

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

BronzeQuest



Katherine Kingston

BRONZEQUEST

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GLIMMER QUEST:

BRONZEQUEST

Katherine Kingston

Chapter One

In another time and place a king ruled a small but prosperous kingdom called Serendonia.

It was a delightful place, full of happy people who enjoyed a comfortable existence. They worked hard, but the land rewarded their labor with plentiful harvests. Animal stock provided eggs, milk and meat in abundance. A wide variety of vegetables and fruits thrived.

All was well in Serendonia, until the day King Warren had a nasty mishap while helping with the shearing of the sheep. Kings don't normally spend much time in such humble tasks, but King Warren liked to help out where he could, since his very small, placid kingdom didn't require much work to keep it running. And while he was denuding a ram, the blade slipped and sliced an ugly, deep wound in his thigh.

The local healer came to tend him. She cleaned the injury as best she could, sewed it up, packed it with healing herbs and then she said a few prayers over it.

Despite her best efforts, the wound refused to heal. Though it did not become morbid, the injury refused to close completely. The king bled constantly. He grew weak and was in constant pain. His family called in sorcerers who worked spell after spell, but nothing helped.

As though in sympathy, the land itself became ill as well. The rain refused to fall. Streams dried up, plants withered, animals died and harvests grew thinner.

The king worried and fretted. His own discomfort he could bear, but to see his people suffering from hunger and malaise pained him beyond bearing. Since he could no longer help with the more active tasks, he spent his time in the library, searching for an answer to his problem.

When they could, one or the other of his three adult, unmarried children helped him. None of them were there the day he finally found the answer he sought.

It was no easy answer. He had to think long and hard about what he'd learned before he finally called his children together.

* * * * *

Prince John's eyes stung where sweat dripped into them. His arm ached from wielding the sword for the last hour without stop. His head ached, too, but he ignored the pain, centering his concentration on his sparring partner.

He could hardly complain, since he'd insisted on using a heavier bastard sword that morning. If it pushed his muscles a bit harder, that was all to the good.

Garrett, the weapons master and his current opponent, dropped his right arm to hip level, his own sword held loose but level, then abruptly drove it upward toward him.

John knew how to answer, though exhaustion and aching muscles made it easier to recognize the opening than to execute the proper response. Still, he feinted down toward his opponent's left, backed up a step and twirled right on the ball of his foot. He did a complete circle with sword outstretched, letting its weight carry him. Bringing his left hand up to reinforce his grip, he parried Garrett's thrust with the flat of his sword. It crashed against the man's blade with enough force to knock it out of his hand.

The sword flew across the yard and clanged into the wooden wall of the practice field. A page and squire who'd been watching from there scrambled out of the way.

John sighed and lowered his sword. He hadn't done it fast enough. If that had been a real combat, he'd be dead now. "Blast it, you slowed down."

Garrett ignored the sword and the prince's irritation. "Well done, Your Highness," he said. "You've made great progress this year."

He'd made progress, yes. Done well that day, no. "You slowed your approach," John accused. "I wouldn't have succeeded if you hadn't." He was the king's only son and everyone praised and applauded him, no matter how mediocre his efforts. He worked hard, but the trainers didn't demand the same level of effort and practice from him that they did from others.

Garrett let some irritation of his own show. "Your Highness, you were working with a heavier sword than you're used to. I worked you until I knew you were tired. And still you executed the turn and parry with excellent form." He glanced toward the sun. "Off to your quarters now and a soak in the tub. You've earned it."

John shook his head and sighed, letting go his irritation.

Though he attempted to demand more of himself, he had to fight a tendency to laziness and the efforts of the trainers to shelter him and ensure he wasn't harmed. They panicked over every bruise or splinter he acquired. He understood why Garrett, especially, took great care to ensure he wasn't injured, but it annoyed him nonetheless. It annoyed him even more that he couldn't fault the man or take him to task for it.

He went off to bathe and don clean clothes, wondering if he would ever become half as good as some of the men he sparred with in training. He won more of his matches because others yielded to his rank rather than truly being defeated by him. It galled, to win that way. He wanted to be worthy of the praise they already heaped on him, and even more. Several times he'd asked that no concessions be made to his rank. His instructors said they would try, but they feared the repercussions of allowing him to be harmed more than they wanted to please him.

As he soaked in the tub, he relaxed into his favorite fantasy.

He'd had a long, hard, fierce battle with the dragon, but the creature now lay dead at his feet, his lance embedded in its throat.

Ignoring the enormous body and the sting of countless cuts inflicted by its claws, he turned away. A loud sob drew his attention to the princess, who sagged against the pole where she'd been bound as sacrifice to the dragon. She thanked him over and over as he slashed at the rope that held her in place.

She fell into his arms when the last of the binding yielded to his knife. He held her for a few minutes, until her violent trembling calmed down. As they set off for the road that led back down the mountain, they passed the dragon's body again. The princess shuddered and looked away, but John couldn't help studying it.

A twinge of sorrow assailed him. It had been an evil scourge, demanding that princesses be regularly sacrificed to slake its appetite for human flesh of the highest quality and tenderness. Still, its immense size, the sleek, graceful lines of its body and the glittering scales had made it a magnificent creature.

They hadn't gone far before he realized that neither of them had the strength to make it all the way down the mountain before dark. He recalled a cabin that sat by the side of the road and insisted they stop there for the night when they reached it. The princess didn't object.

He had enough food in his pack for both of them for that night and the next morning. They lit torches, washed with some water he got from a nearby stream, ate and then she helped him stitch a couple of deep cuts and bandage the others.

"You're so brave, my lord," she said as she sutured a nasty rip across his arm. "And strong. I'm sorry to hurt you with this."

"It's nothing," he answered, brushing aside the pain.

When she finished bandaging him, he reached up to take her arm. "Why did you run away from your attendants, when you'd been warned those who fear the dragon might find and capture you?"

She shrugged. "The dragon hadn't been seen in a while so I thought it would be safe. I wanted to see the valley."

"I hope you've learned your lesson, but just in case, I'm going to reinforce it."

"What – ?" She stopped abruptly when he sat on the side of the bed and pulled her face down across his knees, but began protesting again. "What are you doing, my lord?"

"Reinforcing the lesson about heeding others' warnings." He slapped a hand to her upturned bottom. She jumped and squealed and he wound his other arm around her waist to hold her in place.

She continued to squeal and squirm and protest his unfairness and cruelty while he spanked her thoroughly. It was hardly a cruel or harsh punishment since her clothes absorbed most of the force of his hand. But it had an effect. He knew it when she went from ordering him to stop and berating for his cruelty to asking him to stop and saying she was sorry for her recklessness.

His wounded arm ached and his hand had begun to sting by that point as well, so he stopped and flipped her over, pulling her against his chest. She wound her arms around his chest, holding herself close to him, and cried for a while.

When she'd calmed down some, he gently tipped up her head so he could look at her.

"I'm sorry, my lord," she said. "For everything. You must think me a spoiled child."

"Not a child at all." He stared at her face for a moment, taking in the tear-washed blue eyes, the flawless, creamy skin, and the ripe pink lips that begged for his kiss. He leaned down toward her and planted his mouth over hers...

A knock sounded at the door to his chambers, jarring him out of the daydream. Just when he was getting to the good part, too. He cursed and hoped it would be some bit of household business he could safely ignore.

His man answered and spoke quietly to the person there before coming back to him.

"Your Highness!"

John sighed. "Yes, Conrad. What is it?"

"Your Highness. His Majesty, your father, summons you to his presence."

A shaft of fear shot through him, replacing his annoyance. "Is His Majesty unwell?"

"No, Your Highness. No worse than ever."

John rinsed the last of the soap from his body and hair and climbed out of the tub. He dressed, combed out his shoulder-length blond hair and hastily tied it back, before he set out for his father's private chambers.

Along the way, he encountered both of his sisters. Each looked worried.

"You were summoned, as well?" Riva, his older sister, asked.

"Yes," John answered.

"Is he worse?" Worry pulled his younger sister Lia's pretty face into a frown.

"I was told no," Riva answered. "I shouldn't think he would deteriorate so quickly in any case. Just this morning when I talked with him, he seemed no worse than before."

"I wonder why he would summon all three of us at once, then," John said.

"We'll soon learn." Upon arriving at the chamber door, Riva knocked and they were admitted by a man-at-arms.

The three of them bowed to the man who held himself straight and proud in the chair near the bed. Each time John saw him in that chair, he rejoiced. He'd worked closely with the carpenter to build the chair in the best way possible to increase his father's comfort. He'd recruited several seamstresses to add pillows to soften its seat and back. It was little enough he could do to help, but at least he'd been able to provide a way his father could sit without increasing his pain.

"Riva, John, Lia," he said, smiling at each in turn. "My thanks for being so prompt. Do come here, and sit down, my dears."

A series of chairs lined a wall of the room. Since the king's injury, he often conducted the business of state in this chamber.

"Are you well, Father?" Riva asked. She and Lia both approached him and kissed his forehead before taking their seats, while John bowed and smiled.

"No better than I've been for the last months," he admitted. "But no worse, either." He paused and looked down at a book on the desk nearby. "I think I may have found an answer for this, however."

"An answer?" Lia asked. "Something that might cure you, sir?"

"Yes," he said. His fond smile faded quickly. "I fear it means I must ask each of you to do a great favor for me."

"You know you have but to ask, Father," Riva said. John echoed the sentiment, as did Lia.

A corner of his mouth crooked up again. "Be not so quick to say so, my dears. It would be no small thing demanded of each of you should you choose to undertake this venture."

"Do tell us what is needed," Riva begged.

"I've been reading the legends from our world and many other parallel worlds." The king paused and sighed. "There's little else I can do, trapped here by this." He patted the mound of bandages on his thigh, then turned brisk again, dismissing his moment of despair.

"I've found a legend I think may provide an answer. It's from a parallel world, but one that overlaps ours in many areas. Three powerful objects are hidden within our worlds, but in times of need, strong people can claim them for healing purposes."

He looked at each one of them. "My reading leads me to believe that if we can retrieve all three objects and bring them here, they may be able to heal this, and repair the damage to our lands, as well."

John met Riva's glance and read the resolve in her eyes. He nodded to her and they both looked at Lia, who gave the same answer.

Riva spoke for all three of them when she said, "We will retrieve those objects for you, Father."

He gave them a sad smile. "No, be not so quick to promise, my love. Though I do thank you for it. There is more to the legend than I've yet told you. It's not so easy to find or claim these objects. The tales speak of difficult journeys, with many obstacles and trials along the way. And even when the seeker finds his goal, there are tests within tests yet to be passed. Many who seek these objects fail, and often failure brings death. I would have you think very carefully before you offer to do this. In truth, I would be happier if you could suggest others you would trust to do this for us." He stopped to draw a long breath. "I fear, though, my reading of the tales indicates those who have the most reason to want or need those objects for purely unselfish reasons are most likely to succeed. The person to claim these things must be pure of heart, courageous, loving, loyal and honorable."

His expression turned sad and strained. "I have debated long whether to tell you of this possibility. It burns my heart to think of anyone undertaking these quests. The danger is great. The objects—three of them—are in different locations, guarded by strong wards, and each must be retrieved by a different individual, so no one person may undertake all three quests. I truly hope each of you can find someone worthy for this task, though I know in truth you three are closer to the ideals than any others I know."

The three of them looked at each other again. "We can and will do this thing, Father," Riva answered. "We are your daughters and son. Who else has the power we've got from you, or the strength of love?"

Lines of doubt and unhappiness deepened in his face. "I know not, but I would prefer you found others, people you trust, to do this."

John knew there wasn't anyone who would be better suited to the task than himself. They had better swordsmen, better horsemen, better fighters in the kingdom. But many had other interests or truly cared only for the gold they earned. Some were too old, some had more interest in drinking and wenching than in fighting. None of them had the burning need to find a cure for their father's problem that they had.

"We'll try to find people we trust to do this," she said.

John knew by her tone that she saw the situation just as he did.

Chapter Two

Ten weeks later...

"Would you like to play dungeon keeper and prisoner again, Your Highness?" the girl asked slyly.

John gently pushed away the maid. "Not today, Loris. I've too much else on my mind." He gave her a light smack on the bottom, intended to show he still wanted her and wouldn't do anything about it right then.

The girl giggled and moved back toward him. "You surely haven't that much to do." She brought her hand to her mouth, wet her finger with her tongue and pressed it to his lips. He licked at it. She tasted like honey and spice.

"Not so much to do, but much to think on." Actually, his thoughts already encompassed that lush, ripe body of hers, the breasts that swung freely under her loose shirt and the nice rounded ass that bounced delightfully under his palm. Tendrils of curling, dark hair peeked charmingly from beneath her cap. The heat poured into his groin, making his cock stiffen.

She sensed his weakening resolve and began to run her finger teasingly across his lips. "You're setting out on a long journey tomorrow. I won't see you again for ages. Most likely you'll bring back a lady for your wife, as your sister brought back a husband from her journey." Her ripe mouth formed an irresistible pout. "Your Highness, if you have any soft feelings for me, grant me the boon of one last time."

How could a man resist such a plea? Surely it would take a harder heart than his. "You're naughty, Loris, to tempt me thus."

"Aye, my prince." Her eyes glowed with mischief and invitation. "Will you punish me for it?" She said it with such longing he'd be a cad to resist.

He gave in. He had the time. Little remained to do, and his thoughts made him uncomfortable when he dwelled too long on what was to come. "I think I must. Come here."

Instead, she turned and ran, heading for an unused guestroom nearby, knowing full well he'd chase after her. Her soft slippers made no sound on the stone-flagged floor of the empty corridor, but they gave her little purchase either. His boots clacked noisily as he caught up within a few paces. He dragged her into his arms, and pulled her back into the room. He pushed the door closed behind them and tugged her over to the bed. She made only token resistance, wiggling and giggling, but exerting no real force to break out of his hold.

He leaned down to claim her lips. She waved her head from side to side, letting his lips slide over hers with each pass. Brief sips of her sweet taste intoxicated him, made

his blood spark and burn. He tangled a hand in her hair to hold her and she stilled. He plundered her hot, spicy mouth, drilling through her lips with his tongue. She sobbed in the back of her throat and melted against him, her body soft and warm.

Her hands pushed under his tunic and shirt and caressed the muscles of his chest, fingers tangling in the fine hair there. She pinched his nipples with her fingernails, drawing a gasp from him.

He let go her hair and began to work on the tapes that held her gown in place over her shift. Finally the fabric released. He pushed it from her shoulders and worked on the tapes fastening the shift. The linen slid down her body with a sensuous hiss when he worked it loose.

Her delightful curves pleased his eyes and made his cock stiffen painfully against his breeches. Succulent breasts filled his palms. She squealed in surprise and delight when he tweaked the sensitive nipples. The perfume of her arousal filled the room with its heady fragrance.

She moaned loudly when he bent down to taste her nipples. He stroked the satiny skin of her breasts with his tongue. The two of them became a bit tangled as she struggled to remove his tunic and shirt, but they sorted it out. He tossed the garments aside while she unlaced his breeches. His cock sprang free, gloriously ready for her.

Loris reached for it, but he stopped her with a hand on her wrist.

"We have business to attend to first."

She looked up at him. Though she feigned fear, she could hardly suppress a wicked grin.

He sat on the side of the bed and pulled her across his knees, situating her so she balanced on his thighs with her rear end in the air. She bounced at the first slap and squealed. His cock pressed into her abdomen, straining desperately for what it couldn't have, the heat and sweet slickness of her.

A series of noisy smacks made her bottom turn faintly pink and had her bouncing. She always claimed it didn't hurt her, but it did serve to arouse her to an astonishing degree. He ran his fingers down the crack of her derriere and along the soft petals of her quim. She was wet, almost dripping with her desire. He searched the warm, moist folds of her slit and found her pleasure bud. Loris squirmed harder and let out soft mews of pleasure as he stroked the flesh. Her noises made him hotter yet. Knowing he gave her such joy fed his soul and put more pressure on his cock. He had to grit his teeth to keep from exploding when she wriggled against him.

He flipped her over and laid her back on the bed, parted her legs and leaned down to run his tongue along her crack and her pearl.

"My lord," she moaned aloud again and again as he licked at her bud and then drew it into his mouth and sucked on it. Her woman's flesh tasted tart and sweet at the same time.

She wriggled harder, then less as she tensed with the approach of fulfillment. He stroked her thighs as he lapped at her and tongued her pearl. Her body grew stiffer and her breathing faster and louder. She moaned a few times, desperate, appealing pleas.

The tension broke with a jolt as spasms of pleasure and release convulsed her. She let out a long, low scream of joy. John moved, crawling across the bed to lay beside her. He held her as she jumped and shivered each time a fresh wave engulfed her.

He adjusted his position next to her when the spasms finally wore off. A tear slid from the corner of her eye, and he wiped it off her temple. "Was it so terrible as that, my dear?" he asked.

"It was more wonderful than I can say," she told him and pulled his head down to her so she could kiss him. She spread her legs. "You may come into me this time, if you wish, Your Highness."

"No, Loris. I'll leave you no reminders or baggage that might ruin your life."

"I don't know that I should mind so much," she admitted.

"But I would."

She nodded, accepting his resolve, and reached for his cock with her small hand. Work-roughened fingers slid along its hard length, and ragged shards of pleasure crashed through him. He groaned and lay back, letting her work his cock. Clever hands found all the most sensitive places, sliding down, now and again, to his balls, cupping them gently and squeezing carefully.

In just a short time, the tension of impending explosion gathered, making him hard, hot and full. He could scarcely draw enough breath, nor had he voice enough to do more than give a hoarse shout as the seed spilled from him, spurting over her hand and onto his belly. She continued to work him until he was completely spent.

Afterward they lay together for a bit, enjoying the peace and fulfillment, but it couldn't last long. They each had duties to attend to. He cleaned himself with a cloth and helped her back into her clothes before dressing himself.

She threw herself into his arms. More tears leaked from her eyes, not from joy this time.

"You leave tomorrow and my heart tells me you'll return with a lady. I've always known you were not for me, but you've been a good friend, and I'll miss you, Your Highness. I shall not be here when you return, but I hope you'll always think well of me."

Concern lanced into him. She was so sweet and lovely, and he liked her a great deal. It burned to think of her struggling or miserable somewhere well away where he could not help her.

"Where will you go?"

"My mother's cousin works for the Duke of Carmara. She has promised me a position there. She also says there are a number of eligible young men for husbands."

"A part of me dislikes that you should go so far. Yet I understand well enough why you would want to do so. I'll give you something to help you get by until you get settled. And you know you'll always have a friend in me. Should you need anything, you have only to let me know of it."

"I know that, Your Highness."

Tears ran in earnest down her face now, and her blue eyes glinted with moisture. She pulled herself away from him, turned sharply and was out the door before he could find the words to stop her.

Just as well. She had more strength than he did, to make their parting so clean and final. He would miss her.

Before she'd been long gone, the facts hit him again. He would leave on the morrow, setting out on the urgent quest for the bronze lance that should help cure his father.

His older sister, Riva, had already returned from her quest, bearing the silver platter that was the first of three magical objects needed to cure his father's wound. He'd never doubted Riva would succeed. She always accomplished anything she set out to do.

He wasn't so confident of his own success and feared failure far more than he would let anyone know. It burned in his gut that he might be the one responsible for his father's continued suffering if he didn't accomplish the part of the task appointed to him. An extra hour of sword practice that afternoon helped take his mind off it for a while, until the toasts at dinner brought it right back to mind.

Riva and Daniel, the husband who'd returned from the quest with her, drank to his success, along with his father and Lia. Their confidence in him added to his state of nerves, though he kept his smile in place and refused to show anything but utter peace and calm. Perhaps no one would notice how little he was able to eat.

Riva sought him out after dinner and called him to speak with her privately. John followed her to her quarters, hoping for some last-minute advice that would ease his way.

"You leave tomorrow on your quest," she told him needlessly. "If you're half as terrified about that as I was, it's churning up your insides."

"I don't believe you were ever so frightened as that," he answered. "You're always so calm and so competent."

Riva smiled at him and shook her head. "I wish it were so. I cover it well, just as you do. But going off to an unknown place, with the promise of hard tests and danger, leaves few untouched and uncaring." She stopped and sighed. "I know you hope I can tell you what to expect, what dangers to avoid and how to proceed to ensure success. I wish I could give you help in that way, but I cannot. Not because I don't want to. But I'm quite sure your tests will not be the same as my tests."

"You've never said much about what happened to you, other than that you were fortunate to have Daniel as a guide." In honesty, John would have to admit Daniel

intimidated him a bit. Riva's husband was strong, handsome, confident and the most accomplished swordsman John had ever seen. He didn't speak often, but when he did, everyone listened and respected his comments. Even Riva, his hardheaded, strong-willed sister, looked up to the man and submitted to him.

Riva nodded and for a moment her expression softened, no doubt thinking about the new husband she so obviously loved and admired, but it quickly faded back into concern. "It was a difficult journey with trials of various sorts. Tests of courage, compassion, restraint, nerve and wisdom. I'm not sure it would be wise for me to tell you the exact nature of those, since yours will surely not be the same. It might do more harm than good to have you expecting one thing and getting another. Know this, though. There will be trials, and some will not be easy. Keep your wits and your courage about you, think about each situation as it arises, and do what your heart and your mind tell you is right. The most honorable solution should always be your answer."

A smile broke across her face as she watched him. "I know your heart and wits, John, and I trust them to carry you through all challenges. You've grown into a man I'm proud to claim as a brother."

John blushed and wondered if she'd feel the same way if she could truly see into him. He felt himself lacking in all the areas she'd named—courage, compassion, restraint, nerve, and wisdom.

He wanted to deny her praise but couldn't without confessing his faults. Instead he answered, "You've changed much yourself, Riva. I've admired you always, you know that, but since you returned, you're...different. Quieter, but in a good way. Not as harsh, yet more confident in many ways."

"The quest does change one. It teaches you much and forces you to confront unpleasant things about yourself. At least in my case, it did. It wasn't easy and at times it was quite painful. But it was worth it. It helped me learn how to become a better person, a person worthy of the happiness I've found with Daniel."

John's stomach lurched. He drew a deep breath. "I fear I don't have your strength or resolution." He hated making that admission, but his courage fled with each word of hers.

"You have it. Perhaps you need this to help you unearth it and learn to live by it."

"I don't have your ability with magic, either."

