter Six

Adair found herself more aware of the seating arrangements at dinner than ever before. Lisni sat to the king's right, Mayne to her right, then Adair. Nossa sat next to Adair on her right, then Lethan, Aleena, and Nallis, with Elmini in the end place. There was no sign of Dinra, but her good friend Aleena didn't seem to notice. Aleena was glowing at having been placed between Lethan and Nallis, obviously expecting to have the full attention of both men.

By the time the meal was over, it was clear that Aleena wasn't quite as pleased as she'd been. Both Lethan and Nallis had honestly tried to include the girl in the conversations they were having with Nossa and Elmini, but even when Aleena wasn't trying to take one of the men's full attention she didn't seem able to keep up with the talk.

Nossa, for example would say something amusing, and Lethan would add a funny comment of his own. Adair saw the two of them then turn to Aleena, giving the girl a chance to join in the nonsense, but Aleena didn't seem to know what was expected. Instead of even trying to add her own comment, she batted her eyes at Lethan and asked him how often he went riding with ladies, then said she was free to ride with him tomorrow.

Adair had sighed while Lethan said he would certainly consider riding with Aleena

-if court matters didn't keep him too busy. Aleena seemed to take his gentlemanly refusal as a promise of agreement instead, and Nossa had exchanged a pained glance with Adair. It was becoming more and more clear how limited Aleena's intelligence was, very much a tragedy rather than something to be amused about.

But Mayne hadn't seen any of the by-play. Adair had wondered why Mayne hadn't commented, then she'd realized what Mayne was doing. He was pretending to pay complete attention to his meal while he actually listened to the conversation between his father and Lisni. The voices were too low for Adair to hear any of the talk, but Mayne must have heard most if not all of it.

There was dancing again after the meal, but this time none of those at the head table stayed and danced. Aleena all but clung to Lethan and Nallis, oblivious to how uncomfortable she made them, waiting happily for them to ask her to dance.

When they both excused themselves and left instead Aleena was put out, but not so much that she didn't show a smile of victory to Elmini and Nossa before strolling out herself.

"Aleena really thinks she's getting somewhere with your brothers," Adair said to Mayne as they walked toward her apartment. "I know that Dinra has been telling Aleena that the two of them will definitely be chosen as brides, but how can Aleena just believe what she's told without looking around for herself to find out if it's true?"

"Unfortunately, Aleena is like a lot of people," Mayne said with something of a smile, patting her hand where it rested on his arm. "The world frightens and overwhelms her, so she makes no real effort to cope with what happens. Instead she just believes the comforting lies she's told, and that way is able to go on."

"I think I envy her," Adair said, her own smile wry. "It would be nice to see the world the way I want it to be rather than the way it actually is. Less need for the decision to fight tooth and nail against things that will probably run you over anyway."

"The way to keep from getting run over is to find someone larger and stand behind them," Mayne answered as he opened the door of Adair's sitting room and urged her to walk in first between the guardsmen. "And in case you were wondering, yes, I'm definitely volunteering. Most people find a different way to go rather than try to run me over."

"I think I'd choose to stand next to you rather than behind you," Adair said, stopping in the middle of the room to turn and study him. "Do you mind if I ask if you learned anything from listening to what your father and Lisni said to each other?"

"I don't mind at all," he said with a better smile, putting one hand to her face. "Especially since you were the one who was smart enough to mention the matter to me in the first place. In a nutshell, you were right. I have no doubt now that my father is in the process of falling in love with Lisni if he isn't already there, but I think there's going to be a problem. Unless I'm mistaken, my father is probably going to be noble about it and let Lisni walk out of his life."

"But why?" Adair demanded, immediately hurting for her friend Lisni. "Why would he throw away the life they can have together?"

"I have the feeling that Lethan, Nallis, and I are part of his reason," Mayne said with a short headshake. "You have to understand that my father isn't just any man. He's a king, and Lisni is young enough to give him more children. If some of those children are male, what will he do when it becomes time to name an heir? Choose among my current brothers and me, leaving his newest sons out in the cold? Wait until his newest sons are old enough to be in the running, in the process souring the lives of his firstborn sons? The problem is a nasty one, and I don't know if I'd be strong enough to give up my own happiness for the sake of my offspring the way he's doing."

"Well, he hasn't done it yet," Adair pointed out, privately relieved that the problem wasn't hers either. "And since you and your brothers are so intimately involved, shouldn't you three have some say in the matter? Before I got here I thought it was only women who had their lives planned out for them, but you and your brothers are at least as badly treated as women, and maybe even more so. You all accept everything done to you, everything decided about your lives. The decision you all made about standing together against choosing Aleena as your wife is probably the first time you've ever done something like that. Isn't it time the three of you did more?"

"That idea makes me want to close my eyes and pretend it was never said, which means you're right again," Mayne allowed with a sigh that wasn't very encouraging. "My brothers and I love and respect our father and want to please him, which is primarily why we don't argue his decisions. Being chosen as his heir is actually much less important to us."

"If it were me, I'd probably do everything possible not to be chosen his heir," Adair couldn't help saying. "Do you really want to sit around doing nothing for the next who-knows-how-many years, waiting for someone to die before you can start a life of your own? Even the lowliest farmer is better off than that, when he can point to his fields and orchards and herds as an accomplishment brought about by his own efforts. A king's heir has nothing at all to point to."

Mayne opened his mouth as if to argue or comment, but nothing in the way of words came out. The sudden bleakness in his gray eyes made Adair want to apologize for what she'd said, but before she could get an apology put together Mayne touched her arm.

"It looks like there's more than one thing I have to talk to my brothers about," he said, holding some emotion tightly inside him. "I'd save this for the morning if I could, but trying to wait will make me useless to you as well as keeping me from getting any sleep. If you're asleep when I get back, I'll try not to wake you."

He touched her face again before turning and striding out of the room, leaving Adair with no choice but to continue on into her bedchamber alone. She'd really been looking forward to spending time with Mayne and sharing lovemaking again, but trying to keep him with her right now would have been foolish. There were things distracting him, and he needed to see to those things before he'd be able to do anything else.

But if she had anything to say about it, she would not be asleep when he got back. Besides, she still hadn't asked for the details about Dinra.

Mayne left Adair's apartment and headed straight for Lethan's, hoping to find his brother in this time. He'd spent so much time looking for his brothers before dinner that he'd almost been late getting to the dining room, but it looked like it was a good thing he hadn't been able to find Lethan and Nallis. He now had a good deal more to tell them, and once they were told he'd be able to go back to Adair and give her his complete attention. The way she certainly deserved.

But thinking about Adair was of no help right now, so Mayne pushed aside the thoughts and concentrated on what he would say to his brothers. He was almost to Lethan's apartment when he saw Nallis coming from the other direction, and the two of them met in front of Lethan's door. Nallis was being followed by a couple of guardsmen, almost matching the four guardsmen standing outside Lethan's apartment, so Mayne gestured to the door.

"Let's go inside before we talk about why you're here," Mayne said to an amused Nallis. "It so happens I'm here to see both of you."

Nallis nodded pleasantly and knocked on the door, then led the way inside. Lethan sat with a glass of wine in his hand, and once Mayne closed the door to the hall Lethan showed his own amusement.

"Me first, brother," Nallis said at once before Lethan could comment. "I wanted to say this outside, but Mayne pointed out all the company we had. I'm here because Lethan and I arranged to call for Elmini and Nossa and go back to the dancing without Aleena being around, but you're supposed to be with your wife. Did Adair decide to kick you out because of how clumsy you were last night?"

"Clumsy wasn't the word she used, so that should tell you I wasn't kicked out," Mayne countered with a grin. "I'll be going back once I tell you what Adair told me, something I verified to my own satisfaction. Brothers, our father has finally found a woman to end his loneliness."

"Hey, fantastic!" Nallis exclaimed, and "I don't believe it!" Lethan said with a grin that gave the lie to his words, both at the same time.

"I'm really glad to hear that," Nallis said once he and Lethan had exchanged a laugh. "Father has been alone long enough."

"I'll say," Lethan agreed. "So who is she, and when will the contracts be signed?"

"There probably won't be any contracts, and here's why," Mayne answered, then told them everything about the mess. All amusement disappeared rather quickly, and once Mayne had finished speaking there was a moment of silence. It was obvious to Mayne that his brothers were disturbed about more than one thing, which was actually the way he wanted it.

"Now let's talk about who will be chosen as Father's heir," Mayne added, drawing his brothers' attention again. "Adair pointed out that she'd hate to be named heir because Father's heir will get to do nothing with his life but sit around waiting for Father to die. I hadn't thought about the situation in those terms before, but now that I have I don't like the idea. I want to do something with my life, be more than just the smiling nonentity known as the crown prince. If Father has other sons, it won't bother me a bit."

"I hadn't looked at it that way either," Lethan said slowly, as though gathering his thoughts. "I was fairly sure that Father would eventually follow tradition and name you his heir, Mayne, so I never seriously expected to be king some day. Now the idea that I might be named heir after all is more disturbing than interesting."

"Seriously bothered is the way I feel," Nallis put in with a sigh next, looking back and forth between his brothers. "Someone once taunted me with the suggestion that I'd never be king because I had two older brothers, but all I did was laugh at the fool. After seeing the garbage Father has to put up with in the name of politics -and the choices he has to make if he decides he doesn't want to play the game after all - No, I can't see myself enjoying being king after him, not when there are so many more interesting things to do in life."

"Like painting," Mayne agreed with a smile, knowing his youngest brother was a truly talented artist. "It

looks like we're agreed, then. We'll talk to Father as soon as these messes with Duke Lemish and Duke Elden are taken care of, first telling him that Aleena is unacceptable to all of us and then urging him not to let Lisni get away."

"If he explodes and has us all locked up, at least we'll have each other's company in the dungeon," Lethan said with renewed amusement. "And I think I can count on Nossa to come and visit me from time to time."

"Visit nothing," Nallis countered with a laugh. "If I get locked up, I fully expect Elmini to arm herself and then break me out. And I'd be willing to bet that sweet and gentle Nossa would be with her. Adair, of course, would most likely be leading the way."

They all laughed at the picture Nallis had drawn for them, and for Mayne the laughter was warming because he knew that Nallis was right. The god of luck had given them all a priceless gift: women who would fully share their lives rather than stand back and quietly accept whatever misfortune touched their husbands. The women would be partners rather than burdens, and that thought made Mayne feel incredibly good.

"And now I get to go back to my wife," Mayne said, stirring where he still stood next to Nallis. "We'll have to keep this discussion to ourselves, just to be sure that Father doesn't hear about our decisions until we tell him. I'm sure your ladies can be counted on to be discreet, but if they happen to discuss the matter and they're overheard by the wrong person."

"Then we'll be lucky if we aren't executed out of hand," Lethan finished when Mayne let his words trail off, Nallis nodding his own agreement. "I know how efficient Father's spy force is, and this isn't anything like the boyish pranks we were caught at when we were younger. Go back to your wife, Mayne, and then Nallis and I can go and dance with what we hope will be our wives some day soon."

Mayne smiled and put a hand to Nallis's arm, then he turned and left the apartment. He'd told Adair that if she was asleep when he got back he'd try not to wake her, but that had been a lie. And waking her up would be only the first of his efforts.

Adair undressed, took a quick bath, and got into bed, but not to sleep. The fact that she hadn't turned down any of the lamps and had also brought a book along ought to be enough to keep her awake no matter how long Mayne was, but the wait turned out to be unexpectedly short. She'd only just started to read when she heard a sound at the bedchamber door, and looking up showed her Mayne coming in.

"Well, that was quick," Adair commented as she put the book aside. "Does that mean your brothers liked the idea of Lisni marrying your father?"

"Lethan and Nallis liked the idea just fine," Mayne answered as he came closer. "Now all we have to do is get Father to agree with us, which can't possibly be considered the easy part. The three of us will talk to Father in a day or so, but until then we won't discuss our intention with anyone and especially not in public."

"To make sure you aren't overheard," Adair said with a nod of understanding. "That's a good idea, so I'll do the same. And now that you're here again, I can ask the questions I kept meaning to ask earlier. What did Dinra try to do, and why wasn't she at dinner?"

"Dinra was missing because she's being punished, so don't expect to see her at breakfast or lunch tomorrow either," Mayne answered, sitting down on Adair's side of the bed and taking her hand. "As far as what Dinra tried to do goes, I'd rather tell you about that tomorrow. You may think you want to know about it tonight, but trust me, you don't."

"Was it really that bad?" Adair asked quietly, feeling something of a chill pass through her. "Bad enough that you're afraid hearing about it will give me nightmares?"

"There's a chance that hearing about Dinra's plans will get you mad instead of frightening you," Mayne allowed after kissing her hand and then nuzzling it. "I certainly don't want you to be frightened, but I also don't want you angry. Angry women tend to be blocky and difficult when you put your arms around them."

"Have you had much experience with putting your arms around angry women?" Adair asked as he leaned closer to slide his hands around to her back. Now his face was very near hers, so near that they were almost kissing.

"I made that mistake just once, when I was much younger," Mayne murmured, his lips brushing hers as he spoke. "It took a very long time to make her forget her anger, and by then I'd lost most of my interest in her. The experience was very disappointing, and I know it would be even worse with someone I would not lose interest in. You don't mind, I hope?"

Adair parted her lips to say she didn't mind in the least that Mayne wasn't going to lose interest in her, but the words were never spoken. The fleeting touch of his lips had become a kiss, and refusing to respond to that kiss was impossible. It startled her for a moment when Mayne's tongue entered her mouth, but then she realized just how much she wanted to taste him as well.

And taste him she did. By the time the dizzying kiss ended she found that Mayne had taken off his clothing, and that made tasting the rest of him so much easier. She leaned forward and licked his chest, making him moan and shiver and then slide into bed beside her. Once he was on his back she was able to reach all of him, exploring his broad, hard body one lick at a time.

When she reached her favorite part of him she licked it all over, then tried to take it into her mouth. Only part of the hardened rod would fit, though, and it annoyed Adair that she didn't know how to get around the limitation. But before her annoyance could grow, Mayne stopped toying with the place between her thighs and pulled her back to lie flat.

"We'll try that enjoyment again at another time," he said, his voice hoarse and husky as he put himself between her legs. "Right now I'd rather share the pleasure than have it be mine alone, which would have happened if you'd kept that up even one more minute. You're the most incredible woman I ever met, and I love you more than I'll ever be able to say."

And with that he thrust inside her, then moved forward to take her in his arms and begin another kiss. He also began to stroke in and out of her, which immediately started to turn Adair's bones to liquid. But even being mostly liquid didn't keep Adair from holding him tight and moving with him, and her last coherent thought was to thank the gods for making her someone who never wore anything to bed.

Mayne had more than enough time to make love to Adair again in the morning before they bathed and dressed and went to breakfast together. They also held hands as they walked, and if Adair noticed the snickers or frowns coming from some members of the court as they passed, she certainly didn't show it. She just smiled faintly as they walked along, possibly lost to some pleasant, private thoughts.

Nothing but pleasure would have been nice for Mayne to concentrate on, but reality kept intruding and drawing his thoughts in other directions. After breakfast he strolled outside with Adair, but a short time before lunch he took her back to her apartment and sat her down in a chair.

"Yesterday you wanted to know what Dinra planned to do to you," he said, seeing her smile disappear instantly. "If you still want to know, I'm prepared to tell you."

"I'd love to make some joke right about now to show that whatever I hear won't bother me, but it probably will bother me," she answered after a very brief hesitation. "I've never liked Dinra, but I also honestly believe that I've never done anything to her that would call for her doing something horrible in return. So what did she decide on? Never speaking to me again would be my favorite choice."

"I could have lived with that choice myself," Mayne answered, wishing it were possible to continue refusing to go into details. "But we weren't raised the way Dinra obviously was, to consider every slight a mortal insult or worse. She . forced two of the men in her entourage to come after you, ordering them to hurt you rather badly. I happened to be here when the two arrived, and thinking I was a servant or an unimportant visitor they tried to brush me aside. Instead of letting myself be brushed, I . overcame the two and then called the guard."

"What do you mean, she 'forced' the men to come after me?" Adair asked, her surprise over being distracted from the rest of the story clear on her face. "You make her sound like a twelve foot giant who carries a club to bash people over the head with."

"In a way, what she - or at least her father - does is worse," Mayne told her, now able to sit in his own chair. He'd kept to his feet in case Adair needed to be held close, but his beloved was stronger than that. "It seems that Duke Lemish isn't interested in voluntary loyalty from his people. The duke believes in binding men to him with the use of fear and threats against the families of the men he uses, which isn't the way it's supposed to work. My father has sent people to . look into the matter, and we ought to know more later today."

"And Dinra just . jumped in happily and joined her father in doing that?" Adair demanded, obviously beginning to get angry. "How could she not know how wrong it is to treat people like that? I'll bet she didn't hesitate even a minute before deciding to send those men to hurt me. You said she wasn't at dinner or breakfast because she's being punished. What's being done to her in the way of punishment?"

"That's one of the reasons why I chose this time to tell you about what happened," Mayne replied, watching her closely. "I found out that Dinra will be getting her next dose of punishment in just a little while, and thought you might like to go with me to see it done. You're the one who would have been hurt most by her vindictiveness, so if anyone has a right to watch, that anyone is you."

"You know, I almost refused," Adair said after opening her mouth then closing it again. "My first thought was that even Dinra deserved some privacy, but that isn't true. If she's allowed to bear her punishment in private she'll probably be able to forget about it that much sooner. So what exactly was it that she wanted those men to do to me? If it had been nothing but beating me up I think you would have said so."

"I was afraid you'd notice that," Mayne muttered, needing a deep breath before continuing in a normal voice. "The opposite of lovemaking is called rape. That's when a man forces himself on an unwilling woman, giving her fear and pain rather than pleasure. The two men were supposed to beat you, but only after the rape."