"You won't need it. My own talent is small and I found little use for it on my quest in any case. What you need for this, you already have inside you."

"I don't know if..." He could barely meet her eyes.

"I won't tell you it will be easy, but having lived with you all our lives, I do know that you have the heart to succeed. One more thing I can tell you. Listen carefully to all advice given to you, especially if it comes from an unexpected or surprising source. Show respect for all, but do not believe that everything is what it seems."

Riva bent forward to kiss his cheek, then stood up. "That's all the help I can give you, save to repeat that I believe you can do this."

He thanked her and left to return to his own quarters, which seemed empty, despite the clutter of packs assembled for the journey, the piles of clothes left, the arms he'd scattered as he tried to decide what to take. He prepared for bed and lay down, hoping sleep would come.

He tossed and turned for a long time, running all sorts of imaginary tests and trials through his head. The journey might be so long he'd be an old man before he found his destination. He might die on the way. Demons might attack. Or wild beasts. He could get lost or fail the tests and die. So many bad outcomes. So few good ones.

Whether what happened next was dream or vision, he couldn't tell.

As he slipped into the half-dozing state that precedes sleep, the shape of a woman formed, materializing against a dark, rough backdrop that might be the mouth of a cave, a black hall or the side of a stone cliff, but almost certainly wasn't the tapestry-hung wall of his room.

She was long and lean, slender, but with full breasts and rounded hips. The only light on the scene came from the figure herself. Pale radiance glowed from her lush, bare, white body. Long, midnight-dark hair rippled with some unfelt breeze, while her eyes, a dark, dark blue, stared straight at him with implacable intensity. Reddish glints shone from the depths of them. Breasts and hips formed perfect, graceful curves that demanded men's worship. She had an uncanny loveliness, but the ferocity of her expression filled him with dread. When her lips curved into a small, cruel smile, it did nothing to soften the terrible visage. Or its wicked beauty. Her small, white teeth all ended in sharp points.

His body reacted immediately, stiffening with longing. A longing he would deny with every particle of his being, had he any choice.

"Come to me," she said, holding shapely white arms out toward him. "You're mine."

He lay on the bed and couldn't retreat, but if he could have pressed himself down into the mattress any harder he would have.

Her body swayed and drifted with fluid grace as she took two steps toward him. "You fear me. Yet your journey will bring you to me."

He wanted to deny it, but the sounds stuck in his throat. This had to be an effort to frighten him into abandoning his quest. Surely.

She drifted closer to him. "We have so much to learn. Let me show you what I have for you." Her voice, low and hoarse, rasped in his ears.

"Who are you?" The words felt dragged out of him. He didn't even know if he spoke them aloud or just in his head.

She heard. "I'm your destiny. I'm what you most want and most fear." She hovered over him. He tried to roll over to avoid her, but his body refused to answer the demand and remained frozen in place, unable to move at all save to breathe and blink.

"I'm your greatest challenge. Pleasure and pain, lady and whore. I'm what you want more than life itself and fear even more."

A pale hand, with long, white fingers, reached forward and touched his face. The feel of it sent a jolt like a lightning bolt through him. The touch burned with a deep, fiery pain, yet it lit his insides with need.

"I'm your dream and your nightmare. The one you long for and the one you dread."

"No." The word came out on a bare wisp of air and lacked conviction.

A smile curved her ripe, red lips. "You say 'no' and mean 'yes'."

He tried to shake his head, to deny it.

"You want me. Will you give yourself to me?"

His mouth refused to shape the words of denial that sprang to his tongue.

She ran pale, cool fingers down his cheek. Fire and ice touched him, drove into him. It burned both hot and cold. The sensation grew until he didn't know if he could bear it without screaming. Yet pleasure, deep and rich, almost brutally strong, mixed in with the pain. She lifted her hand from him and it stopped. He drew in a deep breath. Part of him missed the sensation and wanted more. It fired his blood and sent waves of need racing along his skin. He'd never felt anything remotely like it.

"You want it." She waved her fingers near him, but not touching this time, reached for a fistful of the bedcovers and pulled them down and off him, revealing his nude body. She stared for a long moment at his engorged cock. "You want to resist, but you yearn for it, even as it burns you."

Again he tried to deny it and found himself unable to.

She laughed lightly and the sound rasped against every nerve. "You're mine. From here—" She touched his forehead and shards of pleasure-pain ripped into him. "—to here—" Toes, this time, and he had no idea those useful appendages could feel so much. "—to here."

Her fingers rested lightly on his cock. He drew in a sharp, hard breath as his body turned molten, a huge lava flow of sensation that buried him. Thoughts disappeared. Knowledge blanked out. He was a mass of flame, a blaze consuming him. It set his insides burning with a pain that clawed along his sinews and made him want to writhe to get away from it. Yet at the same time it felt wonderful, better than anything ever had in his life. He tried to scream, but it came out as a long, animal howl.

She laughed lightly. "Your body acknowledges what your spirit refuses to admit."

Her fingers squeezed his cock lightly, almost gently, but it sent a deep, raging fire spearing into him. Before he could think or move, his body spasmed and his seed spurted from it in a release as deep and thorough as ever he'd experienced, though it

had taken only seconds to bring him to it. She stood next to him, watching dispassionately as the orgasm shook him, transported him, then dropped him with a jolt back into his body.

"You're mine," she repeated. "You're coming to me. And I'll have you." She shimmered oddly for a moment, like a candle flame flickering in a breeze. "You'll free me—if you're the man I hope you are. Let it be so." The last sounded almost like a prayer.

The light glowing from her body dimmed. She faded out, blending into the darkness, until nothing remained.

John remained paralyzed for a long time afterward, save for the shaking he couldn't control. He had no idea what had just happened. If it were a dream, he'd never had any like it. He was certainly awake now, and believed he'd been awake the entire time. But what had just visited him? An angel or a demon? He couldn't say. Couldn't guess. Her words suggested his quest would lead her to him. It made him sick with apprehension and shivering with anticipation.

If there were any honorable way to back out of the journey, he would. The paralysis wore off and he rolled over, burying his face in the pillow. The sticky patch on his belly caught against the sheet and dragged it a bit. He couldn't tear his thoughts away from the woman, wondering who and what she was. Eventually, though, exhaustion took over and carried him away into sleep. If he dreamt, he didn't remember it.

Chapter Three

He set off the next morning with a party of two burly bodyguards, their three mounts and two more horses bearing packs. Riva suggested he might have to do at least part of the quest on his own, but his father had insisted on the guards. John was glad for the company, particularly after last night's disturbing dream. Though he hadn't thought it a dream at the time, in retrospect, he believed it must have been. It wouldn't be the first time he thought himself awake while dreaming.

His father and two sisters saw them off and wished him luck. He knew he'd need more of it than they could guess.

He and his small party journeyed for several days, heading generally southwest, which was where the legends said the bronze lance resided. That part of the trip went smoothly, with no worrisome incidents. Most nights they found an inn along the road. Only once did they have to pitch their own camp.

On the fourth day, a band of robbers attacked. It happened so quickly it was over before he was able to make sense of what had just occurred.

Fortunately the attackers were a small group of only four poorly armed men. One bore a sword with a nicked blade, another a long knife that he wielded as if it were a sword, while the other two had makeshift pikes. John's guards moved in front of him, keeping their bodies between him and the brigands. When the robbers closed on them, his guards defeated the swordsman and one of the pikemen in short order. The other two fled, quickly realizing they faced a company more than normally ready for combat.

Though he breathed a sigh of relief when it was over, John still had to swallow a spear of resentment that other people had to fight his battles for him. Even worse, bitter self-knowledge told him he couldn't have defeated the robbers nearly so quickly, if at all.

They traveled more cautiously after that, but encountered no more hostile or desperate strangers. Occasional parties of tinkers, gypsies or others journeying for their own reasons came toward them and passed by peacefully.

Though they inquired of all they met along the way for directions to the lance's storage place, for some time, no one could give them any help. On the fifth day they met a string of carts, strongly guarded and accompanied by a group of well-to-do merchants, heading in the opposite direction. When they inquired of that group, one man knew of the legend.

"'Tis said in Olbary Town, my lord, that the magical lance is hidden in Mt. Reegit, some thirty miles to the west of Olbary. None I know have been to the mountain, but the story is passed down, and one can see the peak from the town. They say it can be an

odd and frightening sight, as often a dark cloud rings the top of the mountain and thunder rumbles down from it."

For the first time, they had an actual destination. John thanked the man and they set off for the town.

Another two days' travel brought them to the town and its best inn, where they arrived in time for dinner. By buying a few rounds of ale for all in the common room, they loosened a few tongues and learned more of Mt. Reegit.

They'd seen the formidable peak looming over the west side of the town as they'd approached, and John had suffered a shiver of dread and longing on viewing it. He watched it for some time. Though he saw none of the dark clouds the traveler had talked of, several times he thought he saw something flying around near its summit. It had to be huge to be visible at such a distance, and he couldn't help but wonder with a sick fear what it might be. Several patrons at the tavern confirmed having heard the legend that placed the bronze lance somewhere on or in that mountain. None of them seemed at all inclined to go after the treasure. They warned the place had a bad reputation. The few travelers who did go there had not returned. It was not easy to get to it, either, as several people confirmed that a formidable, gateless stone wall ringed the base of the mountain.

John had not dreamt of the woman who'd invaded his darkness since he left his father's castle, but she appeared to him again late that night in his room in the inn. He would have thought all the ale he'd consumed would guarantee a quick ease into sleep, and his companions each snored loudly within seconds of lying down on their pallets. But he tossed a few times, seeking comfort in his softer mattress, and found only restless dread. Whether fear of the journey ahead or something else caused it, he didn't know.

As he lay on his back staring into the darkness, she came again, appearing once more as a bare, graceful white phantom that hovered over him.

The smile that lit her face lent it a glimmering beauty, yet it also suggested a hint of cruelty. "So, my prince, you are indeed coming to me. Have you accepted yet that you will be mine?"

Breath almost deserted him, but he managed to force out a bare syllable. "No."

She shrugged with arch sadness. "It will be harder for you if you resist. Give yourself over to me and find so much more."

"I can't." Somehow the words made it past the obstruction in his throat.

"But you're coming to me. Why will you not submit to me?"

"I have...a mission."

"Of course. The lance."

"You'll keep me from it."

She stopped and looked startled for a moment before she laughed gently again, showing her wickedly pointed teeth. "Not so. Not at all so. I can tell you no more of that. Only that I am your destiny and you are mine." She moved closer to him.

He cringed when she bent down, but it didn't stop her from brushing her lips softly across his forehead and down his cheek. Fire lit in his flesh and ran along his veins again. Wicked shards of mixed pain and pleasure shredded his insides. Only fear of waking his companions kept him from crying out aloud. Yet he wanted to reach up and grab her, to bring her hot, moist lips to his own and feel the heart-stopping shock that more intimate contact would bring.

"You'll learn to bear my touch," she said. "Even to welcome it."

He shook his head.

"You think not? You must. You fear me and what I bring you? Even if I tell you it's necessary?"

For a moment he lay still, wanting to deny it. "Coward," he muttered, finally, making the admission and hating himself for voicing it.

She laughed gently and shook her head in denial this time. "You have courage. It simply lacks exercise to strengthen it."

She lay her fingers on his belly and it felt as though hot knives dug in there. Yet his cock sprang to life and something in him welcomed the fire. It burned him as it fed on his cowardice, eating at it.

She smiled, almost as though she knew his thoughts. "You'll learn to welcome my embrace." She slid the tips of her fingers down his abdomen.

"You'll destroy me."

Again she paused. "No. Never."

"You'll hurt me."

Her head tipped a bit to one side. "I'll hurt you. But it won't harm you." She drew a harsh breath. "Can you find any comfort in knowing you'll hurt me far more? And again cause no harm."

"No. I don't wish to hurt anyone."

Her stare turned to a puzzled frown. "You're a prince and will be a king someday. Do you truly believe you can rule well without having to harm some? Will justice not sometimes demand harshness from you?"

"Surely. But the cases are different."

One black eyebrow slid upward, a sharply angled contrast to her pale skin. "Perhaps not so different as you think. But you'll learn. You're coming to me."

"I don't—"

She wrapped her hand around his cock. Lightning bolts swept through him. Flashes and starry bursts of light blazed behind his closed eyelids. A huge shudder—too deep

and strong to allow even a groan to exit—convulsed him. His cock spurted and the fierce pleasure all but drowned him.

“Sleep well, my prince,” she said, just before she faded into the darkness again.

* * * * *

The next morning, John had to struggle to maintain a normal appearance. Both of his guards commented that he didn’t appear to have rested well. He didn’t deny it but attributed it to excitement and anticipation of reaching their destination.

A half-day’s ride brought them close to the base of the mountain. That morning, the dark clouds did indeed ring the top of the peak, hiding it from view. As they approached it, John’s spirits sank. The mountain rose so high, the top of it was far, far above, poking into the sky and the clouds. Would he really be expected to scale that height? It could take weeks of climbing. That was assuming he could even get to it. The wall surrounding it provided a formidable obstacle as well.

It loomed directly ahead of them, blocking their way.

Sunlight shone on an expanse of yellowish stone that formed the barrier they’d been warned about. It rose high above them, at least thirty or forty feet tall, and stretched out on either side as a blank stone face, unbroken as far as they could see by either a door or gate. He doubted any of them could toss a rope with an anchor high enough to let them scale it that way.

The road had twisted away toward another town some miles back, but a rough path, wide enough for the horses and riders to negotiate, led up to the barrier. It stopped right where the wall blocked it. John and his two guards halted and stared up at the barrier. It was even taller than he’d guessed from farther away, eliminating any possibility of climbing over it.

There was no obvious way through, despite the road that continued up to the bottom of it and ended abruptly, cut off by the wall. No hint of gate or door showed on the blank stone face.

“What now, Your Highness?” one of the bodyguards asked.

John stared at the barrier and wondered the same thing himself. “We search for a way through. People surely go in and out, so there must be a gate somewhere.” He mulled that over another moment before he said, “Roger, you head southward until midafternoon. Arvin and I will go northward. At midafternoon, we turn and come back here. With any luck one of us will find a way in.”

Both men agreed. John and Arvin set out northward, riding into increasingly wild and hilly country. The wall remained a solid stone barrier to their right the entire time, while the journey became increasingly difficult. The path they’d followed gradually disappeared, overtaken by brush and even stands of trees and shrubbery high and wide

enough to force them to take wide circuits around them. They persisted until the midafternoon deadline, but found not even a hint of a way through the wall.

John couldn't avoid thinking this might be the shortest quest ever undertaken. As he and Arvin turned and made the return journey to the road, he could only hope Roger had found an entrance.

Roger waited for them where they'd parted earlier. His glum expression killed John's hope quickly. The guard confirmed it when he shook his head and said, "I apologize, Your Highness, but I found no opening or gate, nor entrance of any other kind. As far as I went, the wall remained just as you see here, and just as solid."

John drew a deep breath and reminded himself it didn't behoove a prince to show anger or despair in front of his guards. "It was the same for us."

He studied the road and the wall a while longer. There had to be a way through if someone could actually quest for the lance. The only clue he had was that the main road to the place stopped right here. Perhaps finding the entrance was the first test. Of course, if it required magic to make the entrance show itself, he would have to go find a wizard to do the job or face defeat.

He dismounted and walked toward the wall, followed by the two guards. The barrier looked solid. Blocks of stone fit together tightly, held in place by the weight pressing down from above and by mortar filling the joints. He ran his fingers along the stone, weaving back and forth, starting above his head and going down to his waist. He found no crack or line to indicate an opening, nothing to suggest a way past the barrier.

A glance upward showed no obvious indication of an opening, but when he looked downward, he noticed a section that jutted an inch or so out from the rest of the surface. It started less than eighteen inches above the ground and ran down to the pavement. Closer study showed another line running horizontally along a seam of stones for about two feet, forming a corner with the vertical jog. If it were some sort of door, it was a low and narrow one.

John got down on his knees. Feeling along the vertical line he found a groove, just big enough to let him curl his fingers into it. He tugged toward him and the small section of wall outlined by the two lines he'd found swung toward him on cleverly hidden hinges that blended so well with the stone, the entire thing was invisible until one looked very closely.

It swung reluctantly as though it hadn't been breached in a long time, and likely that was the case. John bent down to peer through. Beyond the small opening, the road continued on toward the mountain, curving as the land began to rise and disappearing into a stand of trees.

By lying flat on his belly and wriggling a bit, John just barely squeezed through the low, narrow opening. On the other side, he pulled himself up, knelt and surveyed the landscape. He was considering how long it might take them to reach the rising ground when it hit him. He had no way to get the horses through that opening. He'd just made it through himself, and though his shoulders had gotten wider in the last couple of

years, he was still fairly slender. His bodyguards were both large, burly men, especially selected by his father in the belief their intimidating size would keep him safer. John doubted either one of them could make it through that small door.

He'd either have to go on searching for another passage or leave behind guards and horses and proceed on his own. Neither option appealed to him. What were the odds they'd find another entrance to this place?

The guards waited on the other side, looking puzzled and ill at ease. Arvin made an attempt to wiggle through, after removing his chain mail, leather jerkin and even his shirt. He scratched up his shoulders miserably and banged his head, but he couldn't fit through the opening.

John crawled back through to join them, dragged some of the packs off the horses and began sorting through, separating out the things he'd need to proceed on his own and packing them into a bag he could carry on his shoulders.

Arvin and Roger watched him in frowning silence until Roger could stand it no longer. "Your Highness, you're not thinking of proceeding without us?"

"I want you two to continue to search for another way in and then meet me on the other side," John answered. "Search for three days, but should you find no entrance, return to town and wait for me there three months. You'll find money enough in here." He handed them a purse of gold and silver coins. He'd removed some for his own use, though he doubted it would answer most of the needs he'd encounter on this journey.

"Your Highness, begging your pardon, but His Majesty, the king, insisted we should keep you company on this trip."

"You've done your duty most admirably, and so I shall report to my father on my return. But now it's obvious you cannot accompany me through this. I think it was meant to be thus."

They weren't mollified, but they dared argue with him no longer, especially when he glared his displeasure. John finished sorting out what he thought he'd need, balancing the urgency of an item against the weight it would add to his pack.

He stood up and tested the load on his shoulders. It weighed him down, but he could bear it. "Go now and search for another entrance. I'm going in."

He pushed the pack through the narrow aperture and then wriggled himself through after it.

"Take care, Your Highness," Roger called. "We'll seek a way to join you as rapidly as we can."

He nodded. The small door suddenly slid shut again, settling into its frame with a definite thunk. John had to fight a sudden raging panic that urged him to go back and claw at the door and push it open again. He thought he knew how a prisoner in the dungeon felt when the door locked him into his cell. He resisted the urge to try to push back through it. His quest took him the other way.

He would succeed. He had to now. There was no way back.

* * * * *

A voice spoke from behind him.

"So, Prince John, you passed the first test. Will you proceed now to more difficult ones?"

John started at being addressed when he felt sure no one else had been present just moments before. He whirled to face the woman who stood just a few feet off to his right.

She was small, with scraggly gray hair and a face comprised of masses of wrinkles. Still, there was something about her that suggested power and a confidence in herself usually seen in younger, stronger women.

He bowed in her direction. "Your servant, madam."

She nodded. "An excellent start, young man. You've come seeking the bronze lance, Prince John."

"Yes, madam. But how did you know?"

Her smile was oddly lopsided and it gave him a chill. "We know a great many things here, Your Highness." She paused just a moment to spear him with a hard look. "But we're impressed by very few of them, including titles and royal blood."

Since John had no idea how to respond to that, he kept silent and waited for her to continue.

"We welcome you to the quest for the bronze lance. Your journey will take you up the mountain and inside it at times. You may go anywhere you wish, but you must not damage or destroy anything. 'Tis best by far you stay on the road as much as possible. For you, there is no easier route to the lance than to stay on the road. There are no shortcuts. Remember that."

She paused, watching him in an alarmingly calculating way. "Offer no harm to any other living creature save to protect your own life, but do not hesitate to respond if threatened. There are shelters in various places along the way, marked by a cloverleaf over the door. Feel free to eat the food you find in those and use whatever facilities it affords. All others should be left alone."

For a moment, she went quiet, but it was more of a thoughtful silence than a final quiet. He wasn't surprised when she continued her lecture. "There is but one true road for you, Prince John, and while it twists and turns and is difficult to negotiate, you should stay on it until you get to the point where you must make a decision. You'll learn more of that later."

She speared him with a hard look. "Follow the right way. Be courageous, be true, be loyal and loving. What you win, one way or another, lives on after you, so make the right choices."

She shrugged and started to turn away, then turned back. "One more thing. A dragon calls the mountain home and guards it with some vigilance. You might want to avoid a confrontation with the creature until it's entirely necessary."

John looked away from her to stare up toward the top of the mountain, recalling the black figure he'd seen swooping around it. "Thank you for the warning, madam. Have you any suggestions for how I might —"

When the import of her last words sank in, he looked back toward the woman, only to find her gone as quickly and mysteriously as she'd first appeared.

She hadn't said "unless it was necessary" but "until it's entirely necessary". The implications of that made him shudder with a deep, bone-shaking dread. He fought the impulse to turn around and go back. The door would open at a push and let him out. Somehow he knew it would. It might not allow him back in again. But what point was there in continuing, if the quest involved a confrontation with a dragon? He had no chance at all of surviving that.

After a few minutes of panic, his pulse settled down and he began to think again. Perhaps a confrontation with the dragon wouldn't be necessary. Perhaps there was another way. He couldn't even guess now what this journey would bring.

If he turned back now he'd failed before he'd even begun. *He wouldn't fail.* This was his mission. John drew a deep breath, hoisted his pack higher on his shoulder and headed along the road toward the mountain.

Somewhere above and ahead, but out of his line of sight, an animal squawked loudly. It sounded like a large bird, but it could have been almost anything. Even a dragon. He shivered again and drew a deep breath to steady himself. A moment's stop let him withdraw his sword belt from his pack and buckle it around his waist, then settle the sword in the sheath. It offered only a little reassurance, but he needed any small bit he could find.

How did one avoid a vigilant dragon? And how aggressive would the creature be should he fail to avoid it? He hoped he wouldn't have occasion to find out.

He set out along the path that would take him to his goal.

The road dove into a stand of trees that grew quickly thicker and denser. In the dimmer light, it occurred to him that it was past midafternoon, and he had only a few hours left to find that promised shelter. He hoped it wasn't too much farther, as spending the night camped on the road didn't seem like a good way to avoid being seen by a dragon. Nor did he relish the idea of traveling after dark. He had tinder and flint and a couple of torches, but he wanted to save them for a greater need.

At least the road remained wide and clear, making travel easy and getting lost unlikely. He encountered no other travelers as he hiked along. The weather was warm but not unbearably so. A pleasant breeze riffled his hair and dried the perspiration.

Two hours later he still trudged along the road, looking for the promised shelter, footsore, weary and hungry. By then several depressing realizations had occurred to him.

Princes didn't train for prolonged walking. Already a blister was forming on his heel. And he'd better find some shelter with food available. His supplies would last only a few days, and this journey looked like it would take quite a bit longer than that.

His shoulders ached from the burden of his pack, and one strap was starting to raise another blister on his shoulder.

More noises surrounded him, the sounds of animals in the underbrush nearby and others at greater distance. Squawks and chatters, a low growl and a piercing shriek reached him in the space of a few minutes. The last sounded so close, it made him jump and sent his pulse racing. But nothing plunged out of the woods toward him.

He kept moving, mostly because he couldn't think of anything else to do, shifting the greater weight of the pack from one shoulder to the other and holding onto the promise of shelter. The light faded into a dim twilight and his nerves tightened.

Just as twilight gave way to full darkness, he saw the outlines of what looked to be some kind of building ahead. He could only detect a rough, dark rectangle silhouetted against patches of barely lighter sky showing through the trees, but the lines were too regular and even to be a natural formation. It motivated him to hurry forward to reach it before blackness obscured everything. No moon had yet risen to help light the way, so it threatened to get very dark indeed.

He approached the structure. It looked more and more like a good-sized barn as he got closer, but one with a narrow door and just a few narrow windows in the side he could see. A plain wood panel at the front had no knocker or bell, but a latch that gave easily when he squeezed it. It seemed like a strange sort of shelter for a traveler, but adequate.

As he leaned over the threshold, ready to step inside, it occurred to him that he hadn't looked for the mark over the door the woman had warned him about. He drew back his foot before setting it down. A quick scan around the door showed no sign of the cloverleaf shape supposed to mark shelters he could use. He felt with his fingers, around and above the frame, thinking he might not be able to see it in the dark. But he detected nothing that way either.

Backing up a couple of steps, he fumbled in his pack and spent a few minutes lighting a torch, which he held up beside the door. The cloverleaf he'd been told to expect wasn't there.

A quick survey of the area showed no other shelters close by, and darkness obscured the view more than a few yards away. What should he do? The temptation to just go right into the building tugged at him. Walking on in the darkness in a strange and dangerous place terrified him. Fear of failing by not following the rules he'd been told roiled in his gut.

He debated for a few minutes, but fear of failure overcame fear of the dark. He kept the torch lit, however, as he continued down the road.

Not much farther on, but around a bend that concealed it from view of the other structure, he found a small cottage by the side of the road. Its windows showed no light or sign of life within. When he approached the door, he found a cloverleaf painted over it.

Breathing a sigh of relief, he tried the latch. It gave easily, and he stepped inside. The torch lit the interior, which consisted of only one room, with windows on all four walls. It held a table, a few chairs, a sink, a chest and a cabinet on one side, while a large bed took up most of the space on the other.

Though he felt sure no one else resided here, he called out "Hello?" anyway. No answer came.

John slid his pack off and extinguished his torch by rolling it on the dirt floor after using it to light the oil lamp on the table. He had only a few torches and didn't want to waste them.

A shelf above the chest held a basket of apples, a loaf of bread that was still warm from the oven, and slices of salted, dried meat. He debated about whether he dared help himself to the food. No one had told him to refrain, and he worried that he might need the small supply of provisions he carried later in the trip, so he broke a hunk of bread and ate it along with some of the meat and an apple. Though he was used to more sumptuous banquets, the unaccustomed exercise of the day had lent him an appetite that made the simple foods a most satisfying meal.

He began yawning even before he finished eating, but managed to stay upright long enough to clean up after himself and peel off his dusty clothes.

He fell into bed, expecting to sink instantly into sleep. Perhaps he did. Or perhaps he just dozed. What happened next might have been a dream, but it seemed more like a vision when he thought about it later.

Chapter Four

One by one, though not in any obvious rank or order, torches lit up the dark room around him. They illuminated the space in an eerie, flickering way that gradually brightened to show the cabin, but oddly changed.

Huge, elaborate tapestries now covered most of the wooden walls. His vision-dream afforded him ample time to study each one. They shocked him. Not because they depicted a stunning variety of sexual acts—which they did—but because he'd never guessed so many positions were possible, nor the variety of combinations of people. Two men served a woman in one, where she lay sandwiched between the two with one man facing her, cock in her cunt, while the other took her from behind. In the next one, three men all rubbed cocks in various parts of a woman, then in another, two women were entangled with two men, and more.

A magic of the weaving made the scenes come nearly to life, so that he would swear he saw people writhing in the throes of passion, beads of sweat rolling down bodies, limbs moving and occasionally a flash of seed spilling.

The woman with three men now lay on her back, with one man's cock in her mouth and one in her cunt. The third man sucked on one of her breasts while she pumped him with her hand.

The tapestry with three men and two women showed a tangle of writhing limbs with hands groping for buttocks, hair, breasts and legs. Beside it, another showed two men who had a woman tied spread-eagled to a bed. One teased her nipples with a feather while the other slapped her pussy with what looked like a light whip. Anger rose on her behalf until a closer look showed that the tension on her face came from pleasure rather than pain.

He switched his gaze to the next one, where a woman knelt on all fours with her legs spread so widely both holes were clearly visible. A man stood over her, inserting an object shaped like a cock into her rear hole. At the same time he had three fingers buried in her cunt.

Even in the dream-vision, he felt heat rise in his cheeks. He'd never seen things like this or guessed at the possibility. They were odd things, things he'd never heard of or would consider too different to be right, yet the participants all appeared to be enjoying their experiences.

One tapestry at the far end looked completely black. He couldn't say why it drew his gaze, but while he stared at it, trying to discern some pattern in its inky darkness, a shape took form, standing in front of it.

The woman of his previous visions stood there, staring at him with a small, tight smile that made him shiver. "You passed the first tests. And you're coming to me." Her

cold, dark blue eyes glittered with a terrifying delight, but as she stared at him a hint of sadness crept into her expression for a moment. "My poor dear, you have no idea what awaits you here. Are you sure you want to continue? If you turn around in the morning and go back, the gate will let you out."

"No," he said. "No. I must do this."

"Even should it mean your life?"

He hesitated. He didn't want to die. But he couldn't live with failure. "Yes. Even so."

"There are things worse than death," she warned. "You risk those, too." She floated toward him, reached out and touched his shoulder. Streaks of fire speared into him there, though her fingers barely rested against his flesh. He gritted his teeth against the pain and tolerated her touch for several long seconds until she finally lifted her hand away. His breath had turned almost to panting sobs by then.

"You do have courage," she said, sounding almost admiring. "But how will you do when I wrap you in my arms and hold your entire body against mine?"

Instead of answering her question, he asked his own. "Who are you? Why are you doing this?"

Her expression changed. Eyes narrowed and her red lips, brilliant against her white skin, pressed together. "I'm your destiny and your challenge. You don't believe it now or understand it. But it is so. You'll learn. My name is Evelayna."

"What do you want from me?"

The question surprised and seemed to puzzle her for a moment. "I want you."

"Why?"

"You're my fate. My doom or my salvation."

"How will that be?"

She shook her head. "You'll learn." She watched him silently. "Have you the courage to touch me?"

He didn't know the answer.

Evelayna made no sound and didn't move while he debated.

He'd always been one to rise to a challenge, yet he took the time to think it through before acting. For this, though, he couldn't guess what action might be right or wrong. Oddly, he did want to touch her, even knowing it would be painful. Pleasure had mingled with the pain, in an intensity almost too deep and rich to bear. And something about her drew him, almost compelled him to her. He felt a connection to her he couldn't fathom.

Time to find out if he did have the nerve. He sat up and reached out toward her. She didn't move to approach him. "You'll have to come to me," she said.

He got out of bed, all too aware of his nudity in her presence. She didn't hesitate to study his bare body either, running her eyes down the long length of his torso and legs,

up again, stopping at the center of his manhood. He took some pride in his body, a fitting body for a prince, he thought. He was fairly tall, and slim, but decently muscled and carried no spare flesh on his frame. If the sight of him pleased her, nothing on her face revealed it.

She waited for him to come to her, standing very still, expressionless, only letting her eyes move as she watched him.

He stopped before her and held her gaze for a moment. Dark, deep, fathomless eyes offered no encouragement or discouragement, but something terrifying lingered in the depths of them. A streak of cruelty or a relentless devotion to unthinkable duty. He couldn't decide which might be worse.

John reached out, pleased to see his hand didn't tremble, and laid the palm against her breast.

Heat rushed into his hand, just prickly and uncomfortable at first, but building rapidly to a scorching fire. Every fiber of his being wanted to pull away from her, to relieve the pain before it damaged him beyond repair. He held his breath and refused to move, even while he longed to tear his hand away, to wave it and let moving air cool it. Something inside him resisted the urge, though he knew he could do so if he wished. The pain built and built, spreading throughout his body. His legs trembled with it and sweat beaded on his temples before running down his cheeks and dripping onto his chest.

Despite his best efforts to repress it, a whimper slid past his lips. Why didn't he pull his hand back? Nothing forced him to keep it there save his own will.

She didn't move away or try to release him. Nothing showed in her expression as she watched his pain, neither satisfaction nor compassion.

Even his breath began to clot in his throat, moving in and out on shallow, rapid pants.

"Why?" The word came out as a sob. Darkness, punctuated by brief flashes of light, gathered on the edges of his vision and spread to block out sight. The pain was a shrieking, raging inferno folding him into a world of agony. His legs grew weak, refusing to hold him, and still he would not take his hand from her.

As he sank to the floor she reached out for him. Hands at his elbows supported him and kept him from collapsing, but more pain racked his body at those sites. He groaned and again asked, "Why?"

"If you cannot endure this, you have no chance to succeed on this quest," she answered. "A moment more. Hold on just a moment more."

John couldn't have answered her. He retained just enough consciousness to hear her words.

He did hold on for another moment, the longest moment of his life. Fire clouded his vision with a red haze and felt as though it melted the skin from his bones. At its end, amazingly, the heat began to die down. The pain faded slowly, leaving him to reclaim

control of his breath and his muscles. His vision cleared and he stared into her eyes again.

She looked different. Her expression had softened and a genuine smile curved her lips. Her hair remained just as black, her skin as pale, her eyes as dark blue and deep. But she seemed smaller, though still a tall woman, a few inches less than his own height. Most markedly, whatever had lent her features the cruel, fearsome aspect was gone. Her teeth were now unremarkably small, white, and even.

Evelayna looked like a sweet, charming young woman, probably no older than himself. A very pretty woman.

She moved her hands on his arms, soothing away whatever remained of the pain. He lifted his palm from her breast and was stunned to find it unmarked, not even the slightest bit red. He would have sworn it had been badly burned.

He almost flinched away when she stretched to kiss him on the lips, but managed to control himself. It didn't burn in any painful kind of way, though the feel of her mouth on his sent heat roiling through his veins.

"Quickly." She lifted her mouth from his and all but dragged him over to the bed. "We have only a little while."

"For what?" he asked.

"For this." She wrapped a hand around his engorged cock and began pumping. Though it felt spectacularly wonderful, he still said, "Woman! Wait."

"No, we can't."

"Why not?"

"I told you. We have little time."

"We have to do this?"

She looked up at him. "Do you not want to?"

"I don't know. You... I don't understand who you are or what you want."

"And I cannot tell you any more than I have right now. Am I not attractive to you?"

"You know that you are." He stared pointedly down at his surging cock. "You're beautiful. Magnificent. But..."

"You're afraid of me."

"No! Well, yes, some."

"Does fear rule you?"

"No." He paused a moment to consider whether it was true. "But I do exercise caution."

"Ah. You call it caution, so it becomes wisdom rather than folly."

"I don't understand you."

She studied his face, her dark eyes meeting his and searching deeply. "I think you do. You don't want to. But you do."

"You're frightening me again," he said, making it light, almost a joke.

Her small smile in response showed her recognition of the truth behind the words. "The line between bold action and rash action is a fine one. A delicate distinction. Choose now."

It tore him in two. His body wanted hers desperately. His cock throbbed with the desire to feel her soft white body against his, to bury himself in her promised heat. His mind reminded him of how much she'd hurt him and how frightening she could be. But he looked at her and saw a pretty woman, one with depths he couldn't plumb, but a yearning she didn't bother to hide. Perhaps that should have worried him, but his body was reasserting control, assisted by some innate compassion and generosity.

When he reached out and pulled her against him, she came willingly, raising her face to accept his kiss. Warm, soft lips clung to his, quivering as he pressed harder. The sweet mounds of her breasts pressed into his chest, the nipples rubbing delicately against him.

He increased the pressure of his mouth, and her lips parted to admit him. Sweetness burst against his tongue as it tunneled into the hot, delectable depths of her. She tasted of honey and fruit, tempered with a sharper edge of wine or something stronger, something intoxicating. It went to his head like the steward's special reserve brandy, making him giddy, dizzy, almost floating.

He ran his fingers into her hair, relishing the soft, silky slide of it while she clasped her arms around him. Blood fizzed through his veins and gathered in his cock, making it swell even further, straining for her.

Lack of air finally forced him to draw back, panting, but not releasing his hold on her. He pulled her over to the bed and drew her down with him on it.

Her skin had the satiny smoothness and softness of finest silk that rewarded every trip his lips and hands made over it. She gasped and moaned when he palmed her breasts and twirled fingertips around her nipples. Her legs spread apart, releasing the heady perfume of her arousal.

"Please, now," she begged. "Come into me."

"But I've barely had time to get you ready."

"I'm ready, I promise you. There isn't much time. Come now."

John drew a deep breath and moved over her, kneeling in the gap between her legs. "Are you sure you want me *in* you?"

"Of course I do!"

"But the risk—"

"Someday I hope to bear many children, but not until the time is right. I'll not conceive now. They'll be no royal bastards from this coupling. Nor do I suffer from any ailment I could pass on to you, as I know you do not either."

He winced a bit at her phrasing and hoped she was right. She seemed very sure of it. He shifted until his cock just rested against her opening. A thrilling rush of warmth

and pleasure jolted him at the contact. Gently he pushed forward, wincing when he missed the first time, but then finding the opening and spearing the tip of himself into her.

Heat and warmth and a silky slickness surrounded him, stunning him with sensations unlike anything hands—his own or someone else’s—had ever brought. So great was the pleasure he nearly came right then, but he restrained himself with an effort. She sucked in a sharp breath and tightened around him.

“Kiss me again,” she begged.

Lightning bolts blasted through him when their mouths met again and tongues dance against each other. He buried his fingers in the satiny fall of her hair.

“You’re beautiful,” he gasped, burying himself more deeply inside her. “Hot and sweet and beautiful and...a treasure.”

Supporting himself on one arm, he toyed with her breasts and tweaked the nipples with his free hand. Surprise and pleasure drew a series of sharp squeals from her. She screamed when he leaned down and pulled a nipple into his mouth, sucking on it.

Her arms wound around him, pulling him closer against her.

“You’re much more—” A sharp gasp interrupted the words while her face tightened with strain and pleasure. “Much more than you know.”

Right then he felt like the king of the world. Nothing he’d experienced could touch the wild, astonishing joy that filled him.

He released her nipple, pulled back out and surged forward again, going in farther this time, watching her reaction, then drew back and plunged in all the way, burying himself in the sweetness of her glorious body. She gasped and jolted a bit when he touched deep inside her. Muscles tightened around his buried cock, shocking him with their strength and the pure, fiery pleasure it brought.

He pumped in and out, pausing occasionally to keep himself from coming too soon. The deeper he invaded, the more she tightened and moaned. The heat and slickness of her drove him into a frenzy of pleasure and need. Her fingers dug into his back, causing small stings that just added to the maelstrom of sensation sucking him down into it.

“Powers, do you know how beautiful you are?” he asked her. “How hot and tight and sweet?”

Controlling himself to give her as much pleasure as possible made the pleasure a mix of agony and thrill.

“Faster,” she coaxed, on a gasping moan. Her body felt so tight she might break apart.

Who was he to resist a lady’s command? He plunged faster, harder, deeper until he could barely hold himself upright.

Tension gripped her, built inside her, growing and expanding, clenching him tight. Finally she exploded in a climax that tightened him like a wrench, squeezing and

loosening unbearably. He couldn't hold it any longer. His yell joined hers as the pleasure broke like a storm over him and he rained his seed into her valley.

For long minutes, they clung to each other as aftershocks rolled through them, bringing smaller jolts of pleasure, slowing regaining breath and wits. Evelayna looked at up at him. Her chest heaved in the aftermath of her explosive climax and her face bore a pretty flush. Tenderness suffused her face as she stared into his eyes and her arms held tight to him.

As he leaned down to kiss her, though, her expression changed in an instant from peace and love to alarm and then to concentration and worry.

"Get off," she ordered. "Quickly."

"I'm not sure I can move," he admitted. "You – Ooof."

Instead of waiting for him, she'd brought her arms down, put her hands on his chest, and pushed him up and off. He rolled to her side.

"Why do you hurry?"

She scrambled up and off the bed. "I don't want to hurt you. When you touch me again, it will burn." She turned to face him.

He couldn't say exactly what had changed, but she was reverting to the nightmare woman. Her hair gleamed blacker, her skin grew paler, the eyes deepened and became fathomless holes. Mostly, though, her expression altered, the ferocity and cruelty returning to her tense mouth and narrowed eyes.

"Why?" he asked, responding not so much to her words as to the difference in her.

"To achieve your quest, you must rescue me."

"From this? How?"

"It will become clearer as you go on."

"Will I see you again?"

She smiled and it was a wicked, cruel grin, showing sharp, pointed teeth again. "Oh, yes. I'll be watching you, and I'll visit you when I can. I'll ask you to do things." Her smile broadened. "Things you may not want to do."

"And should I refuse you?"

She heaved a mocking sigh. "We'll deal with that as it happens. In the meantime, for your journey, I'm permitted to give you a word or two of advice. You've done well so far. Stay on the road, wherever it takes you. There are no shortcuts to your destination. Do not linger, waiting for your companions. They'll find no way in. You venture this quest alone. When any you meet ask a boon of you, try to give it, save that it threatens harm to you or others. Look for threats in unexpected places and aid from unexpected sources. Learn to act boldly but not rashly."

She stood watching him for a moment longer, her eyes hooded and shadowed. He waited for her to say more, but apparently she'd finished. She was silhouetted against the backdrop of the black tapestry, and he thought he saw something else move there. A wavering of the light formed into the shapes of giant wings rising up directly behind

her, stretching above her head and far enough out to easily wrap her entirely in their folds. There seemed to be ribs or bracing of bone webbing them.

In another blink of the eye she was gone, the wings disappeared, the tapestries were no more, and all he saw was the plain wood walls of the cabin, pocked with dark windows and a silvering of moonlight coming in from the west.

It took him a long time to fall asleep.

* * * * *

"Are you sure this is the one?" the guardian asked.

"He is my choice," Evelayna said, looking into the scry mirror that showed Prince John tossing restlessly in his sleep.

"He's young, and he seems rather soft. That royal upbringing in a peaceful kingdom doesn't build inner strength."

"There's a tougher core in him than one would suspect, though. He touched me long enough to break through the curse for a time."

"Aye, he did that. But is it youthful stubbornness or true strength of will?"

Evelayna turned away to look at the shadowy figure of the guardian. "Is it all that different?"

"Stubbornness is easily broken. True strength of will bends when necessary but doesn't break."

"We'll find out soon, I suppose."

"Aye," the guardian agreed. "He'll be tested. We'll see. But you gamble much on him, Evelayna. Should he not prove equal to it, you'll have a long wait before you get another chance."

"I know that. But he is the one I want. Something in him calls out to me. There is something that connects us already."

"Something more than his pretty face and royal carriage?"

Evelayna smiled grimly. "He is more than commonly attractive, isn't he?"

"Good looks will not help him pass the trials. Just as your beauty will not assist you in yours."

"I think that's not quite true, guardian. I think perhaps some of our attraction to each is based on looks, but even so, it will help goad us each to try harder for the other."

The guardian glanced quickly into the scry mirror, then waved at it to blank it out, before turning back to her. "There is some wisdom in that. But do not put too much reliance on it, either."

"No. I do know better."

* * * * *

The first light of dawn creeping through the windows roused John from sleep. The cabin looked as he expected it to, with wooden walls and small windows on each side. As before, he couldn't decide if he'd had a dream, a vision or a very odd experience the previous night, but it didn't matter that morning. He still felt the wonder of his mystery lady's glorious response to him as a warmth that filled his heart and boosted his spirit.

A bit of bread and some salted meat remained from the previous night's meal, the only food in the place other than what he carried. He ate it and washed up. An extra shirt, torn into strips, made padding for his feet and shoulders to protect the blisters that had started to form the day before. He shouldered his pack and set out on the road again.

The walking was easy for a while and the journey uneventful. He met no one else on the road for the first couple of hours. The path began to slant noticeably upward, though not so steeply as to make the going difficult. A pleasant breeze whispered through the leaves of tall trees on either side of the road. The dense wood, with thick underbrush, obscured the view more than a few feet into it.

Twice he saw paths going off to the right, but both were narrow and clearly less traveled than this road.

Toward midmorning, he started to notice a different set of noises occasionally sounding nearby. The scrabbling of small animals rushing through the dead leaves on the ground didn't startle him until some of those sounds grew loud enough to be made by larger animals, closer to him than felt comfortable. And though he met no other people as he traveled, he did occasionally hear the sounds of them—distant laughter or an occasional shout.

He wished he could see them. He wasn't used to being alone and it unsettled him. At home, people surrounded him almost all the time. He even had to send servants away and seek a quiet corner by himself if he wanted to think. Here he could think too much. His imagination tended to seize on each noise and embroider it into something menacing.

But the challenge, when it came, was of a completely different sort.

Chapter Five

John slowed his pace on spotting something odd just ahead. It appeared as a sort of shimmering screen across the road. He could see through it to the continuation of the road ahead until it rounded a bend, but the scene wavered a bit, as though viewed through the heat and smoke rising from a fire.