"And after having men force themselves on me, it would probably have been very hard if not impossible to let myself be made love to," Adair stated, a growl behind the words instead of the fear Mayne had been afraid she'd feel. "I've had almost no pleasure in my life, but Dinra didn't care if she robbed me of something to enjoy. She would have enjoyed the stealing, and that's all that mattered to her. If Dinra is scheduled to be skinned alive, I want to see it being done."

"Well, that's not quite what's being done to her," Mayne said, getting hastily to his feet. Adair had stood up very abruptly, and he had the definite feeling that if he tried to dawdle, Adair would leave him behind. "Maybe skinning is what should be done to her, but before you find my father and demand the skinning,

take a look at what's being done instead."

"I'll look," Adair stated rather than agreed, the expression in her black eyes as frosty as her voice. "If I find that enough isn't being done, our next stop will be wherever your father is."

Mayne gave a short nod and headed for the door, knowing beyond doubt that Adair wasn't joking. He wasn't about to let her go to his father and demand something the king would never agree to, but there was no need to mention that. If the problem came up, he'd worry about it then.

This time there was no hand-holding as they walked through the halls. Adair was too angry for that, and her anger helped her to match his stride so they got to the punishment area in just a very few minutes. The girls' punishment room was empty when they arrived, something they saw when they glanced inside, but a moment later one of the men in charge of punishment appeared with Dinra at the end of the hall.

"That's the same day gown Dinra wore yesterday, only it looks like she slept in it," Adair commented, clearly watching the man bringing Dinra closer by the hold he had on her hair. "Does that mean she wasn't allowed to go back to her apartment?"

"It means she's spent all her time since yesterday's punishment in a dungeon cell," Mayne answered, nothing in the way of sympathy in him for the mess of a girl being dragged toward them. "When my father and brothers and I went to confront her yesterday, we found her in the middle of trying to force another two men into doing what the first two hadn't managed. When my father heard what she was saying, he must have decided not to keep her in a place where she might have access to even more men."

Adair made a neutral sound that was more an acknowledgment than a comment, but the following silence didn't last long. Dinra had been stumbling along at the urging of the fist in her hair, but when she saw Adair her own silence changed to fury.

"You!" Dinra screamed, suddenly beginning to fight the way she was being held. "This is all your fault, and I'm going to kill you!"

Her flurry of struggling startled the man who held her, so much so that he made the mistake of trying for a more secure hold on the girl. But instead of getting a better grip, the man lost the hold he had and Dinra was suddenly free to come charging at Adair. Mayne was ready to step in front of Adair to keep the furious Dinra from reaching her, but instead Adair was the one who stepped forward. When Adair's hand came up and slapped Dinra's face hard, the other girl was shocked into immobility long enough for the man behind her to grab her arms.

"You're going to kill me?" Adair demanded, towering fury behind the words she spat at Dinra. "Everything that went on between us was your fault from first to last, but suddenly it's become my fault? You're the one who did it all, Dinra, and refusing to admit that just makes you look like a fool."

"I was entitled to do whatever I did!" Dinra returned with the same fury, again trying to free herself from the man who held her. "I'm the daughter of a duke, and no one has the right to cross me or refuse my orders! No one!"

"Can you really be that stupid?" Adair countered, staring at Dinra as if she were something small and slimy. "Has it somehow slipped past you that I'm also the daughter of a duke? If what you said was true, then that would mean I had just as much right to do whatever I pleased to you."

"You're not in my class and you never will be," Dinra returned with a sneer as she tossed her head. "My father is much more powerful than yours, and once I marry a prince my father will have even more power. But after the marriage I'll have power of my own, and that's when I'll show you exactly how small

and unimportant you are. And that's also when I'll have my revenge on anyone who thinks they can hurt me and get away with it."

Mayne saw a shadow of disturbance touch the face of the man who held Dinra. That man obviously knew how unwise it was to cross the powerful, the smirk Dinra wore showing she knew the same even better. Mayne was about to assure both of them that Dinra was mistaken, but Adair did it first - and more directly.

"Time to wake up, Dinra," Adair said with something of a headshake. "Haven't you realized yet that you won't be marrying one of the princes? If the king had meant to let your father force him into sharing his power, you would already be married. This week with all of us here is nothing but a ploy, designed to make the king's final refusal even more insulting to the men who tried to back him into a corner. Your father will have less power, not more, and you'll have none at all."

"No, that isn't true," Dinra said with a much more violent shake of her head, but the way she paled showed that she'd finally seen the real truth. "No one would dare to refuse my father's orders, not even that fool of a king. What you said isn't true, it isn't!"

Rather than argue the point Adair simply stood silent, and that was when the man holding Dinra's arms chose to continue on into the punishment room. Dinra screamed and struggled with what looked like all her strength, but when another man in charge of punishment appeared the two were able to put her into the stocks. Dinra kept on screaming and struggling, but with her head and hands closed into the stocks she was helpless to keep her skirt from being raised to her back.

"Looks like today they're going to use a switch instead of a strap," Mayne said to Adair as the original man got the switch from the wall display and carried it back to where Dinra waited. "Yesterday she was given thirty strokes, so I imagine she'll get the same today."

"Thirty or three hundred, she still won't learn anything," Adair said, but not with the sigh Mayne had expected. "She really is an idiot, and idiots never learn. If she ever does marry, I feel sorry for her husband and any children she might have."

Dinra's louder scream at the first stroke of the switch took Mayne's attention, but not completely. As he watched the reddened lines appear on Dinra's bottom with every stroke added, he tried to figure out why he was so bothered by what Adair had said. Something about Dinra being an idiot and the children she might have.

Well, some day Dinra might have children, but right now she was being punished like a child. The switch seemed to be falling a bit harder on her backside than the strap had the day before, probably because the man wielding the switch was the one Dinra had tried to frighten. The girl had been a fool to threaten a man who was about to punish her, a man who didn't necessarily have to back down and only go through the motions. Dinra hadn't allowed for the possibility that the man might become angry instead, and even dancing in place with every stroke probably wasn't showing her the truth.

Idiots tend to know what they know, and nothing that happens is able to teach them that they're wrong.

Chapter Seven

Adair stood and watched Dinra being switched, not in the least surprised that she wasn't feeling outraged on Dinra's behalf. The punishment being given the other girl was humiliating as well as painful, but Dinra couldn't claim she hadn't earned it. Well, Dinra probably would try to claim that, but the only one in the entire kingdom who might believe her would be someone who didn't know her.

And I have to admit that this is worse than being skinned alive, Adair thought as she watched Dinra jump at every touch of the switch to her rapidly reddening backside. Simply being hurt allows you a certain sense of dignity that getting your bottom spanked doesn't provide, especially when you know you won't die from what's being done. Once the punishment is over you know you won't be able to sit down, or walk, or even lie on your front to ease the pain. Nothing will ease the pain, nothing but the passage of time.

There was still nothing inside Adair to make her want to turn away, not when she now knew just how much Dinra had tried to take from her life. If someone makes a small mistake it isn't hard to forgive them, but forgiving an act of deliberate viciousness is stupid. If someone deliberately lies to you or tries to hurt you, forgiving them only tells them that their betrayal meant nothing. After all, if they know they'll be forgiven, what's to stop them from doing the same thing again and again and again.

Dinra's screams had a lot of desperation in them, and Adair had no trouble guessing why. Being switched was embarrassing enough, but being switched in front of the woman you'd tried to best was total humiliation. It added a dimension to the pain that very little else could have, but if Dinra didn't deserve to be treated like this, no one did.

It doesn't take all that long to give someone thirty strokes from a switch, but when the punishment was over Adair knew well enough that Dinra probably didn't agree. She was the one who'd gotten those thirty strokes, after all, and her bottom looked hot enough to fry eggs on. Her red and tender-looking bottom wasn't covered until she was released from the stocks and allowed to straighten up, and by that time she was crying hysterically. Adair waited until Dinra turned and saw her even through the tears, then she turned and led a silent Mayne out of the area.

"I expected her to look furious, but she didn't," Mayne commented after a moment as they walked. "I hate to say it, but she looked devastated."

"I think it finally came to her that if I'd been lying about her chances at marriage she would have been able to tell by looking at you," Adair answered. "Men tend to show it when they hear someone stretching the truth, even if they don't immediately speak up to challenge the statement. If you were just humoring me in my beliefs, she would have known it."

"But now she knows something else entirely," Mayne said, and Adair could hear a sigh in his voice. "Her original beliefs kept her strong during the first of her punishment, but now those beliefs are crumbling away. Do you think her mind will be able to handle the same thing being done to her day after day for the rest of the week?"

"If you're waiting for me to say that she doesn't have to be punished again, I can tell you now that I won't be saying it." Adair made her statement after turning her head to look directly at Mayne, wanting to see his reaction to her answer. "I'm not very good at forgiving and forgetting, so if Dinra gets away with not paying the rest of the price for what she tried to do, you're the one who'll have to make it happen."