Whatever it was stretched across the entire width of the road and rose as far up as he could see. It appeared to go for some distance into the woods beside the road as well. Since he'd been told to stay on the road, he wasn't eager to try to go around it.

He could probably go through it, but the idea made him nervous. He had no idea what it was or what might have created it. It did appear that the road went on normally beyond it, so perhaps it was nothing more than a freak cloud or a rolling bank of steam.

John approached it carefully, stopping when he neared it, and extended a careful hand. Odd that it seemed to hang so straight up and down, which argued for it being more than just an ordinary, natural phenomenon. Yet it didn't seem to do anything. No heat radiated off it, nor did any breeze or draft blow from it.

Strangely, he felt nothing at all when he prodded it gently with a finger, then pushed his hand on through. The hand looked entirely normal and waved back at him when he jiggled his fingers. No sense of anything odd or different or threatening came from it. When he pulled his hand to his side, it came back through the barrier unchanged and unharmed. A foot pushed through gave the same result.

For a few minutes he debated trying to go around, but Evelayna's injunction about staying on the road disinclined him to do so. It hadn't hurt to put his hand or foot through. No reason to think he couldn't step through and go on his way.

He felt nothing at all when he pushed through the shimmery curtain, not even a cool breeze or shifting of the air.

The walking remained easy thereafter, and he resumed his journey. But only a few hundred feet beyond the strange barrier, he started noticing something weird happening on either side of the way. Fog gathered in massive tendrils along either verge, becoming denser, but patchier as he walked on, finally condensing into what looked at first to be a series of statues or pillars.

The longer he went on, the more they began to look like real people standing in parallel lines on either side of the road, forcing him to walk between them like the only man in a parade. The shapes took on the forms of men and women, young, old, tall, short, slender, and round, some with long hair, others with none. Their clothing varied from the rich, brilliantly colored robes of a royal court to soldiers' leather armor, to the simple tunics and breeches of field workers.

The figures became more clearly defined, becoming so real-looking he would have greeted them courteously had he met them traveling along the road. But they all stood still at their posts, not moving. Except that by the time he'd passed a dozen or more of them, he could swear the eyes of some seemed to follow his passage as he went by.

Even that didn't unsettle him as much as when one spoke for the first time. The words weren't addressed to him, but were certainly about him and probably intended for him to hear.

"He's a rather spindly looking fellow," the figure of a tall, burly man said while staring at him.

John stopped for a moment and stared back. It wasn't a statue, it wasn't a real person frozen in space, but he was pretty sure it wasn't just an illusion either. Something there, something formed from mist but accurately picturing reality, watched him and spoke. Its face showed little expression other than some apparent impatience or irritation.

He started to remonstrate, then reconsidered. He didn't even know if there was a real person there or not, nor did he know whether this might be a test. He had no idea what the right answer might be if it was.

An answer came from another figure, a rather wispy-looking woman, on the other side of the road some twenty feet ahead. "They're sometimes more than they appear. We must hope that is so in this case."

"Indeed I should hope. He appears to have no fiber, no substance at all." That came from a richly dressed man on the alternate side another twenty feet ahead.

Nothing more was said until he walked farther on. As John passed the last speaker and approached another man, wearing the clothes of a woodsman and armed with bow and arrows, the man spoke. "He does seem weak and puny. 'Tis not likely he can complete the journey."

John himself spoke next. "Who are you? Why are you here?"

He got no answer. The next speaker, farther down the road, of course, had another insult for him. "He's soft and silly. A prince, perhaps, but no fit seeker after the lance."

John stopped in front of the figure, a woman in a plain shift and overdress. "How can you judge that? You've just barely seen me."

Again he got no answer, and the next words came from the figure farther up the road. "He'll not last long before he runs the other way."

Once it became clear they would not answer him directly, but only continue to shower insults, John walked on, ignoring them as best he could, though a few of their jabs bit close to the bone. Try as he would, he couldn't completely insulate himself against the demoralizing effects of their scorn. He didn't want to believe they were right. He couldn't believe it. But they knew this mountain and the challenges it would present far better than he did.

Nonetheless, he had to go on, so he closed his ears and his mind to their words as much as possible. Keeping his head down, so he didn't have to look up at his detractors, he walked steadily forward, refusing to show them in any other way that their words affected him.

The strategy worked well enough until he came to the last of the figures, which stood in the middle of the road, right ahead of him, rather than on one side or the other.

The man was so large he seemed to take up the entire width of the road, blocking the way. John stopped, looking up at him, waiting for the last and probably most devastatingly derisive comment.

Instead the man said, "Come closer."

He had the hard face of a warrior, seamed with a few old scars that cemented the impression, along with the chain mail he wore.

"You seek the bronze lance. Would you look on the object of your quest?" he asked.

"I— Should I?" John asked.

"It will do you no harm." The words held an edge of sarcasm that made John blush.

"Yes, I would then. Or rather, yes, sir, I would."

The man inclined his head, but lifted an arm, pointing the fingers toward the heavens. John followed their direction, looking upward.

A glowing ball of yellow-white light popped into being just over their heads. It descended slowly between himself and the huge warrior, elongating vertically as it came down. By the time it sat just a few feet above the ground, it had stretched into a very long, narrow, vertical oval. The light strengthened for a moment, then faded a bit to reveal the shape of a lance contained within it.

Six feet long and about the diameter of his wrist, the lance was made of a softly burnished bronze that reflected the light around it in a warm glow. The shaft bore no markings, but had a cap on the blunt end that bore an elaborate carving, set with several precious jewels. At the other end, it flared into a blade some eight inches long that tapered to a wicked point.

It rotated slowly between them for a minute or two, then began to rise again, though the shape didn't fade back into the glow.

Instead, as it ascended, he saw other forms join it, standing behind the lance. It took a moment before they became clear enough to descry. A dragon seemed to hover directly above it, an enormous creature with bony, spread wings, wicked-looking claws, a long, pointed snout and horns. The glow from the lance glittered off its scales in rainbow refractions.

The dragon flew in lazy circles overhead, around the other figures gathering behind the lance. A crowd of people and animals seemed to emerge from the glow around the object of his quest, with the back of the group fading into it. He thought he could pick out a couple of big cats, a bear, a dog, a deer and a number of human figures. He felt

sure one of those was Evelayna, wearing her fearsome, demon-woman aspect. An older woman stood beside her, with another large man right behind her.

The dragon swooped down and caught the lance with one of its huge, sharp claws. John cried out in dismay, but he could do nothing about it and no one else seemed concerned. The dragon didn't just fly off and disappear with the treasure as he expected. Instead, it swooped down and carefully handed the lance to the older woman.

She stepped forward, holding it in front of her, and looked down toward him. "This is the prize you seek, quester. It's not easily attained. To gain it, you'll need all your wits, your courage, your generosity and your honor. Failure may bring your death or worse. Success may well mean enduring tests you will barely survive, suffering you can only begin to guess at and a subjugation of your will you cannot even imagine now. You have only this chance to change your mind and go back."

"Lady, I thank you for the warning and the opportunity, but I'll not turn back now. I will do what is needed to gain the prize."

"Well enough, then, Prince John. Proceed on your way, but heed my words and do not forget. Stay on the road, harm none save only they try to harm you first, give generously to others and conquer your fears. Become a man of honor, a man of action, a man of care, and a man of cleverness."

On the last words, she retreated a step, waved a hand above her head, and the entire scene—lance, people and creatures—faded quickly until he saw nothing above him but blue sky and a few clouds.

The large soldier blocking his way moved aside, giving him free access to the road ahead. "On your way now," the warrior said. John nodded and set off, not looking back.

But he grappled with all he'd seen, wondering what it might all mean. The older woman's words made him nervous as well. So far, the going had been relatively easy, but her predictions sounded frighteningly ominous. They reminded him that the woman at the bottom of the mountain had suggested he might have to fight the dragon before he was done. He truly began to wonder if the detractors he'd just passed weren't right about him.

Not much farther along the road he came to another shimmering curtain of air. He stopped and tested it again, but made up his mind to step through much more quickly this time. The only alternative was to go around or turn back and neither seemed a good idea. The passage through it hadn't harmed him before.

Nor did it this time.

The road continued ahead looking little different on this side of the curtain. But when he reached a place where the trees thinned on one side and he could look back down the mountain, over the way he'd come, he realized he was much farther up than he'd realized. He couldn't remember climbing as much as he must have.

Looking upward told him he still had a long way to go.

For the next hour, the trip was uneventful, except that a couple of times he again thought he heard the sounds of people in the distance, though he saw no sign of habitation. The trill of a piper was accompanied by a group of voices singing at least twice, and he heard laughter and conversation several times. It roused an aching loneliness inside. The temptation to go in search of the revelers teased him, but not seriously enough to be a threat. He'd been told to stay on the road, and so he would.

The sounds of animals scrabbling in the brush around him came more often. Worse, his suspicion from earlier that something tracked him began to solidify, though he never saw anything to account for it.

He rounded a bend and stopped in shock. A wide path branched off the road to the right and a grassy sward ran for some distance at the intersection. A group of three women sat on a blanket just by the side of the road, apparently enjoying a picnic in the sunshine. All were young and pretty.

"Hello," a lovely, dark-haired, dark-skinned woman called to him when she saw him. "A traveler, sir?"

He nodded acknowledgement. "I am. I'm John."

"Have you eaten yet, John?" a slender blonde asked. "'Tis almost midday. Would you care to join us?"

It was a fair request and he couldn't think of any reason to refuse. "Thank you, ladies," he said, and went to join them. They made space on their blanket for him to sit down and offered him a tempting assortment of fruits, vegetables, cheeses and bread. They even had a delicious fruity wine to go with it.

As they ate, he asked them if they lived in the area and learned that they did. He debated asking about the lance, but decided it was wiser not to.

He needn't have worried about it as their next question, after learning where he'd come from, was whether he came in quest of the lance.

"I do," he admitted. "My father has an injury that won't heal and the lands have become ill along with him. A legend he found says that the power of three magical objects together should heal him."

The women looked at each, giggled a bit and nodded. "Likely so," they agreed. "And you look like a worthy candidate for the lance."

He smiled at them, pleased they saw him so. If they believed it, living so close to the object and surely knowing more about it than he did, then perhaps he had a real chance.

After a while, the food, the wine and the warmth of the day combined to make him sleepy. The ladies invited him to lay back and take a nap, but some dim voice at the back of his mind told him it wouldn't be a good idea. He needed to make the next shelter by dark, and he feared if he fell asleep now, he might doze too long.

"Thank you, but no," he said. "In fact, I should be getting underway again."

"But there's no great hurry," the blonde told him, trying to coax him to remain. "You have time."

"Not so much as that," he said. "I regret I haven't more time to spend in your delightful company, but I must go."

They giggled again. "He is a courteous one," the redhead said to the others in a teasing, flirtatious way. "Perhaps we can assist him in his quest." She glanced at the others as if seeking their agreement. When the others nodded, she continued, "We can show you a quicker way to the lance. This road will take you there, but it's a hard journey. There is an easier way."

He had a moment of exultation at the thought, but it died quickly. "I thank you again, but I was told there was no reliable shortcut and I must stay on the road."

The blonde shook her head and the redhead looked sad. "They are so frumpy about such things," the dark woman said. "I do not understand why they feel they must put everyone to so much trouble. You can get to the lance by the way we could show you, and be there in under a day's time."

"I have no doubt of that," he answered, "and I know you mean it kindly, to help me. I regret I cannot accept your offer, even though it would come with the benefit of more time spent in your company. But I thank you very kindly for the food and drink."

"Are you sure?" The blonde pouted prettily at him. "We would enjoy having more of your company."

"And I should enjoy yours as well. But right now other needs press hard on me. I'm grateful for the food and your offer of assistance, but I fear my way is to stay on the road."

The dark woman came over to him as he stood up and reached for his pack. She slid her arms around him and kissed him. The others joined her, surrounding him with the aroma of their flowery fragrances and the softness of their skin pressing against him.

It took some doing to entangle himself without being rough or appearing rude. "Ladies, I appreciate your attention and your help, but I really *must* get going again." He found the pack and lifted it.

Finally they backed away. "As you will, Prince John," the redhead said as he turned to go. "Good speed on your way."

He'd already shouldered his pack and set out when the fact that she'd given him his title sank in. He looked back toward them, but they'd gone, disappeared completely, leaving no sign of their presence. Blanket, food and ladies were nowhere in sight. The stretch of grass where they'd sat was empty and showed no evidence anyone had been there.

He hadn't noticed while he'd been dining with the ladies, but shortly after setting out again, he became aware of the sounds in the undergrowth alongside the road. An animal, or something else, trailed not far behind him. Unease had him looking over his shoulder constantly, sword to the ready. Nothing showed itself, however.

An hour later something else did show itself. He heard a loud squawk and looked up in time to see the dragon swoop across the sky, circling the mountain's summit in a lazy gliding arc. From that distance he couldn't tell if the creature above him was the

same one he'd seen in the vision of the lance earlier, but it seemed likely. Because of its height, it was difficult to tell exactly how large it was, but immense or enormous seemed like a reasonable description. John ducked under a nearby tree, hoping it would keep him from the dragon's view.

Apparently it worked. The dragon didn't interrupt its slow glide to swoop down as John half-feared it might. Still, he waited for a while after it had disappeared before he set out again, and tried to stay close to the side where the trees grew taller for as long as he could.

The sun had begun to slip into the tops of the trees when he came to the third shimmering curtain spreading across the road.

He hesitated only a moment this time, and that more because he wondered what kind of strange events it would bring than because he feared harm from it. But for a long time after he'd stepped through, nothing at all occurred. He walked on, waiting for something odd or unusual, but he just passed more trees, rocks and shrubbery.

The day warmed up and he began to sweat. The trees offered only sporadic relief from the sun beating down on him. His shoulders ached from the unaccustomed burden of the pack and his feet complained a bit about all the walking.

He spied something moving in the distance on the road. As he walked on, and it grew, he realized someone else was coming toward him, the first person he'd encountered who actually traveled on the road beside himself. Did he dare ask about what lay ahead since the person came toward him from that direction? Perhaps this was even another quester—one who'd passed or failed whatever tests awaited.

That hope died as he drew close enough to see that the person approaching was a small, thin, bent-over figure, surely not someone braving the trials of the quest for the lance. The person had to draw closer before he could make out the figure under the enveloping brown cloak. It was a woman, apparently a very old woman.

She moved slowly, taking tiny steps at an unhurried pace, so it took a while to reach her. When they got close enough to hear each other, she looked up at him, letting him see her thin, wizened, wrinkled face. Her smile showed broken, blackened teeth.

"Good sir," she said. "You look a hearty enough fellow, and I see you carry a pack. Would you by any chance, have some food with you to share with a hungry old woman? 'Tis long since I last ate. A sip of water, if you could, would be welcome as well."

"Good day to you, ma'am." He hesitated just a moment. He didn't have all that much with him, but he'd been enjoined to be generous. Defying the arguments of his fears of running short, he dug in the pack and found a breadcake. He handed it to her, along with his water bottle.

His stomach clenched with dismay when she took a very long drink, draining more than half his remaining supply. There had to be streams in the vicinity, he told himself, where he could refill the bottle.

She smiled at him again as she wiped her mouth with the back of a dirty hand and returned the container to him. "Thank you, kind sir." The woman bit down on the bread, but stopped and took it from her mouth. "Blessings on your journey and may you be repaid many times for your generosity."

She turned and took a mouthful of bread, waved the cake at him and went on her way. He couldn't help but smile despite his worries about having enough food for the entire trip.

He'd gone another furlong or so when he came to another of the shimmery screens and stepped through it.

By then the sun had slid well down to the west and showed only in slices through the trunks of the trees that lined the road. He began to look for shelter for the night. For a long time he found nothing. Worse yet, he again heard the sound of some creature following behind him, staying hidden in the vegetation just off the road. Several glances in the direction of the noises afforded him no glimpse of it, but he felt sure he didn't want to be caught near it after dark.

Twilight was slipping toward darkness by the time he reached the next shelter. Not a cabin or a hut this time, it looked more like a large tent, with colorful, striped canvas draped over a frame. The rectangle it covered extended some fifty feet or so on the long sides and about thirty feet on the short ones. Window flaps on the side could be rolled up to admit light and air, though right then they covered the openings entirely. A hole somewhere in the roof allowed smoke from a fire within to curl up and out of the dwelling.

A canvas flap on the short side facing the road served as a door. The sign of a four-leaf clover hung over it. John breathed a sigh of relief and pulled it aside to enter the tent. Since he'd seen the smoke from a fire, he expected to find someone waiting within.

He called out a greeting as he peered in, but for a minute or two he saw no one. The tent had a surprising amount of furniture, including a real bed, several armchairs, a loveseat, a couple of large cabinets, and a table surrounded by four chairs. Another piece of canvas, hung on a line, curtained off a corner at the far end.

The woman emerged from that alcove a minute or so after he'd decided he was mistaken about anyone being there and walked in. She looked up at him, neither surprised nor disconcerted to find him there.

"Hello, dearie," she said. "Oh, I'm sorry. Your Highness. I lose track sometimes. But I was told you're a prince. Anyway, I've been awaiting you. Dinner's just about ready. Was hoping you'd get here before everything overcooked."

At first John thought this was the same woman he'd met on the road earlier. But a closer look found the differences. This woman wasn't as old as the one on the road and not quite as bent. Her teeth were better and fewer wrinkles seamed her face. In addition, she had friendly though watery blue eyes, and her gray hair was scraped back and caught into a bun at the back of her head.

"Come on. Set your pack down and take a plate. Don't want to let it spoil, do you?"

"No, of course not. But, who are you?"

"Call me Withinda, dear. Oh, sorry. Your Highness."

"Yes, ma'am. But why are you here? And how did you know I was coming?"

"Ah, well, not all of that is for you to know, Your Highness. But I learned you shared your food and water with my sister on the road this afternoon, and therefore, I share mine with you."

"I did only as I was bid."

"It matters not the reason. Now come and eat."

John conceded and took a plate. Despite Withinda's grumblings about it, the stew was well-cooked and flavorful, and the bread that accompanied it redolent with spices and delicious when slathered with the sweet butter and jam she provided.

He tried to question her more about the mountain and the things that had happened to him, but she either claimed ignorance or evaded his questions. Instead she asked him about his background, his family, the kingdom and his activities as a child. Since she easily turned away all queries he made of her, he finally gave up the attempt and answered her questions about himself.

He tried to help her clean up when they finished, but Withinda waved off his attempts. "Go wash and get comfortable for the night," she suggested, pointing to the curtained-off area.

John washed as best he could and changed into the one clean set of clothes he had in his pack. Then he sat, wondering what to do next.

"Don't hesitate, dearie...Your Highness. Get in bed."

"But you... Where will you sleep?"

"In the bed also, of course." She approached him. "It's a large bed, and I trust you for a man of honor, who will not take advantage of me."

The bed didn't look all that big, but he was tired and she was an old lady. He could do it. "Yes, ma'am," he said and lay down on it, pulling the thin blanket over him.

She blew out the flame on the three lamps and banked the fire in the stove, leaving the interior of the tent in darkness. The sheets rustled and the bed creaked and sank as she got in on the other side. He expected to fall asleep quickly but found her presence oddly disturbing. Each time she shifted or twisted, it jerked him out of his doze.

Sometime after he finally did get to sleep, he woke again. The slight glow from the stove should have died by then, making the blackness complete, but somewhere in the room a low light provide an eerie illumination. When he shifted, trying to relieve some stiffness in his back, he brushed his arm across her shoulder.

The skin he touched felt smooth and tight, not what he would have expected of an elderly woman. It sent a shock through his system that shot straight to his cock. He couldn't believe it. He knew he shouldn't, but he couldn't resist running a hand down her back to her buttocks. Yes. Soft, sleek flesh. He didn't remember her removing her clothes, but she seemed to be nude now. Desire washed over him in a flood.

Another sound disturbed him, pulled him abruptly out of sleep, the hiss of torches igniting. They lit the room with a shadowy, flickering radiance.

The woman rolled over and John gasped in shock. This wasn't Withinda, who'd gone to bed beside him earlier. A much younger woman lay there, reddish-blond hair spilling across the pillow, her breasts just barely concealed under the sheet. She didn't seem the least bit alarmed to find him in her bed. In fact, she smiled at him almost as though she knew him.

John looked around the room, wondering what was happening, where he was. Not the tent where he'd gone to sleep, apparently, though he could see very little of the large room. Most of it remained in shadow.

Just then more torches ignited and the room grew brighter. Several lights stood near enough to the walls to illuminate the same set of tapestries he'd seen the previous night.

It also showed that he lay in a bed that bore almost no resemblance to the one where he'd lain down to go to sleep. Heavy damask curtains hung from rails supported by elaborately carved posts at each corner of the bed. Sheets of fine, soft material covered a soft pad beneath him and down-filled pillows under his head.

He sat up, ignoring the woman beside him.

Another woman materialized in the shadowy far corner of the room. Her waving black hair blended with the darkness behind her, while her white skin stood out luridly against it. "Do you know where you are?" Evelayna asked.

"Should I?"

"Think. You might recognize it."

He stared around the room, then studied the bed. "This bed appears in one of those tapestries." He studied the scenes depicted in each. "It's in all of them."

A man appeared from another corner and walked toward them. Tall, powerful, and totally nude, he moved with a warrior's strength, confidence and cunning grace. The strangeness was getting even odder.

The newcomer and the woman in the bed smiled at each other, while neither appeared to be aware of Evelayna's presence. John looked around again, then stared harder at the other man, who seemed puzzled by his interest.

"The tapestry," he said to Evelayna. "This is a scene from one of the tapestries."

She smiled, that odd, almost cruel smile that still had an unexpected humor and strange warmth. "That's right."

"Am I...in one of them?"

"More or less. You'll experience what's happening in them, and take part if you wish." Her smile brightened and the wicked curl at the corner of her mouth cut deeper. "I hope you'll wish. Try as many as you want."

"How do I do that?"

"It will be clear."

She began to fade and was gone within a few seconds.

The man looked at him. "Are you ready?"

John nodded, wondering if he truly was, and what this was all about.

"Do you want front or back?" the man asked him.

Before he could answer, though, the woman on the bed made her choice clear. "I want to be able to see him this time," she answered, reaching out to push her fingers into his hair, pulling John down beside her. The other man circled the bed and lay down behind her.