"But you won't really mind if I do just that," Mayne said, doing his own studying of her face. "You can't forgive her, but if I can you'll let me do it."

"I've been learning that some of my reactions are as senseless as Dinra's," Adair told him, groping for the right words to express what she felt. "I can't yet tell if I'm totally wrong about most things, but you have more experience dealing . completely with other people. If I watch to see the way you handle various situations, I might be able to figure out where I'm right and where I'm wrong."

"Which makes you very much not an idiot, because not only can you learn, you want to." The smile on Mayne's face was warmer than Adair would have expected, almost as though she'd done something to

make him proud. He touched her face gently with one hand, then put his arm around her shoulders. "I don't know yet whether I'll ask my father to suspend the rest of Dinra's punishment, and I won't know until I think about the question a bit more. When I figure it out I'll let you know, but until then how about some lunch?"

"Lunch sounds fine," Adair agreed, deciding not to lean against him the way she wanted to do. In just another few days she'd have a decision to make, and by then she might know if staying with Mayne was the right thing to do. She still didn't really want to be married, but the more time she spent with Mayne, the more she wanted to be with him. If that trend continued to the end of the week, it might be enough to make her change her mind.

Mayne enjoyed lunch with Adair, but then he left her with Elmini and Nossa. A messenger had come to him saying that the king wanted him in the small study, which probably meant there was word about Duke Lemish. As Mayne arrived at the small study he saw his brothers coming from two other directions, so he waited for them to reach him and then they all entered the study together. Their father wasn't in the room, but before they could comment on where he might be, King Rodick came through a different door.

"Good timing all around," the king commented as he waved his sons to chairs and took one himself behind his desk. "I wanted to let you all know that I've had word about the conditions to be found in Duke Lemish's lands, but now I have something else to add. And before you ask, it's good news."

Mayne felt relief as he took his chair. It was about time they got some news that was good.

"To begin with, conditions are terrible all over Lemish's duchy," the king said, all satisfaction suddenly gone from him. "The farmers are still growing their crops and tending their herds, but I'm told it's as if all the life has gone out of them. One reason for the attitude is the patrols Lemish established all along the borders of his land."

"Patrols to do what?" Lethan asked, only just beating Mayne to voicing the question. "What's so dangerous about the surrounding countryside that the people need to be protected from it?"

"It's not an outside danger the patrols are there for," the king answered, actually looking grim now. "The patrols are meant to keep the people in the duchy from leaving, and that's not the only thing stopping the people. The members of one patrol were questioned harshly by some of my guardsmen, and a couple of the ones questioned broke. The patrols not only keep the people from leaving, but if even a single soul can't be accounted for when the patrol checks up on the farms and in the villages, ten of the people in the village or three on the farm are to be killed."

Mayne joined his brothers in shouting out his fury at that, and after a moment their father held up his hand.

"Now you know how I felt when I first heard about the practice," King Rodick said with a growl. "The reason for doing all that comes down to Lemish's people having picked out more than half of the able-bodied men in his duchy as soon-to-be trainees in the army he meant to build. This hasn't been going on long, though, less than a year to be exact, and most of that time was during deep winter. Lemish must have been expecting to get control over me - and then surprising me with his new army - before anyone found out what he was doing, but he miscalculated."

"Thanks to the way he raised his daughter," Mayne put in, needing to make the point. "And thanks to the blindness he obviously shares with that same daughter. How soon do you think he might be taken by General Ambos's troops, Father?"

"That's the good news I mentioned a minute ago," the king answered, his grimness now curving his lips.

"Thanks to Lemish having most of his hundred special guardsmen on border patrol, he had almost no 'loyal' personal guards when the general went to pay a call on the duke. Those two men we sent in first cleared everyone but seven of Lemish's guardsman out of the way, and Ambos's troops had already captured all the patrols. Ambos was able to put the former Duke Lemish under arrest last night and take charge of the main house, and early this morning Lemish was started on his way here. He ought to make it just in time for me to hold a special court."

"I hope you rewarded the courier who brought that good news," Nallis said, his cold smile matching Lethan's and the king's. "How soon will we be leaving for the throne room, Father?"

"Right now," the king answered as he stood, and Mayne was on his feet even before his brothers. If Lemish wasn't already about to enter the palace, they would not be going to the throne room right now. Mayne liked to think of himself as a forgiving man, but the former Duke Lemish wasn't someone he was willing to forgive.

Mayne stood with his brothers and watched as their father entered the throne room without the least ceremony and sat down on his throne. Usually when their father held court it was a formal occasion, with lots of fur and silk and jewels to be seen.

Right now King Rodick wore nothing but dark leather and a silver band around his brow instead of a formal crown. Every courtier who entered the room stopped to stare before they bowed hastily, but their king wasn't watching them. Instead King Rodick watched a side door, and when the door opened the king smiled in a way that made the courtiers even more nervous.

Two guardsmen entered first, their swords in their fists to show they were seriously guarding someone. Behind them two other guardsmen dragged a man closed into chains, a man who obviously hadn't been treated very well. There were no bruises or other marks on the man's half-bearded face, but from the sweat covering him and staining his worn clothing he might have been dragged all the way from his lands to the palace. A dozen other guardsmen entered behind him, and the courtiers were so shocked there wasn't a sound in the entire room.

"How nice that you're finally here, Lemish," King Rodick said with a broad smile as the chained man was dragged to the foot of the steps leading up to the throne. "You have no idea how I've been looking forward to your arrival."

"How dare you perpetrate this outrage on me?" the prisoner snarled as he glared at Mayne's father, clearly refusing to join the guardsmen in bowing to their king. "I am a power to be reckoned with in this realm, and I will not be treated as if I - "

"Silence!" King Rodick thundered, his smile gone as if it had never been. "You are nothing in this realm, Lemish, not now and not ever again! You were trusted to care for some of my people, allowed the privilege of protecting them while they worked to your benefit, but you violated their trust and mine for no reason other than to feed your ambition. You're a fool, Lemish, and once you're gone your family will be sent into exile with nothing but the clothes on their back. Judging by how badly you ruined the daughter you dared to send here, the rest of your children must be even worse. For all the torment you caused I sentence you to hang - right now. Get him out of my sight."

During the king's rather lengthy speech, the former duke had been growing more and more furious. Mayne was watching closely when the words, "I sentence you to hang" were spoken, and only then did a frown cut through Lemish's expression of deep insult. Anyone else in Lemish's place would have known they were in trouble even before that, but Dinra's father didn't even really catch on now. He shouted out demands to be released immediately even as his guards dragged him out of the throne room again, just as

if he'd already dismissed everything said to him.

"I wonder if he'll believe he's lost even with the rope around his neck," Lethan murmured into the background silence. The courtiers were in shock again, so the only sound was Lemish's ranting. "Let's go and find out."

Mayne felt curious about the same point, as did Nallis, so all three of them went to witness the hanging. A temporary gallows had been erected in a back courtyard, and by the time Mayne and his brothers arrived Lemish was up on the platform with the rope being fitted around his neck. The former duke's shouting had changed to screams tinged with fear, but no one around him was paying attention.

"He seems to be ready to apologize to Father," Nallis observed after listening to the screams for a moment. "In fact he's begging to apologize, which he apparently thinks is the point to what's being done."

"When you make terrorizing people a way of life you tend to think others do the same," Mayne commented while Lethan shook his head. "But what he's really doing is hoping, Nallis, all but praying that he isn't actually going to die. He spent his life doing just as he pleased no matter who was hurt, most likely thinking he'd never be called to task for his actions, but now he has been. If someone had slapped him down sooner, it might never have come to this."

But it had come to the execution of a man who thought the law didn't apply to him, and the episode wasn't pleasant. When the noose was tightened around his neck Lemish began to cry, but that didn't stop the proceedings any more than his shouting had. The lever taking the floor out from under the man's feet was pulled, but the noose hadn't been set to break Lemish's neck quickly. Instead the former duke kicked while choking to death, his arms bound behind his back making it impossible for Lemish to prolong his life.

When the body finally hung lifeless at the end of the rope, Mayne and his brothers returned to their father's study. King Rodick was back behind his desk, and after Mayne and the others helped themselves to tea before sitting again, they found there was more in the way of news.

"Lemish's wife and children have been put into wagons and headed in this direction," the king told them after sipping at his own tea. "General Ambos was generous enough to allow them to take a couple of changes of clothes and a small supply of food with them, and their wagons will get here late in the afternoon on their way out of the kingdom. But they won't be allowed to spend the night here, not even in the city. They'll collect Dinra and keep going, and then be made to camp out by their escort."

"I don't envy the men in that escort," Mayne couldn't help saying. "The former Duchess Trayni is probably screaming nonstop about the treatment she's being given, and those poor men have to listen to her. Almost any other woman would have my pity if not my concern, but that woman is a different story entirely."

"Very frankly, Trayni is the kind of woman who makes my blood run cold," Lethan put in. "I can't ever remember her being satisfied with something or thinking something was good enough for her. When I was young I used to wonder what she could have possibly done to deserve having the world remade to suit her preferences."