The woman drew John closer, watching his face as he reacted to the touch of her nipples to his chest. She pressed against him, and his cock rose in salute, though what little piece of his mind he could force to think wasn't sure if this was real or a good idea.

"Don't be shy," the woman urged. "Take what you want." To illustrate the point, she reached up and dragged his face down to her, kissing him soundly. Her hands roved down his neck and back, fingers pressing into the flesh.

He couldn't see what the other man did, although his hands occasionally touched John's legs, so he presumed he worked her bottom and quim. As John began to kiss down her throat to her breasts, the woman moaned and wriggled in response to something the other man did. But when he reached her nipple and drew it into his mouth, she jumped and groaned as well. His cock responded by swelling and throbbing.

When he pulled back to look into her eyes, an odd shock hit him. She wasn't Evelayna. For some reason, he'd expected her to be, had hoped she would be. He'd seen the woman earlier, so he had no idea why it suddenly struck him as odd. His cock deflated, even though the woman next to him was beautiful, naked and very available.

Fortunately, his companions were too far gone in their own pleasure to notice his lack of enthusiasm. He closed his eyes for a moment while lowering his head to her nipple again. That way, he could at least imagine Evelayna lay below him, enjoying his attentions. It let him get some pleasure from the experience himself, although when his companions both came, after a prolonged period of moaning and writhing, he did not.

His own breathing was rapid enough that they didn't notice his failure. The three of them lay together, holding on, sweaty and panting. John closed his eyes and dozed.

When he roused again, he was still in a bed, but a slightly different one. The wool throw was a deeper shade of blue and the sheets a creamier yellow. Two women lay in the bed with him now, one on either side. Neither of them was Evelayna, though both were attractive enough in their way. One was blonde, fresh-faced and eager-looking. The other had dark hair, dark skin and an unusual, regal beauty. They were two of the women he'd met earlier that day.

They already worked on him. The blonde was running a hand up and down his thigh while pressing her lips to his cock. The dark woman had her fingers buried in his hair and her lips on his throat. He jerked and moaned as the blonde sucked hard on him and the darker one tongued his nipple.

He didn't know what to think of the situation, but it didn't matter. With their concentrated attention on him thinking and reasoning became impossible. Their fingers and mouths were all over him – pumping his cock, teasing his balls, flicking his nipples, sucking at his throat – until he drowned in a sea of sensation.

The blonde took his cock deep into her mouth and sucked until he couldn't bear it.

Pleasure rippled over him, a few waves at first, growing into a tidal force he couldn't resist. He spent into the blonde's mouth, gasping and painting. They didn't stop even then, and he had to shake them away. As good as it felt, he couldn't handle anymore. A buzzing noise clogged his ears and tears burned his eyes.

He dozed off, wishing one of them had been Evelayna.

He woke again in another scene. This one wasn't taking place in the bed, however. A group of chairs formed a circle in a large open area of the room. A man or woman occupied each one. Three that he could see held both a man and a woman, with the woman squirming on the man's lap. All were naked, and he couldn't see any of their faces clearly in the shadows, but their bodies shone with light reflected from the many torches that lit the room.

In the center of the circle a threesome stood. Two nude men held a woman between them. Her arms wound around the neck of the man she faced, and her legs circled his waist. The man's hands supported her buttocks, holding them apart at the same time, while the man behind her held her waist and had his cock buried inside her. The man pumped into the woman, who sobbed with pleasure and occasionally screamed her joy at the treatment.

In the circle around them, some watched avidly while others engaged in their own entertainment. One woman had turned to face the man whose lap she occupied and had shifted so that his rod was buried inside her. She, too, squealed in pleasure and bounced up and down against her partner.

It was an arousing show, but John was just as glad he didn't have to participate in this one. The prospect of performing in front of an audience didn't thrill him. Then something changed, a very subtle ripple in the scene. A closer look this time showed the woman in the center of the group now had flowing black hair and lovely, if somewhat sharp, features like Evelayna.

His interest abruptly surged. He got up from the bed and walked over to stand behind one of the chairs. No one took any note of his presence since all were absorbed either in the spectacle in the center or in their own private pleasures. More than one couple had hands on each other's sensitive places.

A sudden roar from one of the men in the center of the circle drew John's attention. He'd bounced the woman on his cock until he'd come. The proof seeped down her leg onto his. In a quick shift, the woman was lifted off one cock, turned quickly, and lowered onto the other man, with the first man now steadying her and fingering her breasts.

The clearer view of the woman's face afforded by the shift showed she wasn't Evelayna. That discovery didn't entirely kill his interest, though. The athletic achievement of the two men in supporting the woman and moving her on each of them fascinated him. The man who'd already come now reached down with one hand into her slit, and stroked her outer lips and clitoris.

She sobbed and moaned louder and faster. The other man bounced her on his cock more and more quickly, while the first one shifted his hand so he could bury a finger in her rear hole.

When the second man roared as he came into her, she screamed as well, throwing her head back and emitting a piercing shriek of joy and completion.

For a minute or two, the three of them clung together, panting and smiling, running hands over backs and buttocks, as they came down from the heights they'd achieved.

Then one of the men looked up, glancing straight at him. "Will you take your turn now, Your Highness?" he asked.

John nearly said yes. If that had truly been Evelayna, he might have. But then if it had been Evelayna, he would have been angry about her being with them. She shouldn't be with any man but himself. He had no right to that emotion, he realized, but it made no difference in his feelings. She belonged to him. Somehow the connection between them had been drawn and they both knew it.

"Thank you, but no," he answered. He returned to the bed and lay down, wondering what would be next.

He dozed briefly and woke to a room similar to the last, except there was no circle of chairs. Instead, a table and a strange upright piece of equipment that looked like an enormous, empty picture frame occupied the open space in the room.

A man and a woman walked out of the shadows of the far corner. The woman was nude save for wide leather straps around her wrists and ankles and a similar cuff around her neck. The man wore a short leather vest that hugged his torso closely, leaving bare his impressively muscled shoulders and arms. Close-fitting leggings covered his lower body, but with no codpiece, so that his long, erect cock jutted out freely.

The man led the woman by a length of leather hooked to the collar around her neck, though he allowed enough slack that he didn't pull or jerk her.

The woman was tall and slender with short, red hair and a long, angular face, full breasts and rounded hips. The pair stopped between the table and the upright frame.

"I'm sorry we have to go over this lesson again, slave," the man said roughly. "But you will learn to obey my commands."

"I'm sorry, too, Master," the woman said. "I will try not to disobey again in the future."

For someone who was obviously about to be punished, she sounded neither dismayed nor frightened. If anything, she seemed excited and eager.

The man led her to the table, which was about the height of her hips, and made her bend over it. He pressed her down so that the top half of her body rested on the surface, her arms stretched out alongside her head and beyond. The man went around to the other side and hooked something on the table to the cuffs on her wrists to hold her in place.

John's stomach tightened in excitement as he watched it. How would he feel if it were Evelayna there? The woman certainly seemed eager for this rather than unhappy about it. Would Evelayna?

He had no idea where the paddle had come from, but the man stood behind the woman, holding what looked like a thin, polished wood board about a foot long with another six inches of handle. Holes had been drilled through it at regular intervals.

It made a startlingly loud splat when he struck the woman's unprotected bottom with it. John jumped almost as much as the woman did. She didn't make any sound herself, and remained stoic and quiet through several more spanks. After ten or so, her derriere became decidedly pink and she began to moan aloud.

After twenty, she was yelping and begging him to stop. But she also rubbed her crotch against the edge of the table in a suggestive way. Moisture glistened at the top of her thighs.

The man released her, helped her up and took her to the frame, where he fastened her wrists by the leather cuffs again to the upper corners, and her ankles to the lower corners.

John didn't see where the multi-tailed flogger came from either, and didn't even notice it until the man swung it. The ends of the leather lashes bit into her back, leaving small pink weals as they fell away. She moaned and wriggled.

Again and again the flogger struck her, on her back, bottom and thighs, cracking sharply, leaving pink areas and sometimes a trail of welts. She moaned and begged to be released and promised she'd never disobey again. John didn't count but guessed the man struck her a dozen or more times before he released her and she fell into his waiting arms.

"Have you learned to obey me, slave?" he asked her.

"Yes, Master," she said.

He'd moved his hand down between her legs, testing the wetness there, and his fingers came back sopping with her moisture. "We'll see," he said. "On the table," he ordered. "On your back."

She complied immediately, though John thought it must have been uncomfortable to have the welts on her back rubbing the hard surface.

"Part your legs," the man said.

She complied, affording John a decent view of the puffy lips of her quim and the tip of her clit peeking out.

Her master still held the flogger, but he didn't strike her with it again. Instead, he held it so that the ends just touched her, dancing over her nipples. The woman squirmed and moaned in need.

"You will not come until I give you permission, do you understand, slave?" he asked.

"Yes, Master," she answered, her voice breaking on a sob.

"We'll see." He let the ends of the flogger trail down her body to the parting of her legs and moved it carefully so that the tips caressed her labia and clit.

The woman moaned and squirmed. She grabbed the edges of the table and tightened her fingers around them. He could tell by the tightening of her body that she neared a climax.

"Please, Master," she begged. "I'm going to come. I can't hold it. Please!" The last word came out almost a scream.

"A little longer, slave. Hold it a little longer."

"I don't—" the last dissolved into a sob when he leaned over and took a nipple into his mouth. She bucked and squirmed and pleaded with him. The master moved around the table to stand between her legs. When he dipped his face into her quim, she screamed in frustration and need. Her head rolled around frantically and her body heaved. "Please," she begged. "I can't hold it. I can't."

Moments later, the master lifted his head. He shifted until he could work his cock into her exposed slit, sliding it in smoothly. "You may come now, slave," he said.

Two thrusts later, she screamed again, in an ecstasy of joy and release. By his expression, the master wasn't far behind her in release. Moments later, he leaned over to rest his head on her stomach, his cock still tucked into her cunt.

The scene faded out and John lay back on the bed. His own cock had engorged and now throbbed painfully. He wrapped a hand around it and pumped up and down until the seed spurted onto his belly and the pleasurable relief soaked through him.

He nodded off again, and this time no dreams interrupted his sleep.

Chapter Six

He woke to the smell of food cooking. John didn't want to open his eyes and face the morning. He wondered what Withinda knew about what had happened the previous night, if she'd say anything, and how he'd react if she did.

His belly was sticky where his semen had dried.

But Withinda greeted him cheerily when he rolled out of bed, carefully pulling his clothes into place. She didn't mention anything about the previous night save to ask if he'd slept well, and she didn't act as though anything untoward had occurred. She fed him breakfast and sent him on his way with a packet of food she put together. He thanked her and set off.

The morning started pleasantly cool, and while his feet weren't as fresh as the day before, they didn't ache initially. Sleep and food helped him get moving. As before he walked for some time with nothing happening save for the normal sounds of the breeze in the trees and the noises of animals in the woods.

Gradually, though, he became aware that a louder sound of something moving through the underbrush trailed him as he walked, reminding him that he'd suspected something had tracked him the previous day also. He couldn't say how long it had been there, but suspected it had been a while longer than he'd realized. Several times he turned to look, but never could make out a sign of anything there. The sounds tended to halt when he did, but resumed as soon as he started moving again. It persisted for more than an hour into his walk. The noises suggested something big, though it remained hidden from sight. John was sweating by then, and it wasn't all due to the warm sunshine beating down on him. He wanted to see what pursued him. Perhaps if he passed some place he could duck into for shelter, he could use food to lure it out into the open. Or possibly just stay there until the creature grew tired of waiting for him and left.

He passed two small cottages in the next half hour or so. Neither bore the cloverleaf sign indicating he could use them for shelter. He didn't see anyone in or around them. No light or movement showed in the windows and no smoke rose from the chimneys. Disappointed in that hope of help, he rushed onward, resisting the urge to take refuge in one of them. But he still feared failure more than he feared the creature stalking him.

As he passed the second cottage and looked back, he got a quick glimpse of the creature rounding behind the building. It was even larger than he expected, based on how well it had hidden in the underbrush. He guessed it was the size of a large hunting dog. It had the general shape and form of a dog, as well, though the grayish-blue fur didn't look like any canine he'd ever seen. Its head looked odd, too, more sharply angular than most dogs' faces, giving it a ferocious aspect.

John resisted the urge to run, but picked up the pace of his footsteps, nonetheless, even realizing the futility. The creature could easily outrun him at any pace he could manage. He loosened the fastening that held his sword in its scabbard and positioned it where he could reach it easily.

It disturbed him, but the animal appeared content to remain out of sight and not attack. Though it was only midmorning, sweat gathered under his shirt, making it cling uncomfortably. The day had grown significantly warmer and the road rose more sharply.

He'd just negotiated a very steep stretch of road when he began to hear the sound of water rushing. That could be good or bad depending on where the water was in relation to the road. It wouldn't hurt to refill the water bottle, but he didn't relish the idea of having to wade across a cold river.

Fortunately that wasn't necessary. Rounding another switchback, he came to a planked bridge that crossed a stream a couple of feet wide. To his right, just twenty feet or so from the road, the water fell off the side of a rock well above his head into the stream, making a sustained crashing sound. A narrow verge of sandy gravel lined the water's edge, giving way to a grassy area next to it on the side nearer to him. On the other side, trees and shrubs grew up to the line of gravel.

He stepped off the road to get closer to the stream. The silty gravel gave slightly when he walked on it, and the water ran very clear and cold, as he discovered when he dipped his fingers in. He lifted a handful to his lips and tasted cautiously. Sweet and cool, it ran over his tongue and down his throat, refreshing him as it went.

He'd just leaned over to fill the water bottle, when the voice startled him.

"Good morning, my lord."

He whirled sharply to see an old man sitting on a rock at the side of the stream, not far from the waterfall, with a fishing rod hung out over the pool at the bottom of it, and a net, bucket and bag beside him.

"And to you too, sir," he said. "How's the fishing?"

The old man grinned a nearly toothless smile. "Just fine, my lord. Just fine. You've traveled far to get here."

"Yes," he agreed. "You know how far?"

"I've a notion," the man said. "You've yet a ways to go, now. And rough climbing it is. You'll have to defeat the dragon to finish your quest, as well. A sad business." He shook his head mournfully. "You seem like a nice youngster, too."

"I'll have to..." He choked on the words. The dragon? Was the old man right? It echoed—sort of—what the woman at the bottom of the mountain had hinted. He'd have to defeat the dragon. Having seen it, he knew there wasn't even ghost of a chance he could manage that feat.

"Get past the dragon. 'Fraid so. Not an easy thing to do. Unfriendly critter, that dragon. And big, too. Me, I stay out of its way."

That sounded like a good plan to John, too. "No one man could kill that dragon. Surely there must be another way to get to the lance."

The old man turned a sharp, speculative gaze on him. "Might be," he answered. "Awful waste to let a boy like you go up against a dragon."

"Tell me how I can avoid it," he asked.

"There's a way," the old man said. He pointed back into the woods behind him. "A path that will take you up quicker and get you to the lance without the dragon knowing or seeing."

"You know this way?" he asked. "I'll avoid the dragon if I follow it?"

"I know it well enough. It's sheltered by trees for most of the way, then goes into a tunnel. You should be safe from the dragon's view. Way's quicker, too. Kind of a shortcut. Much better for you. Safer and faster."

Perhaps it was the word "shortcut" that triggered the memory. He'd been warned to stay on the road. There were no shortcuts to his destination. But if it meant fighting a dragon, he'd never reach that destination anyway. The dilemma paralyzed him for a few minutes.

He couldn't fight the dragon and win. There wasn't any possible way. But he'd been warned that taking any kind of shortcut would lead to failure. John sighed, feeling his shoulders sag. It appeared he couldn't complete the quest either way. If he were destined to lose, which way did he prefer to do it? Getting eaten by a dragon didn't sound like fun, but it would be quick. If he took the other path, though he might not achieve the lance, he at least had a chance to survive.

But he'd fail in the quest. Fail his father and his sisters, who believed in him. Fail Evelayna, though he wasn't sure exactly what part she played in this.

He couldn't live that way.

He sighed and pulled himself together. No one had promised this would be easy. Riva had thought he could do it, but then she couldn't have guessed he'd have to face a dragon. Unless... Had she faced that challenge and survived it? But she had talents he lacked. Others had warned it would be harder than he guessed. How much harder, he couldn't have imagined.

"I thank you, sir, but I believe I'd best stay on the way as I've been directed."

The old man shook his head sadly. "Shame. But if that's the way you'll have it, that's the way you'll have it."

"I believe it's the right choice, though I doubt I have much chance against a dragon."

The man stared hard at him. "You might have a better chance than you now believe." Then he shrugged. "Still, better you than me. Good fortune to you and blessings on your way." He turned back to his fishing.

John nodded as he tucked the refilled water bottle back in his pack and lifted it to his shoulder again. "I thank you for your kindness, sir."

The man's head came around sharply to stare at him again. "'Twasn't any kindness," he said, the words firm and definite. "Fortune on your way."

"Blessings on you, too, sir," he said, turning and going back to the road to set out again. The prediction about the dragon and the inevitability of him facing it sent his mind into so much turmoil it took a while before he recognized the oddness of the old man's last words.

For the next hour, the road continued twisting up the side of the mountain, sometimes in longer, straight sections or gentle curves, sometimes in further series of tight switchbacks.

Near the end of a longer bend, a colorful sight ahead drew his attention. It looked like a tree beside the road in the full cry of brilliant fall foliage, despite the fact that it was early summer, but when he drew closer, he discovered the effect came from a group of butterflies fluttering around and through the branches. The only thing odd about it was the sheer number of them. Hundreds, possibly thousands congregated in that one small area. They blanketed the tree in a cloud of orange, yellow and black wings.

It didn't occur to him to be cautious around them. If he'd remembered Riva's warnings about things not being what they seemed, perhaps he would have been more careful. But they were brilliant, beautiful and fascinating. Curious about what would cause them to flock to that one spot, he took a few steps toward them.

Something bounded out of the shrubbery on the other side of the road and charged toward him. He took a few stumbling steps backward and drew his sword. The dog, or wolf, he wasn't sure which, stopped short of him, directly between him and the butterflies. Its head swung back and forth, discouraging most of the insects from coming that way.

One of the butterflies lighted on the hand that held the sword. A sharp, stinging pain burned into him there, nearly causing him to drop the weapon. As he shook the creature off his hand, a flutter of wings near his face culminated in another sting on his forehead. John brushed it away, stepped back from the tree and rushed past it.

The animal had parked itself in the road. Several butterflies settled on its head, muzzle and back. It made a low, rumbling growl as it scratched at its neck with a paw while shaking its head around, trying to dislodge the others, and whipping its tail back and forth.

Only when John was well away, still swatting a few straggling butterflies that tried to reach him, did the dog finally move, turning suddenly and shooting into the shrubbery at the side of the road near him.

For the next fifteen or twenty minutes, the dog's growl, sounding more pained and angry than menacing, occasionally issued from bushes near him. It kept John wary, even while he rubbed at the burning welts the butterflies had left. The creature had saved him from being engulfed by the insects. He shied away from imagining what might have happened if the dog hadn't warned him off.

The day warmed up as the sun rose, and the trail grew steeper. He wondered what the next test might be. It disheartened him to realize he'd almost surely failed the butterfly one. But he'd stayed on the road even when sorely tempted to stray from it.

He waited for the next test or challenge. Would another shimmering screen appear? Another person meeting him along the way? But, the rest of the morning passed with nothing more occurring and after a while he sheathed the sword again. His feet began to bother him again and sweat gathered under his shirt. He stopped at a shady spot where a rock provided a convenient seat and ate the food Withinda had provided.

The sun and a full stomach combined to make him drowsy, so he settled back for a short nap before setting out again.

He dreamed, but it was nothing like the dream visions of Evelayna.

A fierce battle raged in his uncomfortable sleep. He had a strange, eerie view of it, looking down on the expanse of meadow on the side of the mountain, where two sets of troops, one in red-slashed dark tunics, the others in gray uniforms, moved amidst the trees that bordered the open area.

Units of each army advanced, met the enemy amidst barrages of arrows and phalanxes of swords and shields. They clashed for a while and many died in the chaos of flashing pikes and swords and battle hammers. The survivors retreated to rejoin other units that had held back. Then after a while they did it again.

Sometimes one side lost a great many more men than the other, but on the whole the fight seemed pretty even with no real advantage gained by either side. Occasional, soundless explosions decimated entire groups, sending body parts flying in all directions. After a while the remaining soldiers moved with grim, weary tenacity, fighting on through exhaustion, many to their death. He counted it a mercy that he could hear nothing of the battle, only see it.

Then the battlefield faded into darkness, and he woke shortly after.

The dream left him shaken and disoriented. Though he had no idea why, his hands trembled as he gathered the remains of his meal, hoisted his pack and set out again.

For several hours nothing happened beyond his encountering a fallen tree that lay across the road, forcing him to scramble over it.

Around midafternoon, he reached a place where the woods thinned quickly on his right, giving way to a meadow that stretched as far as he could see down the side of the mountain. To his left, though, the trees and underbrush continued just as densely, and the creature that tracked him was on that side.

The meadow offered considerable distraction, though, not just by dint of the long stretch of blue- and yellow-flowered ground spreading down the slope, but also because it offered a largely unimpeded view out over the side of the mountain to the lowland below. He'd come a long way uphill, though he suspected he still had a long trip ahead of him. The woods here mostly obscured the view upward, offering no clue how much higher he'd have to climb.

The strong, fresh aroma of the floral carpet reached him, just a tantalizing sniff or two at first, but growing rapidly as he approached, to become a more ravishing smell. It almost overwhelmed him as he reached the edge of the meadow. He had to stop to admire it for a moment, since he couldn't recall that he'd ever seen a more brilliant and extensive swath of natural color. The perfume of it surrounded him, nearly drowning him in its heavy, sultry cloud.

It drew him closer, filling him with a need to smell it more deeply, to lose himself in it. The flowers waved at him with gloriously cheerful blue and yellow and white heads, inviting him to come play with them.

A loud growl behind him made him whirl to face the opposite side of the road. The dog watched him with teeth bared and ears standing straight up at attention. Only its tail moved, a quick, sharp twitch. Its teeth were long and wickedly sharp and looked more than ready to tear into him.

John's heart slammed against his chest at twice its normal speed. Sweat suddenly burst out on his temples and stuck his clothes to his body. Raw terror made it almost impossible to think or plan, though he did put a hand on his sword.