"You're not the only ones to feel that way about the woman," King Rodick said with a wry smile when Nallis's expression showed he agreed with his brothers. "Three of my dukes used to flinch just thinking about running into her, and the only one she never handed orders to was me. Not that she didn't try a time or two, just to see if I'd let her get away with it. When I made it clear that I was the one in charge, not her, she finally backed off just enough to keep from testing my temper."

"I remember how furious Lemish was a couple of years ago when two of his sons just up and left without a word," Nallis said. "I also remember thinking that it was a shame they'd gone because they were the only decent ones in the family. The three sons who stayed are just like Lemish, and Dinra's younger sister is just like her and their mother."

"Once our current problem with Duke Elden is taken care of, I intend to have a closer look at the rest of my dukes," Mayne's father said. "If I hadn't ignored the kind of man Lemish was, I would have saved myself a good deal of trouble. I expect to have word about Elden soon, hopefully by tonight at the latest, and then General Zellis's troops will be able to return to their former position near Duke Finlor's lands. They should certainly be back there by week's end, just in time for the announcement about betrothals, so I'd like to take a moment to ask if you've all made your choices."

Mayne exchanged glances with his brothers, having no trouble seeing how suddenly nervous Lethan and Nallis were. The opportunity to talk about unpleasant decisions had come, and putting it off would make very little sense.

"You, Mayne, seem to be doing well with Adair, but keep in mind that once Elden is arrested there won't be anyone to complain if you cancel the contract," Mayne's father went on. "If the girl hadn't saved your brothers' lives I probably would have insisted on having the contract canceled, but as it is we do owe Adair some consideration. Lethan and Nallis: have either of you decided on Elmini?"

"I have," Nallis answered with only the smallest hesitation. Mayne noticed the pause, but their father didn't seem to.

"Good," King Rodick said with a nod. "That leaves Aleena for you, then, Lethan, although I haven't seen you much in Aleena's company. It does pay to get to know a girl before you marry her, son."

"I've already gotten to know Aleena, Father, and that's why I can't agree to marry her," Lethan answered after taking a deep breath. "The girl's impossible, and there's no political consideration in the world important enough to make the effort worth being chained to her."

"Well, if you feel that strongly about it maybe we can shift things around," King Rodick said with a thoughtful frown. "Just because Nallis claimed Elmini first doesn't mean he won't be willing to take Aleena instead. How about it, Nallis? Are you willing to help your brother?"

"I'm sorry, Father, but I'd refuse to accept Aleena even if I hadn't claimed Elmini first," Nallis answered with a sigh. "Aleena is impossible, and I feel just as strongly about the matter as Lethan does."

"Well, one of you is going to have to change his mind," the king stated, his frown now deeper as he looked back and forth between his two sons. "I'd say that Mayne could cancel his contract with Adair to accommodate you, but Duke Elden won't be available to sign a new contract. That means one of you will have to make the sacrifice, so which of you is it going to be?"

"Why does it have to be either of them?" Mayne put in when he suddenly got an idea. "Duke Harro isn't really the kind to fly into a rage if his daughter Aleena is sent home to him, so why not let Lethan marry Lisni instead? After all, Duke Rayl isn't likely to object."

"No, that arrangement isn't in the least acceptable," King Rodick said at once, a trace of panic in his light eyes before he seemed to banish the emotion. "Lady Lisni isn't - a part of this, really, so we'll just leave the girl in peace. Which means that one of you will have to make the sacrifice and marry Aleena. She isn't hard to look at so doing your duty by her won't be hard, and the rest of the time you can be 'occupied' elsewhere than wherever she happens to be. Playing politics isn't always pleasant, but it is always necessary."

"What point is there in playing politics if doing it ruins your entire life?" Mayne asked while his brothers just sat there looking very disturbed. "I happen to feel the same way about Aleena that my brothers do, but I only realized why that is a minute ago. You talked about her husband 'doing his duty by her,' meaning giving her his children. Father, the thing that makes Aleena so unacceptable is the fact that she has no mind. If her lack of intelligence is passed on to her children, which it most probably will be, do you really want those children in line to inherit your throne? If someone really stupid ultimately ends up with your crown, how worthwhile will all your playing politics turn out to be?"

Mayne's father just sat staring at him, the frown he wore showing him at least as disturbed as Lethan and Nallis. Almost a minute went by in silence, and then the king shook his head.

"I want to say that that couldn't happen, that no one without a sharp mind would ever get the chance to ruin what I've worked so hard to build, but the statement would be a lie. Something like that is possible, and I can't tell you how frightening the possibility is. But if we reject Aleena, who will you marry in her place, Lethan? It does happen to be time for all of you to marry, and that applies to life as well as to politics."

"If Lethan is willing, I have a suggestion," Mayne said slowly, trying to pretend he'd only just thought of the idea. "Duke Lemish and Duke Finlor both requested that their daughters be considered by my brothers and me for marriage, and Duke Lemish has not only been refused for cause, he's also lost his duchy. If Duke Finlor is also summarily refused, there's a good chance he'll start to worry about losing his duchy as well. Especially since Duke Finlor was probably talked into joining Lemish because their lands march side by side."

"And if Finlor starts to worry, his worry could spread to the rest of my dukes," the king said with nod as he considered the matter. "When I start taking a closer look at what they're doing in their duchies, something I have to do, that combined with taking Elden down in turn could bring me more trouble than I'll be able to handle without a war starting. Good thinking, Mayne. I now know what has to be done, and I'm afraid you simply have no choice in the matter, Lethan. Your bride will have to be the lady Nossia."

"Yes, Father, I can see that," Lethan said, fighting to keep from grinning after exchanging a quick glance with Mayne. "The lady Nossia is unexpectedly bright, and I won't mind marrying her at all. Accepting Nossia after rejecting Dinra should show your dukes that you don't simply refuse to do things, you consider those things first and then act accordingly."

"Yes, it will, won't it?" the king agreed, now looking extremely pleased. "And now that that's settled, we can get back to doing something other than huddling together in a small room. I'm also going to think about making the announcements about your choices after Elden is in my hands rather than wait until the end of the week. No sense in delaying sending Aleena home any longer than we really need to."

"Sending Aleena and Lisni home, don't you mean, Father?" Mayne said before the king was able to get to his feet as he so obviously intended doing. "After the announcement is made, keeping Lisni here while sending Aleena home would make no sense."

"Yes, of course," the king muttered, no longer trying to stand. His face showed nothing in the way of an expression, but his eyes. "It would be cruel to keep Aleena's hopes up during the extra days, but that way no one would be able to complain that the decisions made were hasty. Yes, we don't want people to think we're being hasty, so - "

"Father, please," Nallis said, and Mayne could see as much sympathy on his youngest brother's face as he himself felt. "We know you don't want to let Lisni leave, and we also know why. Mayne, Lethan and I

have talked it over, and we all want to keep respecting you as much as we always have. If you chase away the woman you love, how can we possibly do that?"

"I don't think you understand, Nallis," the king said, the shock he'd shown at first already fading. "Lisni is a very young woman, one fully capable of giving me more children. How am I supposed to add more names to the list of my possible heirs without making you three justifiably furious with me? And if I name one of you three as my heir, how will any other sons I have feel once they're grown? I love my children and will love any others I might have, and you just don't do things like that to people you love."

"There is a solution to the problem, Father," Lethan said, his smile a bit of a surprise for Mayne. "We've already thought of your objection and discussed it, and if one of our future brothers turns out to make a better king than we would we won't feel betrayed. We all intend to start lives of our own once we're married, and would do the same even if you didn't marry again yourself. Why don't you choose one of us as a just-in-case heir, but keep the choice secret? That way you'll leave your options open and be able to change your mind."

"And that way our future brothers won't grow up hating us," Mayne put in while their father just stared at Lethan. "They'll have as much chance at the throne as we do, and if one of them really wants the job - and can handle it - there won't be a reason for him not to have it. You also might want the three of us to go with you when you tell Lisni that you intend to ask for her hand. That way she won't worry about us hating her if she agrees."

"Agrees," King Rodick echoed with a very strange smile. "Yes, just getting her father's agreement would not settle the matter, would it? Lisni and Adair seem to have a lot in common, but Duke Rayl isn't at all like Elden. The man is completely loyal, but not to the point of being a fanatic. If Lisni asked him not to sign a marriage contract with me, he'd most likely do as she asked."

"So what are we waiting for?" Nallis said as he got to his feet. "Let's go ask a girl to marry us."

Lethan stood as quickly as Mayne did, both of them and Nallis wearing identical grins. Mayne saw that they'd all realized that if they gave their father a chance to think about what he was doing, he just might not do it after all. It takes courage for an older man to speak his heart to an independent younger woman, and that went for kings as well as ordinary men.

But when Mayne's father was drawn to his feet to join them, Mayne had very high hopes that they'd get him to speak his piece before his nerve ran out.

Chapter Eight

They almost made it to Lisni's apartment before the king suddenly stopped dead in his tracks. Mayne had been afraid of that, and his father's first words confirmed the fear.

"Now that I've had a moment to think, this might not be such a good idea," King Rodick said, speaking to all his sons in general rather than to just one. "Lisni might be in the midst of getting ready for dinner, and I'd really hate to disturb her. After dinner I can speak to her more easily, and - "

The king's words broke off when they all saw Lisni coming along the hall from the opposite direction. She was most likely on her way to her apartment instead of already being in it, but Mayne suddenly knew that disturbing the girl wasn't what bothered King Rodick.

"Father, I happen to know that Lisni loves you just as much as you love her," Mayne quickly murmured. "Adair told me that Lisni was crying at the thought of never being able to marry you because she thought

you didn't care. Do you really want her to agonize even one minute longer?"

"No, absolutely not!" King Rodick almost snarled, but just as quietly as Mayne had spoken. "And if any of my subjects don't like the idea of me marrying a woman so much younger than I, that's just too bad about them. My personal life is none of their business."

By now Lisni had walked over to them, a puzzled look on her face even as she curtsied.

"Your Majesty, Your Highnesses," she said, looking around at all of them. "Is there some reason you're all standing here outside my apartment?"

"Yes, Lisni, there is," King Rodick answered, and Mayne saw the foolish smile his father now wore as he looked at the girl. "My sons have ganged up on me and insisted I do something I should have had the sense to do on my own. I'm here to tell you that I intend to ask your father to sign marriage contracts on your behalf, but first I wanted to know if you have any objection to my doing that. Do you?"

Lisni just stared at the king for a moment, her expression absolutely blank, and then she swayed so alarmingly that she would have fallen if the king hadn't thrown his arms around her.

"Lisni, are you all right?" a very worried man asked at once, staring down at the girl he held. "You almost fell."

"I . must be dreaming," Lisni answered with difficulty after a moment, just before she began to stand on her own again. "I thought I heard the craziest thing, but I'm sure I was mistaken. Daydreaming and all that, what a foolish thing to do. I apologize, of course, to all of you. I'll just go into my apartment now."

"Lisni, please," the king said without releasing his hold on her, now clearly even more worried. "Are you saying you don't want to marry me? Don't you want me as much as I want you?"

"Dear Rodick," Lisni murmured, caressing his cheek with her hand as she looked up at him. "If this were real instead of a dream, I'd tell you that I want you more than I want to continue to live. But I've come to realize how bad our marriage would be for you, so I'll simply enjoy the rest of whatever amount of time we have together and then go home to my parents. My love would be a poor thing if it did nothing more than cause you harm."

"Then you do love me," the king responded, intense relief creasing his face with smiles. "That's all I wanted to know, and now that I do I'll take care of everything. And when you see Adair, you can tell her how wrong she is. If I needed your agreement rather than just your father's, I'd probably have a lot of arguing ahead of me. As it is, your sweet and lovely but foolish intention of wanting to protect me won't keep us apart, not once I explain things to Rayl. I'll see you in a little while at dinner."

Mayne watched his father kiss Lisni's hand before turning her toward her apartment with a gentle push, knowing why the king wasn't going with Lisni so they could be alone for a while. All of them had seen the guardsmen escorting a tired-looking courier, and the king needed to know what the courier had to say.

As a matter of fact Mayne also wanted to know what word the courier brought, but none of them found out right away. The king gestured the guardsmen and the courier into following before he headed back to his study, and only once the royal family and the courier were in the study with the door closed was the king ready to listen.

"Get yourself a cup of tea, man, and then sit down," King Rodick said as he settled himself behind his desk again. "If you fall over it will be even longer before I find out what word you bring."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," the courier said with a bow before walking to the tea service. "But I think I

can pour tea and speak at the same time. I did ride hard, but I'm not quite as tired as my mount. General Zellis had his army in place by midnight last night, so he saw no reason to wait for daylight and encourage Duke Elden to use his own men to resist being taken. The general had his men enter from all sides of the house at once, and by two this morning Duke Elden was his prisoner. The duke did try to resist being taken, but in spite of the number of men he had around him he still fell prisoner once the fighting was over."

"Excellent," the king said with a smile that wasn't as nice as the one he'd given Lisni. "Is the general in the process of following the rest of my orders?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," the courier answered from the chair he'd lowered himself into after taking a long swallow of tea. "General Zellis took everyone in the house into custody, then began to go through Duke Elden's private papers. The duke was definitely getting ready to put a subordinate in charge of his duchy, and a list of payments made to certain parties confirmed what he thought he'd be doing instead of tending his duchy himself. The man was a fool for keeping such . complete records."

"It's always better to have a fool as an enemy than a smart man," the king commented. "When can I expect to see the former duke here in the palace?"

"The escort bringing him and his private papers ought to be here by tonight, Sire," the courier said after another swallow of tea. "General Zellis got him started on his way late this morning, once the general was sure he'd found all the paperwork available."

"That should work out well, Father," Mayne observed as his father simply nodded. "The other dukes will be here tomorrow as planned, to visit for a day before the final announcements are made. If you like, you can keep Elden in a cell until everyone is here and has seen his papers. After that no one will wonder why the man is being condemned to whatever kind of death you decide on for him."

"And that's just what I mean to do," the king agreed, flashing Mayne a smile of approval. "Until then, however, I don't want word of what's going on to spread through the palace. Not a word to anyone by anyone, and now it's time to get ready for dinner."

Everyone stood when the king did, and the courier was the first to excuse himself. Mayne hesitated as his brothers also went toward the door, but instead of speaking he just left right after them. He didn't like the idea of not saying anything to Adair, but if word got around about what was going to be done to Elden, the actual audience held tomorrow would have less impact.

And Mayne still wasn't sure how Adair would take the idea of her father's execution. His own father hadn't used the offered opportunity to say he wasn't going to have Elden tortured to death after all, but that really meant nothing. Everyone would know the king's decision when the king announced it, and until then all Mayne could do was fret.

Adair went into lunch the next day still confused over the happenings since dinner the night before. Everyone at the main table seemed deliriously happy except Mayne and her, and even Aleena looked smugly pleased about something. If Adair had wanted to guess about Aleena's mood, she was fairly certain that the other girl was pleased that Dinra was no longer one of the group.

Not that Aleena seemed to have asked anyone why Dinra was no longer with them. The simple fact that Dinra was gone, leaving Aleena as the only "perfect" prospective bride, was apparently all that concerned the girl. If Adair had wondered about Aleena's intelligence before now, there was no longer any question. Aleena didn't have any intelligence.

But Lisni had all but floated into the dining room and to her place at the table, apparently more than just

pleased about something. Adair had wanted to ask Lisni what the something was, but Lisni had disappeared right after dinner and hadn't come to the dining room for breakfast.

"No, she's still not here," Elmini put in when Adair stopped at the table the other girl shared with Nossa to look around the room. "I even went to her apartment and knocked, but there was no answer. If she doesn't show up pretty soon I'm probably going to explode from curiosity."

"Maybe her father arrived early and she's busy talking to him," Nossa suggested with a quick grin for Elmini's comment. "My own father isn't here yet, but once he arrives I'm sure he'll want to see me."

"My father can go whistle," Elmini said, her expression making it clear that she wasn't joking. "I really don't care what he does, and if our thinking was wrong and I'm not chosen as a bride, I'll be out of here before my father can get in the way. What about you, Adair? Think you'll be leaving with me?"

"Or will you be staying with her?" Nossa asked, a faint smile now on her pretty face. "I wish I could stay too, but that's not likely to happen."

"Okay, I can't stand it any longer," Adair admitted out loud as she leaned down toward Nossa. "Elmini, I can't let you hear this, but Nossa needs to know. Do you mind?"

"Not if it makes Nossa feel better," Elmini said at once. "Go ahead and do it, Adair."

Adair nodded and then whispered to Nossa, "Mayne told me last night that he and his brothers somehow got the king to agree to Lethan's marrying you. But not a word about this until the announcement is made. If you tell anyone before then it will probably mean my neck."

"Tell anyone about what?" Nossa asked with a delighted laugh, reaching out to grab Adair's hand in silent thanks. "I couldn't hear anything you said, Adair, but I'd still like you to know that I'll love you for the rest of my life."

"I'm really delighted to hear that, Nossa, but I think I'll get some lunch now," Adair replied with her own laugh as she eased her hand from Nossa's grip. "If I have to see my father at some time today, I'll need all the strength I can muster not to scream in his face."

Elmini smiled and nodded graciously, and as Adair turned away she was certain the other girl knew what she'd told Nossa. But as long as Elmini didn't say anything, Adair would avoid having Mayne think murderous thoughts about her.

Mayne. As Adair let one of the servants fill a plate with her choice of food, her thoughts returned to the night before. Mayne hadn't been so distracted that he hadn't made love to her when they went to bed, but there seemed to be a sadness or quiet desperation inside him. Adair had no idea why he would feel that way, but the situation still made her uneasy. She'd meant to question him this morning, and when she found him gone when she woke up, the uneasiness had gotten worse.