When the dog took a step toward him, John turned and ran into the meadow, forgetting Evelayna's warning to stay on the road. He panted heavily, struggling for air, trying to move even more quickly when he saw the creature cross the road in his direction. It stopped at the edge of the meadow, however, and let out a surprisingly mournful whine.

John barely noticed. At the same moment, he tripped over some unseen obstacle in the sea of flowers and landed on his face in the vegetation.

He struggled to get up and discovered his body no longer wanted to cooperate. His legs moved feebly, but couldn't seem to generate enough force to get under him and push upward. With fingers digging into the tangled mess of flower stems, leaves and blossoms, he willed his arms to push. Nothing much happened.

The drugging perfume of the flowers made his head feel increasingly muzzy. Instinct urged him to fight the effects, but the necessary concentration slipped from him faster than his will could rally it.

He didn't remember much but a jumbled confusion of impressions for a while after that—sinking into darkness, a wetness on his face, movement and his body sliding along the carpet of vegetation. It felt squishy at times and bumpy at others. Then he hit a rougher spot of ground, and the scraping jolted him into full awareness.

Something tugged the lower end of his pants, right above the leather rim of his boot. He levered himself up to see what pulled at him.

His heart slammed against his chest at the sight of the dog standing over him with a mouthful of his pants clutched between wickedly sharp fangs. It was still dragging him away from the meadow, although the rougher surface of the road had slowed their progress.

When John sat up abruptly, trying to get into a defensible position, the creature released his pants leg and backed up a couple of steps. Its posture didn't look particularly threatening, but the pointed teeth still showed. For a moment or two neither of them moved. They eyed each other warily, waiting for some threatening gesture.

The dog backed up a few more steps, then abruptly turned and ran back into the shrubbery. John heard it go, but the sounds stopped shortly, suggesting the creature hadn't gone far. Watching the place where it had disappeared, John stood up and got his pack repositioned on his back.

He stared back at the meadow of flowers for a moment, wondering what they'd done to him. It still looked like a magnificent carpet of color across part of the down-slope, but he now saw a vague menace in its enticing beauty.

What would have happened if the dog hadn't dragged him back out of it? Would he have lain there and woken up hours later, possibly in the middle of the night, exposed to all sorts of menace? If he woke up at all? He shuddered as he considered those possibilities.

But why had the dog pulled him out? Was it dragging him to a more hospitable spot where he could gnaw on him in greater peace? That being the case, though, it would have made more sense for it to take him anywhere but back to the road. He didn't think that was what it had done. In fact, it appeared the creature might have saved him from pain or failure or both at least twice that day.

Perhaps half an hour later, he faced a series of tight switchbacks where the road ascended a steep section of the mountain. After a couple of quick turns, he was huffing and puffing, pushing his body to keep climbing. The sound of his own breathing rang so loudly in his ears that at first the noises ahead were just a low hum, like the buzzing of a swarm of bees.

As he approached a sharp bend in the road, the sounds grew sharper and decidedly more alarming. The snarls and growls came in enough different timbres and volumes to indicate the presence of several animals. Several angry animals. Probably not far ahead of him on the road, though his view was blocked by the curving ascent.

John stopped to draw his sword again and walked forward warily. The sounds grew louder and more menacing as he got closer. At a guess, he heard a small pack of wolves fighting among themselves. He really didn't want to provide any distraction for them.

He took step after cautious step as he rounded the bend, stopping when he could finally see the conflict.

Four large creatures occupied the middle of the road. Three of them menaced the fourth with bared fangs, snarling and growling. Three unmistakable wolves, large, muscular creatures with strong legs, thick bodies, shaggy black and silver coats, and long muzzles lined with razor-sharp teeth, formed a semicircle, facing the other one. The fourth was the creature that had saved him earlier. It was smaller than the others.

The shape of its muzzle differed from theirs as did its fur, which was a much bluer shade.

As he watched, the center one of the three large wolves dashed toward the smaller one, mouth wide, leaving its fangs open to go for its opponent's throat. Some attempts must already have been made since the smaller animal bore a couple of bleeding cuts and one ear hung at an odd angle. It was the ear that really got to John, rousing a burning fury deep in his gut. It made him so angry, he forgot to be afraid, forgot to consider whether he was following the rules or not, forgot even how inexperienced he was in real combat.

He let the pack slide off his shoulders, leaving it in the middle of the road, swung the sword up and around as he charged toward the melee and chopped it down into the neck of the attacking wolf. It nearly severed the head completely off. John recoiled in shock for a moment, stunned by how much force he'd put behind the blow and the result of it.

His astonishment couldn't last long. One of the remaining two animals fainted toward him. John swung the sword again, but missed when the creature moved faster than he expected. He caught it on the leg with his backhand, however. The wolf whined loudly and retreated, limping, leaving a blood trail. The other one slunk off into the woods right behind it.

He planted the point of the sword in the dirt and leaned on it for a moment, getting control of his raging heartbeat and panting breath. He wasn't sure what to do about the dog, but it took care of itself. After watching him for a moment or two, the animal stood and walked off into the woods as well. It limped a bit, but not so badly as the wolf he'd cut with the sword.

John also debated what to do with the remains of the dead wolf. He hated to leave it in the road where some unwary fellow traveler might happen on it. It would attract other predators as well.

Lack of shovel or other digging implement limited his options. He dragged the corpse over to the side of the road, stepped a few feet into the shrubs, and tipped it into a ditch. A collection of all the loose debris he could find in the area went over it, effectively burying it, if not too deeply. It probably wouldn't keep predators off it forever, but it was the best he could do right then.

Wearily, he retrieved his pack and set off again, hoping he'd seen the last of the challenges for the day. He likely still had some distance to go before the next shelter and he'd spent more time than he could afford on the dead wolf.

It was late afternoon, but twilight came much earlier than he expected. Looking up, John saw that dark clouds had moved over the top of the mountain and blocked out his view of the sun and sky. As he walked on, hoping it wouldn't be far until he reached a cabin or tent, occasional booms of thunder shook the ground and rattled his teeth. It reminded him of the dream of battle from earlier.

He grew worried when he found no shelter as the day grew darker, but just before the onset of true night, he came to a ramshackle hut that bore a cloverleaf over the door. No smoke curled over it, nor did any light shine from within. It looked so rickety, he doubted it would keep the rain off, if those dark clouds overhead decided to let go. But it should keep predators out and provide some protection.

The interior did nothing to dispel the impression of long disuse. A straw mattress in one corner, a table and two chairs in the other, and a dry sink along the wall comprised the only furniture. Confounding the impression that no one had been there in years, however, a fresh loaf of bread, several pieces of fruit and strips of dried meat lay on a platter on the table. A pitcher stood beside it, still cool to the touch and damp with condensation.

He let his pack slide to the floor and sat down to eat.

The thought of sleep and the dreams it might bring both excited and terrified him. He put off finishing his meal as long as possible and took considerable time washing up, reorganizing his pack and cleaning his clothes. Exhaustion finally forced him to call a halt to the delaying activities and lie down on the straw mattress.

He couldn't remember ever trying to sleep on a less comfortable bed. The thing let out a billow of dust and straw bits when he put his weight on it, making him sneeze, and the cloud of debris rose again each time he tried to find a comfortable position. The straw had probably been eaten by several generations of rodents since there didn't seem to be much of it between him and the floor beneath it. What there was poked at him in sensitive places and made him itch. Most likely it harbored fleas as well.

Nonetheless, he fell into a doze faster than he expected.

And dreamed.

He found himself in the midst of battle again, only this time with sounds. A cacophony of yells, shouts, screams, tramping, and thunderous explosions nearly deafened him. He seemed to be closer to it this time, almost in the center of the smoke and chaos and running soldiers. None of them showed any sign of noticing him, but he could nearly reach out and touch some.

When a couple of arrows whizzed by, too close to his head, he ducked behind a nearby tree. He'd never been in battle before. His father's kingdom and its neighbors were at peace, a pleasant, productive peace, so despite his training with sword and pike, he had no experience of the real horror of war. He wanted to get away from it, as fast as possible.

A man not far from him let out a sudden sharp yell and fell to the ground with an arrow protruding from his chest. He groaned loudly, screaming for help as blood seeped from the wound. John crawled toward him, ducking below another volley of incoming arrows.

The wounded soldier was no more than a boy, probably several years younger than himself. He writhed in pain for a few minutes as John watched helplessly. Then he lay still. Deathly still.

John raised the boy's head, ignoring the blood that ran from his mouth and touched his cheek. "Wake up," he begged him. "You have to wake up." It seemed like he did that for a long time.

The scene faded out as John struggled to suppress tears for a boy he'd never met, never known, who was probably nothing more than a piece of his own imagination.

Some time later—he couldn't tell how long—he roused to a strange sound. When he opened his eyes, he realized he'd heard the hiss of a torch igniting. Several of them, standing in holders along the walls, now blazed, lighting up a space that was not the cabin he'd gone to sleep in.

This was the same room he'd visited in dreams before, with the strange, unsettling tapestries showing assorted sexual pairings hanging on the walls. He lay on a bed now, something much more elaborate and far more comfortable than the straw mat.

Chapter Seven

Evelayna stood in the darkest corner of the room, watching him with cold, hard eyes and a cruel smile. She wore a black shift with some sort of black cloak over it. His heart clenched and then began to beat faster. Unbidden, desire rolled through him. His cock filled and rose, and sweat beaded on his temples.

"You're doing well. It pleases me," she said, her voice low and husky, ripe with promise and threat. "Will you come to me?"

He drew a deep breath. Part of him wanted to go to her and wrap her in his arms, no matter the pain. Another part of him was terrified by it. Before he realized he'd made a decision, he'd levered himself up off the bed and onto his feet. A chill breeze blew across his bare body, raising bumps. It didn't cool the desperate throbbing of his cock.

She watched him with no change of expression as he padded barefoot, bare-bottomed, across the floor toward her. His toes sank into a surprisingly soft, springy and comfortable carpet.

He stopped an arm's length from her.

"You're mine, you know. Do you acknowledge that yet?" she asked.

"Why would I?" He expected his reply to anger her, but if it did she didn't show it.

Instead her smile grew broader. "You question. Very good. And begin to exert your own will. You're doing well. Have you the courage to touch me again?"

"I have the courage. Whether I have the inclination is a different question."

She laughed and licked her lips in a blatantly seductive way. "You don't desire me?"

"You know I do." He glanced down at his rampant cock. "The evidence is clear. But desire is just an impulse. Difficult to control, but not impossible."

She looked startled by that. "When did... When did you learn this?"

"I started to realize it just last night, when you asked me to do things that were strange and new and some were not to my taste. But I found I could. Or need not, if I wished not. Was that not the lesson I was supposed to learn?"

She looked nonplused for a moment. "It was. Part of it, anyway. But... You don't want me."

"You know that's not so."

"You fear the pain? Or that I might do more harm to you?"

He considered her point. "Perhaps so."

"No, I think not. You question whether I'm another temptation to failure in your quest for the lance. You fear I'll lead you astray, into danger or death or distraction so deep you can find no way back from it."

"You won't?" he challenged.

Her smile twisted very oddly. "Before the night is over, you'll think I'm doing just that. Things are not always what they seem."

Riva had said something like that to him before he left home. Not everyone he would meet was what he or she seemed. Of course, Evelayna had two very distinct seemings, and he didn't know which was the truth.

"What do you want from me tonight?" he asked. "More fun and games?"

"Perhaps." She slanted an arch look toward him. "If you could have any of the ladies you were with before, which of them would you choose?"

He didn't hesitate. "None of them."

"None of them?" She looked surprised. "Why not? They were all quite beautiful, weren't they?"

"They were. But they weren't you."

For a moment she didn't say anything, nor did her expression change. Then her lips curved into a smile that held satisfaction and some relief. "What games would you like to play? Were there any last night that interested you particularly? Any that appealed to you more than others?"

Was this a test? If so, what kind?

"Yes. Master and slave." He wasn't entirely sure whether he answered her question truthfully or if he intended it as a return of her own challenge. Either way, it was the right answer.

She looked pleased by the choice as well. Perhaps he hadn't thought it through as thoroughly as he should have. She could hurt him with her touch as it was. Putting himself completely in her power, gave her leave to do even more to him.

Instead she asked, "Do you prefer to be Master or slave?" It startled him so badly, for a moment his mind went blank.

"You would play slave to me?" he asked.

Her smile twisted, went savage and brutal and avidly lascivious. "Oh, yes, indeed I would. Is that your wish? But I suggest we take turns."

"And you will be Master first?"

"Mistress," she said. "You will address me as Mistress. And, yes, I'll be first." She moved in a slow, graceful glide over to the bed, shedding the cloak and shift as she went. As before she moved like a queen, even unclothed, knowing she didn't need the trappings to look like royalty. Queen of Darkness, perhaps, but a queen nonetheless.

"Lay down on the bed, my slave," she told him. "Because I don't trust you not to try to run away, I'm going to tie you down."

"I don't think —"

She stopped him with a finger to his lips. Bolts of fire slammed into his mouth at the touch, the pain bearing a strange burning pleasure in its wake that crawled along his veins and muscles.

"I will not harm you," she promised. "It's the game. And you'll have your chance as well."

John hesitated, then did as she ordered. He almost panicked and changed his mind when she drew from behind her somewhere, strips of cloth that she proceeded to wind around his ankles, then fastened to the bedposts. She took care not to let her fingers actually touch his skin while she bound him. His wrists received the same treatment, leaving him spread-eagled and defenseless on the bed. His heart pounded against his chest wall so hard he wondered the flesh could contain it. Sweat broke out all over him.

From out of the air, or so it seemed, an object appeared in her hand. He blinked several times in disbelief, but even after closing his eyes and opening them, the thing in her hand remained a feather, a rather large one, like a goose quill.

She smiled wickedly, held it by the pointed end, reached out toward him and ran the quill along his cheek and jaw. It prickled oddly and tickled, sending light shivers down his body.

She brushed it over the top of his shoulder blade, then came back and moved it down his chest. The multiple hairlets on the feather snagged in the light coat of hair there, sending small prickles stabbing into him. Then it touched the tip of his nipple. Shards of white-hot desire flamed through him. His cock and balls swelled painfully, needfully. He gasped.

Her smile widened as she saw its effects on him.

"It's deliciously different, is it not?"

"Yes," he panted, the word little more than a harsh exhalation.

"Imagine how it will feel on other—more sensitive—parts of your body. But you needn't imagine it. You'll know shortly."

He wasn't sure he could bear it when she brushed it along his abdomen, heading for his groin. The touch of that thing on his cock would surely send him over the edge into an embarrassing explosion. This gentle torment was just the opposite of what he'd expected from her, and it moved something deep inside him as it stirred his body into desperate, flaming need.

She bypassed the cock and balls, moving it down his thighs. Sheer, raw pleasure sliced into him. He struggled against his bonds when the sensation threatened to overwhelm him.

"Lady, please," he gasped, when the feather worked its way slowly, tantalizingly up the inside of his left thigh.

"Please, what?" she asked.

"Stop. No, don't stop. But I'm going to explode."

"Oh, no. Not yet, slave. You obey orders, remember. You don't come until I say you can."

"I don't know if I can...contain it."

"I'll have to punish you if you don't," she threatened.

The feather brushed lightly across his balls, dragging a sharp cry from him. Nothing had ever felt remotely like this before, a pleasure so deep and profound it was nearly unbearable.

Being tied and helpless, unable to move to stop it, at her mercy, just compounded the feeling. His cock throbbed, desperate for relief from the pressure. He concentrated on watching her for a few minutes, but that didn't help much. She was beautiful and terrible. Her eyes, dark, deep blue, not black as he'd thought, held a gleam of delighted satisfaction as she watched him writhe.

She teased him with the feather for an endless time of mind-numbing, sense-drugging, thrilling torment. Tears formed in the corners of his eyes and he fought to keep them from falling.

When it tickled the base of his cock and slipped up along the shaft, he roared and arched his body so hard, his buttocks lifted off the bed.

"Powers that be, lady, please! No more or I'll explode. Let me come! Please!"

It swished down his rod again. Tension made muscles bulge in his arms, legs, and abdomen. He began to slide into the plateau of arrested strain that came just before release, and he all but sobbed.

"Please, lady," he begged. "I can't hold it any longer."

She set the feather aside and leaned over him. "When I kiss you, you may come," she said.

She reached out and put a hand on either of his cheeks. Fire tore into him in a blaze that seemed to engulf his entire head when she touched him. "Don't scream," she warned. "Accept it. Bear it."

He did. And found an excruciating pleasure along with the pain that swelled his cock even farther. When she put her lips against his, he almost yelled from the overwhelming sensation that jolted through him. But then his cock spasmed and he came in the most ferocious and violent orgasm he'd ever experienced.

It went on and on, too, longer than he'd ever come before.

At the end, if there was any pain, he didn't notice. He was too wrung out, sated, overwhelmed, devastated and flattened.

Lips moved on his, soft, warm and pleading, then pulled back.

"John."

He opened his eyes and stared up at Evelayna. The cold, cruel woman was gone, replaced by the softer, sweeter, less beautiful, but far prettier version.

She smiled down at him, a real smile with no hint of cruelty or wickedness. "I suppose you're ready to have your turn," she said.

"Give me a minute to remember how to breathe," he asked.

"If you ask nicely, I'll even give you two."

"The least you can do after tormenting me so mercilessly."

Evelayna stood up and removed the restraints from his ankles and wrists. The touch of her fingers sparked a nice little tingle that bore no resemblance to the burning flashes from her earlier caresses.

"How long will this last?" he asked. "We had only a short time before."

"We'll have more time tonight. As long as we need, in fact." She watched him sit up and stretch to ease muscles that had tightened, before she slid behind him and began to massage his shoulders and back. It felt so wonderful, he hoped she wouldn't stop any time soon. Then it occurred to him that she'd already offered to be his slave, which meant he could order her to do whatever he wanted.

He'd thought himself drained by her earlier attentions to him, but the thought of having her at his command made his cock stir again.

"You'll find most of the things you're likely to need in the chest over there." She pointed to a tall chest that stood against a far wall. John walked over and opened a drawer in the middle. It held a collection of cloth strips, cuffs, collars, odd clothing—some of which seemed made mostly of strings—belts and other things whose use he couldn't even guess. The next drawer down held an assortment of paddles, switches and floggers. John pulled a couple out and tested them on his hand.

His play with Loris aside, he'd never done anything like this and wasn't entirely sure how to proceed. He remembered the stern confidence of the man the night before and wondered how he could manage to project the same. A thought occurred to him. He'd had to endure the pain of her touch before enjoying the pleasure of her body, perhaps she should feel some of the same.

He held some of the cloth strips when he turned to her and said, "Lie down on the bed."

She did it, eyes wide with a combination of fear and excitement as she stared up at him.

"Roll over," he ordered, and again she complied, going from being on her back to her stomach.

"Now you'll know how it feels to be tied down and helpless while someone torments you," he warned as he used the cloth to fasten her ankles and wrists to the bedposts just as she'd done to him. "And to have to endure the sting and burn of their touch before you get to the pleasure."

He took a few moments to study her. A fairly tall woman, she had strong, lean muscle on a slender frame that still curved nicely in the right places. Her bottom was rounded and pale and made an inviting target.

He went to the chest and retrieved a couple of paddles, a switch and a flogger. The lighter paddle fit nicely in his hand and seemed like a good way to start. He left the others on the floor nearby.

His hand shook with a combination of excitement and nervousness. It gave him a strange thrill to have the woman who'd tormented and excited him at his mercy this way. But he didn't want to do anything that would really hurt her or make her hate him.

A light tap on her right bottom cheek left a very faint pink mark that faded rapidly. She neither flinched nor said anything, so he repeated it on the other side. Again it drew no reaction.

The next time he made the tap a bit firmer and watched another pink mark flare. It didn't fade quite so quickly this time. He continued to spank, making the smacks slightly harder each time, until he drew a faint gasp. The splat of wood hitting flesh grew louder also, echoing a bit in the room.

A series of harder spanks left pink marks that remained and spread, and had Evelayna jumping occasionally and squirming. Her bottom took on a nice, rosy flush. The last one made a crack so loud it startled him.

He stopped a moment and leaned down to kiss her cheek. She sighed, a long sweet sigh that suggested pleasure rather than unhappiness. It inspired him.

John exchanged the paddle for the switch. An experimental tap with it produced no mark and no reaction, so he made his next lash with it harder. Having Evelayna at his mercy this way excited him almost more than the feather had. Three more strokes, getting harder each time, and the switch was leaving raised, pink weals on her bottom. At first it made no sound other than a faint whish as it moved through the air, but as his cuts grew harder it began to make an ominous crack as it hit. After two more, Evelayna squealed.

"How does it feel?" he asked her, pausing in his efforts.

"It stings." Her voice was muffled until she turned her head to face him.

"More than the paddle?"

"Different. The paddle is more of a thump and an ache. The switch is more of a burn."

"Like your touch before you change," he said.

"Perhaps," she admitted.

He noticed the sheen of moisture between her legs, and reached down to verify that she was wet. "It makes you excited, too."

She nodded. "The pain...at first it just hurts, but then it tingles in a way that feels good."

He remembered that feeling himself when she'd touched him. "We'll see how much pain and pleasure you can take. Tell me when you don't think you can bear any more."

Again she nodded, then turned her head when he raised the switch, higher this time, so he could bring it down harder. She jumped and groaned when it cracked across her bottom. Five more had her squealing and squirming with each cut but she didn't try to stop him. She had a nice webbing of welts on her bottom.

He stopped for a moment to run a hand over the rough, hot flesh. Something inside him expanded in joy that she would submit to him in this way, allow him to do this to her, trusting him to care for her and not harm her. His fingers moved down into her exposed crack, stroking over the soft petals of flesh and feeling the slick proof that she took pleasure in this.

The skin of her thighs looked pale and wan compared to the rosy flush of her bottom. He raised the switch and brought it down across the top of her right thigh. The crack of contact preceded a loud squeal from her by just seconds. She jumped and wriggled as much as the bonds would allow.

He swished it down several more times, going lower on the thigh each time, leaving a nice ladder of lines that turned her thighs various shades of pink and rose. Another five strokes, moving back upward, had her almost sobbing. John moved around the bed and gave her left thigh the same treatment.

He returned to his position on the other side, raised the switch over his head, and brought it down sharply, with a flick of his wrist, right on the spot where her bottom and thighs met. The loudness of the crack stunned him, but her scream startled him even more. When he pulled the switch away, he found it had left a raw-looking line at the tops of both thighs that swelled into a sore-looking weal. He ran his hand along the line, rubbing to soothe it.

He dipped down again into the folds of her quim and felt her tense at the touch. The flesh there had swelled as the moisture oozed, making her slick and hot. He took a few minutes to explore, stroking the labia, and then her pearl, which drew another shrill scream from her. A finger worked into the opening to her womb slid in easily and came out soaked with her juices. His cock throbbed in response to his explorations, wanting to plow the same path his finger just had.

He wasn't done with payback yet, though. Exchanging the switch for the flogger, he backed up a step and swung it down on her bottom again. It had a couple of dozen leather tails and all bit into her already sore bottom. She lifted her body into as much of an arch as possible within her bounds with a long, loud groan.

He swatted her thighs next. It swished and struck with a series of small cracks. Evelayna screamed and pulled at her bonds again, struggling to get loose. He waited for her to tell him she'd had enough, but it didn't come.

A second stroke on her thighs left her sobbing and the flesh there tinted deep pink and scored with dozens of small welts. Again he waited for her to stop it, but she didn't. He marveled at her ability to accept this.

He delivered two more strokes of the flogger on her bottom, scoring it with a dense webbing of welts, though none broke the skin. By then she was sobbing almost uncontrollably. After the second one, she said, "No more, please. I can't take any more."

He dropped the flogger, but didn't release her from her bonds right away. Instead he rubbed over her bottom and the folds of her quim. He felt her tense and being to throb as he worked her bud. But he wasn't ready to let her come just yet.

Instead he released her from her bonds and rolled her over. A few tears had leaked out and smudged her face. He wiped them away with his finger, then sat down beside her on the bed and leaned down to kiss her.

Their mouths met and meshed with hungry urgency. He plunged his tongue into the hot, wet depths of her mouth and tasted. Evelyana had a unique taste and aroma all her own—cinnamon, spices, wine, fruit, and other even more exotic touches. It wrapped him in a haze of wonder and delight. But he pulled back, wanting to explore even more.

He reached out and touched her breast. The skin felt smooth as the finest silk, soft and giving. He ran his fingers around the firm mounds several times, marveling at the mysteries of them, the wonder of their sweet shape that fit into a man's palm so perfectly, and the peculiar sensitivity to touch. The last he judged by the way she gasped in pleasure and said "Oh, yes!" when he let his fingers wander to the nipples. Her breath caught again and again and she squirmed as he ran fingers around the nipples and then across the beaded tips.

She responded with uninhibited abandon, sobbing, moaning and squealing as he played with the sensitive tips. He rubbed and pressed, twisted and even pinched lightly. Every touch gave her pleasure, if he could judge rightly be her reactions, even the twists and pinches.

When he ran his fingertips down her stomach and abdomen she shivered with anticipation. John teased her with it, advancing and retreating, stopping to explore her belly button and sides.

He reached her quim again and she sobbed as she squirmed. Giving her a dose of the torment she'd put him through earlier, he warned. "Don't come yet. You don't come until I tell you you can."

It tortured him almost as much as it did her. His cock and balls throbbed, painfully swollen, wanting nothing more than to push into her and release their load. But he made her wait while his fingers roved over her slick, swollen quim, playing with her clit and dipping one finger, then two, then three into her cunt. She quivered, trying to repress the explosion that impended.

"Please, Master," she begged, "Let me come. Please! I can't hold it much longer."

"Don't come until I say you can, or I'll have to punish you some more."

She sobbed and strained to hold it back. He didn't make it easier for her when his fingers strayed down further, stroking her thighs and the region around her nether hole.

Finally he climbed over her, inserted his cock and plunged deep into her. Heaven. He'd never been closer to that state than this. Pleasure centered in his cock, but rode over every nerve and muscle in his body.

"You can come now," he said as he drew out and pushed back in, burying himself in her.

The walls of her womb clenched tight around him and he groaned as loudly as she did. When the spasms rolled over and through her, it stroked his cock so hard, it urged him on to release himself. He'd wanted to take it slower, make it last longer, but he couldn't. His seed spurted into her, sending him soaring among the clouds with the amazing pleasure.

When it ended, he found himself lying atop her, head tucked into her shoulder, body pillowed on hers. She held him tightly pressed against her. After a while he realized he had to be crushing her and lifted off, rolling to the side.

She moved against him and they lay together for a while, recovering. Finally, he asked, "Are you all right? I didn't hurt you too much?"

"I may have a bruise or two," she admitted. "But it was worth it. You gave me what I needed and wanted."

"I thought I could tell you took pleasure in it."

"I did." She sighed. "I suppose I can't drag this out any longer. You need your sleep, and I...have things I need to do."

She stood up and got out of bed. When she leaned down to pick up her discarded shift and cloak, he saw that most of the marks had faded and were nearly gone. He watched her dress, wondering what it was about her that compelled him so much. She fascinated him, drew him, almost as though she'd laid a spell on him. On their first meeting she'd told him she was his destiny. He couldn't deny it.

He was wondering what that might mean for both of them when she said, "John?" Her tone was strange, sad and almost pleading.

She turned back toward him, and she had tears in her eyes.

The sight both stunned and alarmed him. "What is it? Did I hurt you? I thought you would stop me if I did something that—"

"No, you didn't hurt me. In fact..." She bit her lip and looked hesitant.

It was so unlike her, he couldn't help but worry about what it might mean. "What's wrong, then?"

She drew a deep breath and gained control over her expression. "John, how do you feel about me? The truth, as honestly as you can."

Was this another sort of test? He wished he knew the answer to that question himself. "I'm not sure what to tell you. You know you're beautiful and appealing. No man could resist you, especially when you look like this. But sometimes, you're so... Sometimes you frighten me, especially when you're..."

"That other person."

"That other person," he agreed. "When you're her, you terrify me. You seem cruel and wicked and frightening. You hurt people—me, anyway—but I'm still...drawn to that person. And that terrifies me, too. But when you're like this, I'm drawn to you much more. I feel like there might be something special between us. Last night when I was with those other women, it didn't feel right until it was you. I don't understand what it is, but it's something deep inside. Does that make sense?"

"Yes. I know what you mean."

He waited, but she didn't expand on that. "Why are you asking this?"

She sighed again. "Because I'm going to have to ask you to do something for me, and I don't want to."

Chapter Eight

Chivalry said he should tell her not to be afraid to ask anything of him, but John feared he could end up regretting those words. Instead he asked, "What is it?"

"This will sound easy, but it isn't. It will cost you more than you can now guess in effort, grief and pain."

This didn't sound good. But... "Will it help me gain the lance if I do this?"

She looked surprised, which didn't seem like a good thing. "I don't know if it will help, but it will not hinder. I promise you that."

"But it will keep me from pursuing the lance?"

Her eyes seemed to get shadowed for a moment and her face emptied as though she looked somewhere else for an answer. After a moment she nodded and her expression cleared to the sad, thoughtful one. "No. If you do as I ask, you'll still be questing for the lance."

He didn't quite understand how that could be possible, but so many things were strange and mysterious on this mountain. "What is it you want to ask me then?"

She stared at him hard and for a moment her eyes squeezed shut. Then she braced herself visibly and opened them again, looking straight at him. "This is very important, so please don't think I ask it lightly or that what I ask is any small thing. Will you be my champion?"

He waited for the rest of it, but that seemed to be the entire request. It took a moment before it sank into him that the commitment she asked for in that very simple request might be a deep and life-changing one. "Why do you need a champion?"

Again she paused before answering. "I'm cursed. Only someone willing to be my champion can break it."

"Cursed how? And how can your champion break it?"

"I cannot tell you that right now."

"I would have to agree to be your champion without knowing who I'd have to fight, and how, and why?"

"I fear that's so."

"What would I have to do as your champion? Can you tell me nothing of what would be asked of me?"

"You'll have to be trained. What little training you've had in weapons and warfare as a prince would not be adequate. The training would not be easy. But you have the opportunity to become much more than you've ever thought possible."

"I'll be a king someday," he pointed out.

"And likely a good one, so long as peace holds sway. Should your kingdom find itself threatened, the story might be very different."

His first reaction was annoyance that she undervalued the training he'd received in his father's court. Then he remembered his dreams of battle and how overwhelmed and inadequate he'd felt. Perhaps there was some justice in her words. Nonetheless, his quest right now was for the lance, not for more training as a soldier.

"This is..." He stopped. He just didn't know what to say or how to react. How did he really feel about Evelayna? Both frightened and fascinated. Perhaps he even loved her. Was that reason enough to take a risk with his quest? With his life, perhaps? "I don't know that I can answer you now. I need time to think on it."

She nodded, no expression showing on her face. "You may have it. If you continue on the road as you have, in a day and a half's time, you'll come to a tunnel. Within the tunnel, the road diverges. Should you decide to become my champion, you'll take the passage that goes off to the right and follow where it leads. If you decline, go to the left and you'll stay on your current path." She turned away, and when she turned back, the other woman version of her began to show. "Before I go, I have a gift for you." She pulled an arm around from behind her back and held out a chalice-shaped clay cup to him.

He stared at it but made no move to take it from her.

"It won't harm you. In fact it will help to sustain you when you need it. Because you shared your food, this will work for you. You need not worry about running short of food or water."

The cup was a plain, clay container with a grayish glaze, about five inches in diameter and three or four inches deep. He peered inside, but saw nothing there other than what looked like a few drops of liquid on the bottom. He tipped it one way and then the other, watching the beads roll around the slick interior surface.

"How do I make it work?"

"You don't. It will work for you when you need it. Don't worry about it." Her voice had already roughened into the deeper and more sarcastic tones of the darker Evelayna. Her smile took on the sardonic twist again. "You should sleep now. You have a long journey ahead of you yet."

"Even if I agree to be your champion?" He had to suppress a yawn as he asked the question. It had been a long day and so far he'd had little sleep.

"Perhaps especially so." She walked toward the dark corner, then turned back toward him. "One other thing. You won't see me again until after you've made your choice."

He had only a few moments to consider that before he fell asleep again, a deep, dreamless sleep this time.

Light creeping in through the windows roused him. He was back in the rundown, abandoned cabin, on the itchy, uncomfortable straw pad again. The cup sat on the floor next to it.

John got up, washed and ate some of the remaining food in his pack. It didn't make a satisfying meal, but he hesitated to finish it completely, whatever Evelyayna promised about the cup's magic properties. He found no other food lying around the shelter.

He stuck the cup into his pack, shouldered it again and left the cabin to set off on the road.

The weather became noticeably cooler the farther up he got, but the road also grew steeper and the effort of walking uphill kept him warm enough. Toward midmorning, he heard the sounds of the creature moving in the brush near the side of the road again, and presumed the dog he'd seen yesterday continued to trail him. It roused his curiosity about the creature's motives, but no longer alarmed him as it had at first. The dog had appeared to help him the previous day. He actually wished it would come out into the open more. He'd welcome its companionship.

The road climbed steadily, often in series of switchbacks, and grew rutted and uneven. Twice he had to cross swift streams on rough, plank bridges. In places, the clusters of trees beside the road were replaced by bald, rocky patches and steep overhangs.

He stopped for lunch on a flat, grassy area at the side of the road. Only a little remained from what he'd brought, but he had to keep up his strength for the journey, so he ate it, hoping he could trust Evelyayna's promise that the cup would provide for him or that he'd find food in the next shelter. He could hunt, but he'd been told not to harm anything that didn't threaten him first, and there were surely edible plants and fruits around. Unfortunately he'd never learned to identify those and would more than likely end up poisoning himself if he dared try to forage.

Nothing else happened during a long, hard hike up the side of the mountain until late afternoon, when he heard a loud squawk from somewhere above. Looking up, he saw the sinuous shape of the dragon overhead, closer than he'd ever seen it before.

John pulled back into the shelter of a sheer rock face that rose on the left side of the road. There he could watch the creature swoop and swirl, circling around, swinging its head back and forth in a way that suggested it either sought something below or kept guard on the mountain. He hoped he wasn't the dragon's quarry.

He had plenty of time to study the creature, as it took a while before the dragon finally gave up whatever search it was on and flew away. Seen at such close range, it was even more immense than he'd imagined. Its wingspan could cover a small town. Both beak and claws looked wickedly sharp. The idea of having to face it in battle or try to sneak past it at some point made him cringe and his stomach tighten with dread.

He waited until it had been gone several minutes before he set out again. The road continued to wind upwards in ever-tightening spirals and switchbacks. The air grew cooler and the breeze stronger as he progressed.

A look toward the top confirmed that he was about two-thirds of the way up the mountain. Considering how steep the slope above him looked, he had to assume the road would get even more difficult.

With less cover along the side of the road and much rougher terrain, the dog occasionally appeared in the open and once even trailed him on the road itself. It seemed fearful or shy, however, and never approached him closely.

As the sun sank lower, he noticed that the dog seemed to lag a bit as though tired or suffering from its injuries. After some internal debate, he stopped and sat again, staying still to see if the creature would approach him. It hung back. Its ribs looked too prominent on its lean form. John wished he'd saved some of the food from earlier to share. Moving carefully to keep from startling his wary companion, he rummaged in his pack to see if he could find some scrap he might have overlooked.

He lifted the cup to move it out of the way and realized it felt heavier than earlier. When he pulled it out of his pack, he found it full, almost to the top, with bits of bread and cheese and a coarse, dried meat. A cautious bite on the bread made him chew in delight. It was of a perfect consistency, not too hard, but not mushy either, and tasted of honey and spices. He'd rarely had better, even at home. The cheese proved equally flavorful, sharp and tangy, a nice counterpoint to the slight sweetness of the bread. The meat was chewier but also pleased the palate after the first bite.

He tossed a few of the pieces out toward the dog. The creature waited a moment, wary of a trap, then cautiously moved forward and scooped them up, gobbling them down.

John chuckled. "You're not giving them their due," he told the dog in a soft tone that shouldn't alarm it. "They taste too good to swallow so fast." He tossed out another handful when the creature had eaten the first batch. "This is guaranteed to spoil you for anything else." He stopped and thought about that while watching the dog gobble it down. "I suppose neither of us has much choice now. We're both dependent on whatever the cup will supply."

He alternately ate some himself and tossed bits out, until he was full and the dog no longer pounced eagerly on each morsel. Though between them they'd eaten quite a bit, the cup remained over half full. John didn't understand it, but he wasn't arguing with it, either.

A shadow fell over him as the sun sank down below tree level, reminding him he needed to find shelter for the coming night. He dusted himself off and stood up. The dog backed a few steps away but didn't run off. When he shouldered his pack and began walking again, the dog trailed behind him, staying on the road this time.

He climbed a very steep patch of road that left him winded and his leg muscles burning before he finally came to a tiny building that had the cloverleaf mark over the door. The interior was barely big enough for the bed on one side of the door and the small table on the other, but he really didn't need anything more than the bed.

Though he held the door open, inviting the dog to join him, it turned and went into a thicket nearby, finding its own shelter for the night. As he washed and slipped out of his clothes, wrapping himself in a blanket for the night, he couldn't help but wonder

what it would bring. He expected almost anything, which didn't quite prepare him for what did happen.

Nothing.

He slept soundly, through the night, without a hint of dream or vision dropping in on him.

When he woke and realized morning light creeping in the window had roused him, he was disturbed by the lack of nighttime visions. He'd grown used to them. Had he done something wrong to account for the lack? It helped a little to remember that Evelyayna had said he wouldn't see her again until he'd made his decision. Today he should come to the tunnel where he'd have to choose. He still didn't know what his answer would be.

He found the cup brimming with food again when he pulled it out of his pack. After cleaning himself up and repacking his things, he went outside and stood on the road for a moment.

The dog showed up shortly, as he'd expected. John scattered several handfuls of bread and meat for him, waiting while the creature lapped it all up avidly. Then he set out again.

The going got far harder very quickly. The track could no longer be called a road since it had grown so steep, uneven, and rocky, it would be nearly impossible to bring a cart along it. In places he felt as though he climbed rather than walked. The dog had no trouble keeping up and seemed more used to the terrain than he was.

Around midmorning, he heard the dragon's cry again and ducked under the shelter of a single scraggly tree clinging to the rocky slope. The dog joined him there, huddling close in the precariously thin protection. At this height, the dragon didn't seem nearly as far overhead. When the shadow of its immense wings fell over him, he trembled a bit and had to make an effort to still himself.

Its huge, hooked claws looked even more ferocious. Even the upward-pointed, triangular scales that covered most of its body seemed to hold a terrifying power.

He could now make out features on its face, including the glittering whirl of its eyes. They were crystalline gray, with orange flames burning in their centers.

Its head swung back and forth, as though searching, until suddenly, it halted in the motion and paused. One enormous eye appeared to look right at him, and John shivered, struggling to repress a sob that tried to get past his tightly clenched lips. He held himself as still as possible, and the dog seemed to understand that need. It didn't move other than to pant lightly.

The dragon hovered above them for so long, John knew it had seen them and was just waiting for the right moment to swoop down and pluck them from their inadequate cover. He put his hand on his sword, determined that he would at least put up a fight if it did. Not that he expected the dragon to be much concerned about a sword shorter than one of its claws.

John's breath came in great, gulping pants, though he managed it without moving his chest more than a minuscule amount. Sweat dripped down his body despite the chilly breeze. He wanted to beg the dragon to get on with it if it planned to eat him. The waiting stretched his nerves to the breaking point.

Finally, after endless ages of hovering and watching John and the dog, the dragon suddenly flapped its wings and rose into the sky, swooping in a long turn toward the far side of the mountain. The rush of air as it left blew bits of stone and other debris into his eyes.

For several long minutes after its departure, he could only sit there and shake as he recovered from the terror. The dog didn't seem any more inclined to move. Finally he got his breathing and heartbeat back to something like normal rhythm. When he stood to go, though, he found that his legs felt rubbery and unstable.

An hour or so later, he came to the place where the road ducked into a tunnel blasted or worn through the side of the mountain. John stopped there, studying the entrance. It was wide enough to admit three or four carts side by side and several times taller than himself. He couldn't see very far into it, but the road appeared more level in the part he could see than it had been for most of that day. He wasn't thrilled about going into the dark interior, but there was no alternative path he could take. In any case, it would keep him from the dragon's eyes.

John lit a torch and walked in. The dog followed, continuing to remain a few steps behind him.

He would have to make a decision shortly, and he still hadn't made up his mind. He'd rolled the pros and cons, or what he knew of them, of each choice over and over in his mind, but couldn't find a clear answer. His heart was drawn to Evelayna, but his head kept reminding him that he was searching for a magical object to cure his father's malady. That should surely be his highest priority.

He didn't like the dark and found the closed-in feeling of the tunnel uncomfortable, but other than that it wasn't a bad walk. Though it bent around in a long curve to the right, following the side of the mountain, the passage remained relatively even, with just an occasional, gentle incline or down slope to negotiate. No light came from the other end so he had to presume it was a fairly long passage.

His one real fear, that it might narrow so much he'd have to squeeze through tight places or the roof would decline, forcing him to crawl, never became an issue. The temperature remained cool, but not so cool as to be uncomfortable. Sounds echoed oddly. The clatter of his boots on the stone floor sent ripples of echoes sailing along the cavern and arcing back toward him.

Occasional uneven spots and rocks, even large boulders fallen from somewhere above, impeded his progress at times or threatened to trip him up, forcing him to pay some attention to the road. But mostly he spent the time mulling the question of which path to take when he got to the fork.

He looked at it from every angle he could think of. Evelayna had said that agreeing to her request might or might not help his quest but it wouldn't hinder it. He knew nothing of what the other path might bring, save that it would take him closer to the dragon and he had doubts about whether he could get by it.

He couldn't deny Evelayna drew him, fascinated him, even enthralled him in a way no other woman ever had. But even if he did this and survived, he wasn't sure there was anything between them that would last. She had said she was his destiny, but what did that truly mean? And if he did succeed, what kind of relationship did he want with her? And could he truly trust her? She might be just a distraction, one of the tests he was meant to pass.

Riva had said he should follow his heart and mind, but what was he supposed to do when his heart and his mind were flummoxed? How could he decide?

He didn't see the fork until he was just about at it, since the passage remained in deep shadow beyond the radiance cast by his torch. Only a slight change in the reverberations of his footsteps alerted him to something different about his surroundings. Holding the torch up, he finally noted the dark mouth of another tunnel diverging from the one he traveled. Nothing marked either passage in any way that would make one a more obvious road forward than the other.

The tunnel going off to the right would likely lead deeper into the mountain, but that might just represent a faster way up and out. He stopped and listened, but the only sounds were the small click of the dog's claws and a very faint distant tinkle of dripping water.

He hadn't even realized he'd made up his mind until he started walking again, heading to the right and whatever would await Evelayna's champion.

He prayed he'd made the right decision.

For some distance, maybe half a mile or so, no change occurred in the plain stone walls of the cavern or the complete darkness that held sway, save that the floor began to slope distinctly upward. The dog continued to trail him.

When he grew hungry, he stopped for a quick meal, sitting down on the floor with his back against a rock. The dog settled nearby and eyed him expectantly.

John pulled the cup out of his pack and found it full once again, this time with a heartier, darker bread and strips of salted pork. By tossing the food so that it gradually landed closer and closer to him, he coaxed the dog to him, and eventually convinced it to take a few pieces from his hand. Of course, it immediately scooted back several feet before it stopped to eat them.

Once he'd eaten his fill, John leaned back, hoping to rest, but his disturbed thoughts, fear of having made the wrong decision and concern about what he'd let himself in for, refused to give him any peace. He shortly stood up and moved out again.

He didn't have to walk far before he rounded a bend and saw a pale glow ahead. That spurred him into speeding up. Farther around the bend, he found a series of torches set in sconces built into the wall that lit the passage to its very end. A solid-

looking door of ponderous size cut off any progress beyond where the line of torches ended. Though a few panels of elaborately carved, stylized motifs decorated the door, nothing remotely like a bar or latch showed.

No other passages offered alternative routes. The door stood solidly and squarely in his way, showing no obvious means for opening it.

If he couldn't find a way to open it, he'd have to turn back.

Since he had no intention of doing that unless he absolutely had to, John moved right up to the door and studied it, looking it up and down, eyeing the crack between it and the wall, searching for something that might make it yield.