Adair and her friends were just finishing a final cup of tea before leaving the dining room when one of the king's people appeared to announce a special audience that everyone was requested to attend. A buzz of commenting started as everyone in the room got up to go to the throne room, the noise most likely due to the very topic Adair and the other girls had been discussing.

Yesterday the king had had Dinra's father hanged and then had thrown the rest of the family out of the kingdom. Was it any wonder everyone now speculated about who was to be hanged next.?

Mayne hated to leave Adair's bed without making love to her again, but he really had no choice. There were too many things that needed doing today, and his father had wanted them to get an early start.

Right after Mayne shared a private breakfast with his father and brothers, the first of the unpleasantness began. Duke Elden had arrived right on time the night before and had been put in a dungeon cell, but he wasn't the only duke to show up earlier than expected. Duke Harro had also arrived rather late, probably because he preferred to arrive a day early and not miss the arrivals of the other dukes on the following day. Aleena's father was shown into the room once breakfast was over, and once Duke Harro finished his bow the king gestured him to a chair.

"There's something you need to know, Harro, and I wanted you to hear it directly from me," King Rodick said to the tall, handsome, but rather serious man. "I'm afraid that your daughter Aleena won't be marrying one of my sons after all."

"May I ask why, Your Majesty?" Harro returned, but without the anger or confusion Mayne and his family had been expecting. "I'm not arguing the decision, you understand. I'm just curious."

"There's no way to put this nicely, my friend," King Rodick said after something of a hesitation. "Aleena is a very pretty girl, but I'm afraid that's all my sons find her to be. The wife of a prince needs to be . more."

"In other words, there's nothing in her head but air," Harro said, his expression now drawn as he nodded woodenly. "It seems that your sons are wiser than I was at their age, Sire. When Aleena's mother was offered to me in marriage, I agreed at once. My wife is one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen, but her . mental lacks have been passed on to every child she's given me. In another year or so I'm going to have to consider acknowledging a son I fathered just before I married. He's a young man now and working in my house very closely with me - and has three times the intelligence of either of my legitimate sons."

Mayne had exchanged disturbed glances with his brothers at that, but all their father seemed to be was sympathetic.

"If doing that becomes your decision, come to me and we'll make the announcement together," King Rodick told the desolate man. "We really must protect our people as best we can, even when doing so is personally painful. You're a good and loyal man, Harro, and I'm proud to have you as a member of my nobility. If you like, you may take your daughter and return home after the special audience this afternoon."

"Special audience, Your Majesty?" Harro echoed, and a weight seemed to have been lifted from his shoulders. "May I ask what the audience involves?"

"It involves a really serious matter, Harro," the king answered with nothing showing on his face or in his voice. "You and my other dukes will be shown certain papers just before the audience, papers that will let you know exactly what's going on. Until then, you're excused."

"Yes, Your Majesty, of course," Duke Harro said as he stood and bowed, accepting the dismissal by quickly leaving the room.

"Harro was afraid I'd insist that he name one of his legitimate sons as his heir," the king said once the door was closed behind the duke. "Since I remember the two boys from having seen them a number of times while they were growing up, there's no chance at all that I'd insist on one of them with another, more capable candidate available."

"The two are nice enough, but they always look lost in even the easiest situations," Lethan put in, his headshake slow and sad. "Simply coping with everyday problems is usually beyond them, and I remember wondering how either of them would be able to take over the duchy and run it properly."

"They couldn't without a keeper, and I thank the gods that Harro was indiscreet in his youth," the king said as he got to his feet. "Now we have other things to do, and we'd better be about them. The rest of my dukes ought to be here somewhere around lunchtime, and I intend to be ready to greet them properly."

Mayne and his brothers also stood, then followed their father out of the room. At one point Mayne had very much wanted to talk to Adair about what would be happening, but then he'd changed his mind. Knowing what would happen in advance would just make the time harder for Adair, and that was the last thing he wanted to do. All he really wanted was to hold her close forever, but he knew beyond doubt that that would not be happening without more trouble than he currently had the heart to think about.

Adair walked into the throne room with Elmini and Nossa, bothered by the way everyone fell silent as they entered the room. The king already sat on his throne with his sons ranged in a line to the right, but none of them were looking at the new arrivals. The king spoke quietly to the four men standing to the left of his throne, all of them very much on the grim side, and the three princes paid attention to what was being said.

"It looks like your father hasn't gotten here yet, Adair," Elmini commented in a very soft voice once they stopped in the middle of the crowd. "But it also looks like they're getting ready to start, so either your father will be here any second or he'll miss the audience entirely."

The idea of missing her father entirely didn't disturb Adair, not when she was already bothered by whatever was about to happen. She would have preferred to stay in the middle of the crowd, ignored and anonymous, but the people in front of her and the other girls turned to see them. As soon as that happened they were bowed to and urged forward, again and again, until they stood very close to the steps leading up to the throne dais.

"Why do I have the feeling that we've just been placed as protection for all those gracious people we passed to hide behind?" Nossa asked Adair and Elmini very softly. "If I'm seeing the matter in the wrong light, please do feel free to correct me."

"Wish I could, but unfortunately I agree with you," Elmini responded in a whisper, smiling wryly. "None of those behind us want to be seen and remembered, I think, and that's why they were nice enough to let us pass them."

Adair was about to add her own agreement, but that was when the king gestured to some guardsmen standing in front of a door to the left of the room. The guardsmen drew their swords before turning to open the door, and then four chained men were dragged into the room. The first two men staggered, obviously having been put to the question, but the last two -

"By the gods, Adair, that's your father!" Nossa gasped softly as the four were dragged through the muttering crowd to the foot of the stairs not far from where Adair and the other two girls stood.

If Adair could have spoken, she would have mentioned that the man right in front of her father was Zinder, her father's personal bodyguard. Zinder looked very much the worse for wear, but not because he'd been tortured. He must have tried to protect his master and had been knocked aside rather than killed.

"Elden, no longer a duke of this realm, you come before us in the chains you've more than earned," King Rodick said suddenly in a loud, grimly furious voice. "Do you have any idea what your fate will be now that your perfidy has been uncovered?"

"Your Majesty, I have no idea what you mean," Adair's father responded smoothly, his attitude saying he

wasn't really standing filthy and in chains. "If anything terrible was done, it certainly wasn't done with my knowledge and complicity. Zinder, have you really betrayed my trust and angered the king?"

Zinder turned slowly to stare at his master with a frown, fear in the man's dark eyes as he realized he was about to be thrown to the wolves, but the throwing wasn't allowed to happen.

"Stop wasting our time, Elden," the king growled, even more angry now. "It wasn't your man behind the plot, it was no one but you. You maneuvered my eldest son into signing a marriage contract, and then you tried to have my other sons killed. Once Mayne was declared my heir by being the only survivor, I would then have been assassinated as well. Once Mayne was crowned he would have followed the rest of us, leaving you to come and help your widowed daughter run the kingdom. It was a stupid idea that would never have worked, but you tried it anyway."

"If it's such a stupid, useless idea, what's all the fuss about?" Adair's father all but snapped, obviously having trouble holding his temper. "I'm completely innocent of those charges, but even if I weren't then all I'd deserve would be a slap on the wrist. What more would you do to someone whose pitiful idea had no chance to work?"

"You really are a fool," the king ground out, staring at the object of his anger with a lowering glare. "We've all seen the proof of your treason in your own handwriting, so your guilt is no longer in doubt. The point you seem to be missing entirely is that you tried to have my sons killed! Are you too stupid to understand that the penalty for what you did is to be tortured to death slowly, preferably for a week or more?"

"You - can't possibly do that to me," Adair heard her father mutter, finally distracted from his anger over having had his private papers made public. "It wasn't me who tried to kill your sons, so I can't be subject to the penalty. You can only do that to the men who actually tried to - "

"Fool!" the king bellowed, cutting off the overly reasonable explanation Adair's father was in the middle of. "You're the one behind the attempts, so you're the one who pays the price! But I owe a member of your family a reward, so I'm going to modify the sentence just a little. Your daughter Adair is the one who saved the lives of my sons twice, ruining the best chances your plan had to work, so I'll leave it up to her whether you're tortured for the entire week or only for a day or two. Take him back to his cell now."

"No!" Adair's father screamed, suddenly staring at her with all the hatred in the world. "You ruined everything, you little bitch! I should never have allowed you the privilege of living in my house! If I'd had any other daughters to fit into my plans I would have had you killed! You unnatural slut! I hate you! I hate you! I hate -"

The ranting cut off only when the door Adair's father was dragged through had been closed, but Adair felt too numb to react in any way at all. Her mind had stopped dead, all thoughts absent, and she barely noticed when Mayne used the help of Elmini and Nossa to head her out of the room through a very thick silence.

The walk to her apartment went by in a dream for Adair, and the next thing she knew she was seated in a chair and she and Mayne were alone. He'd gotten a small glass of wine from somewhere, and helped her drink from the glass while his free arm circled her shoulders. After two or three sips Adair's mind began to work again, and in spite of the frenzied whirling of her thoughts it seemed as if she'd never seen things so clearly. When Mayne tried to get her to drink even more of the wine she pushed it away, then got to her feet.

"I'll expect the horse and the gold you promised me to be ready first thing in the morning," Adair said as she headed for the sideboard and the tea service without even glancing at Mayne. "Tonight I'll be locking

my doors, so don't waste your time trying to join me again. Right now I'd appreciate being left alone."

"Just like that?" Mayne said from behind her, the words about as far from calm as it's possible to get without actual shouting being involved. "Suddenly everything has changed and you're leaving? Have you very conveniently forgotten about our deal? There are still a couple of days left until the end of the week."

"I think the fact that you lied to me ends that deal right now," Adair said, turning from the sideboard with a full cup to look straight at him. She'd expected his objection, of course, and was completely ready for it. "I don't like people who lie and sneak around behind my back, which means I don't like you. If my father wasn't the lowest creature I've ever come across, I'd be tempted to say you were two of a kind."

"You think I lied?" he returned at once, taking one step toward her. "It so happens I've been very careful not to lie to you, so your objection doesn't hold water. You can't claim I lied when I didn't."

"Is that so?" Adair countered, hating the anguish she could see in his eyes just behind the anger. "Lying doesn't just mean telling an untruth. The term also covers holding back on something that the person you're talking to doesn't know about. Tell me you didn't sign marriage contracts with my father even before we left his house."

"I had no choice about keeping that to myself, but it still makes no difference," he came back after a short but awkward hesitation. "Our deal was that I'd cancel any contracts there might be at the end of the week, which covers the point completely. That just leaves the fact that it isn't the end of the week yet."

"Mayne, I'm leaving," Adair stated, fighting to show nothing but calm and unwavering decision. "If you force me to it I will stay the extra days, trying to forget that this is where my father is being tortured to death. But I refuse to say anything one way or another about the sentence your father imposed. I'd appreciate it if you'd tell him that for me."

He parted his lips to say something else, changed his mind, then nodded once before turning and striding out of the apartment. As soon as the door closed Adair put down the untouched cup of tea and ran to her bedchamber. She felt as if she were being torn apart by wild animals, but having that done to her would actually have been a rather large kindness. Wild animals would have killed her, but this other kind of tearing would give her pain forever.

Adair wasn't used to wishing she could cry, but as she let herself fold to the floor at the foot of the bed she knew that tears would have helped even if only a little. Somewhere deep inside she'd known that her father would end up destroying her life completely, and now that he'd actually done it she couldn't even pretend to be surprised. She'd wanted nothing more to do with the man responsible for her birth, but now she would be tied to him forever.

With her cheek to the carpeting, Adair found that tears already trickled down her cheeks. What a fool she'd been to think there was any chance at all of her making a life with Mayne, double a fool for letting herself fall in love with him. The pain inside was so great that she moaned and curled up in a ball even as the crying grew harder and wilder, but nothing helped. Just as nothing would ever help to stop the pain, the same nothing that was left in her life.

But suddenly Mayne was there beside her, pulling her into his arms and holding her so tight that she almost couldn't breathe. She hadn't wanted him to see the tears, hadn't wanted to see him again at all, but all she found it possible to do was cling to him as she cried. Her heart had broken into a million pieces, and the shards were cutting her up so badly that she wished she could die.

But she didn't die, and didn't even cry all that much longer. The sobbing ended first, then the tears, and after that she was finally able to pull away and sit alone.

"I'd ask why you were crying, but I think I already know," Mayne said, his hand coming to smooth her hair just once before he withdrew the hand again. "I apologize for taking so long to realize just how strong you actually are."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Adair said without looking at him, her voice rough and uneven. "And I thought I asked you to leave and not come back."

"Yes, you did ask that, but not for the reason you claimed," he said, his own voice calm now. "I was half way down the hall before I realized that you were just using my 'lying' as an excuse. You even tried to insult me to make the claim sound better, but you couldn't force yourself to do it properly. You don't hate me, Adair, you love me, and that's why you want to leave."

Rather than say anything Adair closed her eyes, mostly because she couldn't think of anything to say. All she could do was pray that he didn't really understand, but the gods, as usual, had turned a deaf ear.

"You're now the daughter of a traitor," Mayne went on, making Adair feel even worse. "Everyone in the palace knows about it, and it won't be long before word spreads to everyone in the kingdom. You decided that the last thing I need is to be married to a woman like that, a woman people might whisper about behind their hands, so you made up your mind to leave me. You're doing it for me."

Adair thought about starting to cry again, but she seemed to have run out of tears.

"You sound as if you think a particular reason changes something," she said, still not looking at him. "The deal we made was that if I wanted to leave you would let me go. I do want to leave so you have to let me do it."

"Otherwise I break my word," he said, and Adair could almost see him nodding. "You think you have me where you want me, but you're wrong about that. I said I'd release you at the end of the week, but I never said which week. The week I had in mind is about twenty or thirty years from now, and your not specifying a week makes my choice valid. My word is still intact, and you're not going anywhere."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard," Adair stated, refusing to feel any part of the uncalled-for elation trying to fill her. "You specifically said the end of this week, something you may have conveniently forgotten but I haven't. And if you don't mind looking like a fool in front of everyone, I do. Only a fool would insist on having someone like me as his wife - or being the wife of that fool - and everyone in the palace would know it."

"That's it," Mayne growled, the words almost letting Adair feel the flare of anger that seemed to take him over. "You're stubborn enough to stick to that, but I won't have it. Let's see if we can't dent some of that stubbornness that you use like armor and get rid of it that way."

Mayne sat beside her on the floor, and the next moment he'd grabbed her and pulled her across his lap. Adair choked down a gasp and tried to fight free, but that proved to be impossible, just as impossible as keeping him from taking down her tights and drawers and holding her hands out of the way.

"If you're wondering why you're getting this spanking, the answer is simple," Mayne said as he began to smack her bottom really hard. "To begin with, you forced me to leave this apartment earlier by pretending you were bothered by the thought of what's going to be done to your father. I'm willing to bet that you think your father deserves whatever is done to him, and you only used that image to chase me away."

Adair probably wouldn't have answered his charge even if they were still just talking. Right now the way his hand kept hitting her seat over and over left her with the ability to do nothing more than fight not to

yell.

"In the second place, you keep lying to me," Mayne went on, the anger in his voice mirroring the strength in his hand and arm. "You know you don't care what other people think of you, so it's only me you're concerned about. You love me enough to leave me for my own good, even if doing it ruins your life forever."

It hadn't taken long for Adair's bottom to start aching and throbbing, but that wasn't what brought the tears back to her eyes. She did love Mayne that much even if she hated to admit it to anyone including herself, and being faced again with the idea of losing him forever brought back the sobbing.

And that was when Mayne pulled her to her knees beside him and folded her in his arms. Even an aching bottom couldn't change how incredibly good it felt to have him hold her like this, which made her feel even worse.

"Listen to me, love, and believe what I say," Mayne murmured as soon as her sobbing eased up a little. "There won't be any trouble for me having you as my wife, not when my father has already started to give you the reward you deserve for saving my brothers' lives. Didn't you hear what he said in the throne room?"

Adair shook her head against his chest, having no idea what he meant.

"My father pointed out to everyone that you were the one who ruined your father's plans," Mayne said, one hand stroking her hair gently. "At first I thought he did it to dig the knife deeper into the former Duke Elden, but that was only a by-product, so to speak. What my father actually did was point out how loyal to the crown you are, so loyal that you stood against your own father. And so loyal that he trusted you to help in the punishment of a traitor. But don't worry about that part. Unless you really do want to get involved in the decision, he won't be expecting a recommendation from you."

Adair lay very still in his arms for a moment, trying to decide if what Mayne had said was true. Could that really be the reward the king had found to give her, that her life would be kept from ruin after all?

"And there's one more thing," Mayne said, lifting her off his chest so that he could see her face. "First thing tomorrow I'm going to have new marriage contracts prepared, contracts that will require your signature. That way our marriage won't be based on a traitor's plotting, and what happens in your life won't be based on someone else's decision. It came to me that this is the best wedding gift I can give you."

One small part of Adair wanted to gasp in shock, but the rest of her just smiled through the wetness of tears with the knowledge that Mayne's doing something like this was no surprise. It was the reason she'd fallen so deeply in love with him so quickly, that her happiness meant as much to him as his did to her. She reached out to touch his cheek gently, and once she did he took her hand in both of his.

"In another few days there will be wedding ceremonies for Lethan and Nossa, Nallis and Elmini, and my father and Lisni," he said with his own smile. "How about you and me making it a clean sweep?"

"On one condition," Adair said, using the back of her hand to wipe away some of the tears. "The next time we have an argument, I get to spank you."

"Let's discuss that after we get into bed," Mayne countered with a grin as he pulled her into his arms again. "It's just possible I may be able to talk you out of the condition, so let's try it and see."

And then they were kissing, each with their arms wrapped around the other. With the condition or

without it, Adair knew that the life they were going to share would be the best possible. It looked like the gods were listening after all.