Nothing jumped right out at him. Most of the panel was of rough, plain, solid wood. Only the four rectangular, carved panels centered in a two-by-two square, broke up the otherwise unadorned surface. He studied the walls around the door, but the smooth, unbroken stone showed nothing that might help.

The carved panels had to be the key, somehow. He held the torch up close to them and looked at the whirls and swirls that formed no obvious pattern. After some study, he thought he saw something odd. He traced each pattern with a finger and realized they formed a sort of maze in that panel when he ran his finger along the grooves.

It didn't make any sense, but nothing else did either, so he idly ran his fingers through the maze in each square as he considered what else he might try to get the door to open. But when he reached the end of the fourth maze, his finger dipped into a sort of hole where it ended.

A low rumble gave him just enough warning to let him jump back and away. Once the door started swinging open, it did it in a hurry, reaching the stone wall in a matter of seconds.

The opening led back out onto the mountainside, but he wasn't on the same road any longer.

He ducked through quickly, thinking it might slam shut again just as quickly as it had opened. The dog followed close behind. And he was right. No sooner had the animal cleared the opening than the panel closed again, with a muffled boom that shook the ground.

The scene ahead of him was vastly different from what he'd seen so far on his trip up the mountain. He must be on the opposite side. He could see out far enough to realize he was still at a high elevation, but the downward slope was much gentler and more gradual here. He'd met only a few people on the road and seen no obvious towns, but what stretched ahead of him was something of an encampment. It had the feel of a temporary, military settlement. People moved from one large tent to another or sometimes between the several large tents and the many smaller ones.

From just over a low rise, he heard the sounds of voices shouting and someone calling encouragement and direction. Weapons clanged, and shortly after he stepped out of the tunnel, a cheer erupted from an unseen throng.

He walked toward the cluster of tents. In passing the nearest one, though, he realized it was open on the side facing him and two people sat at a table as though waiting for him to pass. One man stood up and reached across the table toward him as he approached, shaking his hand when John got close enough.

"John," the man said. "I'm Sir Swandon. This is Master Antonio." He pointed to the other man, who nodded in acknowledgement, but didn't stop scowling at him. "We hoped you'd choose to join us. I'm glad you've decided as you have. Of course, you realize this isn't going to be easy."

"I'm here as Evelayna's champion," he said, a bit puzzled by their words.

"Of course. She warned you you'd have to be trained, didn't she?" Swandon said.

"Yes, but she didn't explain much of what that training would involve."

"Of course not. But you can guess most of it, can't you? A champion has to be a soldier, after all, and a particularly good one. Do you think you're a particularly good soldier now?"

The question was posed lightly, but John didn't mistake it for anything but a serious inquiry.

His ego demanded he proclaim himself a very good soldier. Honesty compelled a different answer. Honesty won the battle. "In truth, probably not," he admitted.

"Ah, good," the man said, smiling at him. "A good start, to know and acknowledge your weaknesses. We can work with you." After a moment, the smile died. "Come with me, over here, and we'll get you ready. There's a small company ready to start training. You'll join them in a bit."

Swandon led him down a path between two tents and into a smaller one that held nothing more than a table and a few chairs. The man nodded for him to sit and took a chair on the opposite end of the table.

"There are a couple of things you must understand before you give final consent to this. First, I know you're a prince, but the others will not, and you should not tell them. You will not be treated as a prince. For now, for the time you're with us, you're just another soldier trainee." He stared hard at John. "You'll find it more difficult than you expect to adjust to that. You'll have no one serving you here, no one treating you carefully, no one running errands or doing things for you. You get no precedence at meals or any other time, until you've earned it. Can you live with that?"

John considered for a moment, then nodded. "Yes."

"Yes, sir," the man prompted him. "You might as well get used to it. You will refer to superior officers as 'sir'."

"Yes, sir," John answered. He began to wonder if he really wanted to do this. It wasn't sounding like something that was going to help him in his quest.

"Good. Now, secondly. We are at war. You needn't know all the details of why, right now, though you'll learn more as you go on. We have little time to get you ready to go into battle, so the training is...intense. We'll work you hard, give you little rest,

even less free time and almost no comfort. But you'll come out of this a far better soldier than you are now, and fit to be champion to the princess."

"The princess?"

Swandon gave him a strange look. "Princess Evelayna. She sent you here, did she not?"

"She did, but she didn't tell me she was a princess."

"Ah, probably part of the curse. There are things she can't say. And she doesn't always seem like a princess. The curse is a sad thing." Swandon shook his head morosely.

"I don't understand how fighting in battle is part of the role of being her champion."

Swandon nodded his head from side to side in a motion that told him nothing. "No doubt. But it will become clear. You are her choice. Now, what do you say? Do you still wish to do this?"

John thought about it again, wondering if any of this would truly aid him in the quest. The thought of battle reminded him of his dreams, with dismaying intensity. He could get killed, if he fought. Yet apparently that was part of being the princess' champion. The training sounded like what he'd often wished his preparation back home had been like, or maybe a bit more.

"Yes, I'll do it," John said, praying he made the right decision. Riva had said to follow his head and his heart. Right now both led him this way. He just hoped it wasn't a fatal detour off the right road.

"Good!" Swandon smiled and clapped him on the back. "Glad to have you with us, John."

It sounded strange to have anyone address him as just John, with no title, but he would get it used to it. It might actually make a pleasant change, to be just another man in the group.

"Let's go find your bunk and meet the rest of the company, so you can all get started." Swandon stood and led the way out of the tent and into one of the largest of the group. Two rows of cots lined either long wall, separated by wood chests. The man stopped at the fifth cot from the door on the left and said, "This is yours. Put your things in the chest there, including the sword, for now. You'll be wanting it later, though."

Once John had stowed his pack in the chest, they left the tent and headed out of the encampment. He wondered what had happened to the dog, and hoped it had found itself a comfortable spot to hunker down or a way to return to its home.

They walked a hundred yards or so downhill to a level area where a group of people watched a pair demonstrating a hand-to-hand fighting maneuver. Swandon waited until the lesson was complete, with the smaller man sitting on his rump on the ground and wondering how he'd gotten there so quickly, then he stepped forward. He

introduced John to the group, which comprised six men and three women, plus the smaller of the pair of men demonstrating the fighting, who was a trainee also.

Their instructor was Sir Rodolph, a tall, lean man with a stern expression. He nodded to John and said, "Good to see you finally got here, John. Now we can all begin the training in earnest. Sit down and listen."

Swandon nodded and turned around to go back to camp. John sat on the ground at the end of the row of attentive students. Several of the others eyed him with varying degrees of curiosity and speculation, but Sir Rodolph immediately launched into a long lecture on the necessity of keeping one's wits always sharp and alert during battle, citing many unfortunate things that could happen to the unwary. It effectively prevented anyone else from saying anything.

After the lecture, the instructor continued the lesson in hand-to-hand fighting techniques he'd started earlier. After demonstrating a few moves, he had them pair off to practice what he'd taught. John found himself partnered with a boy a few years younger than himself. The youngster was shorter and lighter as well, but quick enough on his feet to make their first few contests a considerable challenge. John lost almost as many rounds between them as he won.

Sir Rodolph went from one pair to the next as they practiced, watching, critiquing and occasionally even chastising someone who failed to perform properly. When he got to John and his partner, the man studied them and adjusted the positioning of John's legs and the other boy's left arm. After watching another few minutes, he nodded at them and walked away.

The other boy's name was Marek, and he'd grown up in a small town near the base of the mountain, on this side. The slope on this side—opposite to the one John had ascended, as he'd surmised—was gentler and held several towns and villages. The foothills below also contained good pastureland and a number of towns as well. John learned all that from Marek as they sparred.

After an hour or two—he found it hard to judge the time that had passed—Sir Rodolph told them to stop and sent them off for food. By then John had collected a bunch of aching muscles and several bruises, including one large one on his butt acquired when Marek had executed a turn, spin and trip motion so perfectly it had landed John abruptly and suddenly on the ground.

He went off with the group to the tent that served as the cafeteria. While they waited in the food line, Marek introduced him to the other members of the company. John tried to commit their names to memory, and mostly just listened while, over dinner, they exchanged stories from their hometowns and how they'd come to be there. The meal consisted of a hearty and flavorful soup, plain but satisfying, and bread to go with it.

When asked about his background, John shared that he'd come from a small kingdom well to the north. He didn't tell them he was a prince of that kingdom. When

someone suggested that he'd traveled there in search of the legendary lance, John didn't deny it. No one seemed surprised or put out by the news.

After they'd eaten, John hoped they'd have time to relax a bit and nurse aching bones, but in fact, they went back to the training area for a few more lessons and practice. The light had faded so far into darkness they could barely see each other before they were dismissed to their beds.

"They'll have us up at first light," one of the others warned as they prepared for bed, "so you'd best try to go right to sleep."

Given the exertions of the day, John had no trouble doing exactly that. Nor did he have any strange dreams or visions to interrupt the solid sleep.

The next day brought more of the same. They rose, as promised, before the light was more than just a glimmer on the horizon, washed, ate and went out to the training field for demonstrations and practice. Later they broke for a meal, ran a couple of miles in a group, had more fighting practice, a brief rest in midafternoon, trained, ate, trained, and finally fell back into bed when darkness returned. In the late afternoon training, they began to learn techniques of fighting with pikes and staves.

By the end of the day, John had never been so tired and sore in his entire life, but tired won out over aching, letting him fall rapidly into a deep and dreamless sleep.

He worked harder than ever before in his life. At times he desperately wanted to quit the whole thing, times when his body ached so badly he could barely move, but he still had to keep practicing and sparring. He forced himself to efforts beyond anything he would ever have thought himself capable of, and then went beyond even that.

He missed his family and the warmth and closeness he had with them, but he missed Evelayna even more. He had no idea when or even why he'd grown to enjoy her company so much. He still wasn't sure whether she was truly the enchanted princess the people here suggested or a demonic part of a plot to divert him from the quest for the lance. Perhaps she was a minion of the very enemy these people fought? But, no, Swandon knew her and appeared to consider her an ally.

Over the next few days, John grew so tired he could barely think but managed to continue to force his body onto efforts beyond his own expectations. He also learned more about the others in his company and why they'd joined. He heard harrowing stories of a war raging on the fields just below them, of towns burned, men, women and children slaughtered, and people carried off and never more heard from. Most of his companions had personal experience of losing people they loved to the war or seeing hideous carnage at close range, and that had impelled them to join this army. Oddly, they knew little of the enemy, save that they were hordes of demonish creatures pouring out of the east.

Four nights went by before anything disturbed his deep, solid sleep.

Chapter Nine

On the fifth night, he woke after dozing for a while. Evelayna stood in the shadows beside his bed, watching him. Her pale-skinned face stood out sharply in the darkness, while her inky black hair faded into the background. Though he couldn't see them, she must have worn dark clothes, since he couldn't discern the outlines of her body.

"Come with me," she ordered, then turned away.

John rose and followed her, though he wore only the coarse linen underdrawers the army had allotted him. They moved swiftly and soundlessly through the dark barracks. None of his companions roused as they passed. He felt like a ghost, padding along almost nude, his bare feet making no noise.

Once outside, she led the way swiftly downhill by the path that led to the training area. She skirted that clearing and continued on down. After a while it occurred to him to wonder why he wasn't stepping on stones and sticks along the way, but he felt only solid, smooth earth underfoot. More of Evelayna's magic, he supposed.

Eventually she stopped at a clearing that offered a view well down the side of the mountain and out over a long sweep of valley below. He hadn't realized this view looked out over lands where war raged right then. In various places he saw small clusters of lights dotting the night, but couldn't tell whether they represented towns or encampments. She stared down at them for a while before she turned to him.

"John." Though she still wore the demonic aspect with the very pale skin, narrowed, deeply set, dark eyes, and sharply pointed teeth, her smile lacked the usual ironic, cruel twist. It held real warmth. "I'm very grateful that you agreed to this. Particularly when you knew nothing of who and what I am and had little reason to trust me based on what you did know." She sighed lightly. "I'm not going to ask you why, as I probably won't like the answer."

He didn't volunteer anything since he still wasn't sure of the reason himself.

"Look out there," she said. "No doubt you've been told I'm a princess. This is my mother's realm." She swept an arm slowly in an arc that encompassed all the visible lands below. "By now you know an army of creatures from out of the south is attempting to invade and conquer us. They've done terrible things to the land and the people.

"We've been fighting them for many years, just barely holding them back. Many have died as a result."

She stopped for a moment, breathing hard. When she had her emotions under control, she said, "Touch my hand. I'd like to take you to another place."

He hesitated briefly, remembering how it burned, but then he put his hand on hers. Fire ripped through him, but briefly, before he blacked out for a moment, then woke again. The pain still burned into his palm, but they no longer stood on the side of the mountain looking down.

He couldn't guess where the actual place he stood might be. They were in a very dark place, a cavern of some kind, he suspected based on the way the smallest sound, even the slight rustle of his drawers, echoed. When a torch set into a wall sconce flared to life, he saw no obvious entrance or exit, but then some of the far reaches of the chamber remained in shadow.

It was a large room, with a dome well overhead, but otherwise very plain. No furniture occupied it and no decorations broke up the dull gray, stone walls.

"Turn around," Evelayna said.

He'd been wrong about nothing adorning the walls. When he whirled to face the other way, he saw that an indentation delved into the smooth surface, about ten feet high, a couple of feet wide, and maybe a foot deep. Its bottom ledge was at eye level for him and its top well over his head.

The lance, the one he'd been shown on the road after he passed through the strange curtain, rested in the alcove. Rested wasn't exactly the right term, though, since the bottom didn't appear actually to touch the ledge. Nothing apparent held it suspended, either, but it floated almost a foot over the stone shelf, shedding a soft, bronze radiance into the room.

It was so close he could almost reach out and take it. But something told him that would be a drastically wrong thing to do.

Nonetheless, he breathed, with almost awe-filled amazement, "The lance."

"Yes. Come here." She walked toward the alcove.

He thought for a moment she meant to take the lance and opened his mouth to protest. Before the words could come out, though, she stopped and didn't reach for it. He joined her near the base of it.

She pointed to two small, shallow indentations in the wall below the alcove. Darkness and the sameness of the stone had hidden them from view before. "Put your hands in them," she said.

John hesitated, wondering what this was all about. "Why?"

"To let the lance know of your intention to claim it."

"Why would I need to do that?"

"Once it's aware of you, you can ask it to come to you at any time you think you're ready and the circumstances warrant it. And also, should you succeed in the tests but not survive, it will know of your intentions."

He didn't even want to think about that last part. He put one hand on a depression, but stopped before placing the other one. "What sort of circumstances would warrant it? I thought I could claim it whenever I'd passed all the tests."

"It's not quite that simple. The final test is one of self-knowledge combined with care for others. You must know that you're ready for the lance's power. It is a powerful weapon. More powerful than you now guess, but it cannot be lightly claimed, as I know well, and to my sorrow."

The last words gave him pause. "What happened?"

She gave him a small, sad smile and shook her head. "Not yet. Make yourself known, and then we'll talk about it."

"What about the dragon? I was told I couldn't claim the lance until I'd defeated the dragon."

Evelayna sighed, nodded and looked down at the ground. "Yes, there is that."

"That's a pretty big 'that'. What makes you think I can kill a dragon?"

Her head jerked up sharply. "You needn't kill it," she said sharply. "You defeat it. They're not the same."

John thought back to what the old man had told him at the waterfall. He couldn't remember the exact words, but it was possible he'd said defeat rather than kill. "I still doubt it's possible. How does one defeat a dragon without killing it?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. I hope you'll find the answer, though." She nodded toward the wall.

John hoped he could find an answer, too. He wasn't sure if the difference between defeat and kill made the task less daunting or more. Nonetheless, he put both hands into the depressions, but cautiously and with some reservations. For several long moments nothing at all happened. Then gradually he felt an odd sort of tingly warmth moving from the stone into his hands and through his body. It didn't burn, as Evelayna's touch had. Instead it felt more like a steady caress or like streaks of light, moving somehow under his skin, then digging into his system and burrowing toward his heart.

It went on for several minutes, working its way further and further into him, until at the end he felt it searched the very deepest inner thoughts, hopes and desires that moved him. That was an uncomfortable thought, but he didn't try to stop it.

Finally, the warmth began to fade as whatever probe it had sent into him retreated. When it was over, he straightened up and removed his hands from the wall.

Nothing seemed different. The lance still glowed with the bronze light, though perhaps it didn't seem quite so high above him. When he turned back toward Evelayna, however, he found her significantly changed.

He stared at her for a moment.

"No, I haven't changed," she said, as if she read his thought. "You see me differently now. You can touch me now, as well, and it won't pain you."

Touching seemed like a very good idea, if she would permit it. Though she still wore the same dark shift, the demon woman was gone, replaced by the lovely, sweet person he'd seen when he'd braved putting a hand on her long enough to evoke that

other seeming. A sudden roaring tide of desire rolled over him, making his cock spring to attention.

"Will you come and kiss me, John?" The words held a sweet simplicity and plea.

They moved together, meeting after each had taken a few steps. He put his arms around her to draw her close against his body. He withdrew one hand to tip her face up to him. She opened to his kiss, and a rush of warmth, very different from what he'd felt with his hands on the wall, poured through him. This had a heat and a power that drove him to force his tongue past her lips and plunge into the velvety warm depths of her mouth.

She felt like silk and tasted like honey. Shards of raw pleasure ripped through him as she moved against him, mashing her breasts into his chest. He'd lusted after women before, and mostly resisted the urge. But none of them had ever moved him as powerfully as Evelayna did, almost as though she was another piece of himself, a complementary half who extended or completed him.

Too much fabric separated their bodies. He gathered a handful of the dark shift in either fist and lifted it up. She backed away just far enough to let him pull it over her head before he tossed it aside and dragged her back to him. He fitted her against him, breast to chest, legs against legs, belly to belly with his cock snugly caught between them.

His blood heated, fueled by her passionate response. He was used to being chased, courted and even seduced because of his rank. Evelayna was a princess herself, probably of a more important and powerful realm than his father's. She wanted him as her champion as well. It made him feel even more potent for her choosing him for that role.

They had to get even closer. He realized she felt the same desperate urgency for their joining when she tugged at his drawers, pushing them down his thighs. He wasn't quite sure how he accomplished it, but after stepping out of the drawers, he eased himself down to the floor and brought her with him. He settled her on the discarded shift so that her back wouldn't be against the cold stone. It wasn't soft or comfortable but he doubted she cared any more than he did. Need overrode every other consideration.

She was beautiful. The flickering torchlight played lovingly over smooth, pale skin that begged to be stroked. Her breasts were just the right size to fit in his palms. Nipples hardened into sweet little buds when he brushed a finger across them. Watching her squirm as he tweaked and caressed made the heat and pressure gather in his groin until he wondered if he could hold on long enough to get inside her.

She wound a hand around his cock and stroked it carefully. The rasp of her palm over his hot, sensitive flesh drove him almost to madness. She explored every inch of his cock with delicate fingers. Breath caught in his throat when she moved down and squeezed his balls.

"You're killing me," he murmured as she stoked the fire boiling inside.

On the verge of exploding, he stopped her, by rolling onto his side and leaning over her again. He kissed each breast, stopping for a few moments to nip and suck on her nipples until she writhed and moaned and spread her legs for him.

The scent of her arousal hit him hard and square in the gut. He didn't need her begging for him to come into her to drive him to kneel between her legs. He parted the petals of her quim to reveal her inner secrets, finding her already damp and ready for him.

"Please, I need you inside me," she begged as he fingered her sensitive pearl. She squealed and groaned. A surge of love and tenderness made him lean over to kiss her on that sensitive spot. She yelped and buried her fingers in his hair, pulling until it stung a bit.

Soft, mewling sounds of need spilled from her as he ran his tongue over the hot, slick flesh. She squealed when he drew her clit into his mouth and sucked hard. Sobs, moans and gasps echoed around the chamber, surrounding him with the music of her desire for him.

"John, please!" The words reverberated off the walls and ceiling of the chamber. "I need you!"

"Is this one of the duties of your champion?" he asked, teasingly, between flicks of his tongue on her clit.

"Yes," she sobbed. "Yes!"

He stretched out over her and probed at her cunt with his cock. Finding the opening, he pushed in, sinking carefully into her slick, hot depths. She gripped him hard, greedily swallowing his entire length into the depths of her womb. When she tightened around him, the pleasure forced a moan of sheer joy from him.

Breath caught in his chest while he watched her face. Building tension narrowed her eyes and drew her mouth into a tight line. Small stings broke out across his back where her fingernails dug in. His balls were full and hard and added to the weight of his need each time they slapped against her slit.

He drew back, almost out of her, and then slid in again. Heat and sweet delight fizzed through his system in a mix so potent it made him lightheaded. He met her eyes. The love he saw in hers made him expand, made the joy bubble up into a frenzy of longing and need.

Her face grew tense with building pleasure. It delighted him to tease her with small, short strokes, then longer, harder dives, varying it so randomly she could never guess what he'd do next. Her breathing grew faster and her arms tightened around him, fingers digging into his back.

"John," she moaned. "You're a miracle. A dream. A wonder." The last word broke up into a sob as he plunged hard and deep, making her jolt with a stroke of pleasure.

He felt her tightening even more and into the throbbing tension that signaled her impending release. Pressure gathered in his cock, so hot and heavy, he knew he'd soon explode with it. He struggled to hold on until she came but wasn't sure he could

manage it. It pressed at him, ached deep inside, but he plunged and plummeted and held it in until she screamed and the vise-like grasp on his cock suddenly broke up into huge, jolting spasms.

It sent him over the edge. With a last deep, plunge, he spent into her. The world expanded, blew up in a shower of stars and light that blazed behind his closed eyes. It took him out of himself, sending him on a dizzying, dazzling trip to a heaven beyond any expectations. Pleasure was a sea he floated in, could happily drown in. Urged by her arms around him, he let himself down carefully on top of her, resting his face next to hers, chest resting on her breasts.

For a while they lay together, panting, jolting to the occasional aftershock, her arms around his torso, hands still gripping his back. He ran his fingers into her hair, adding the pleasure of the smooth, sleek strands sliding along his skin to the bliss of completion. He never wanted to move from this position.

When he finally got his breathing back to something close to normal, he pulled himself up and slid on his rear end until he could sit with his back to the cavern wall. Unprompted, Evelayna joined him, settling next to him so she could rest her head on his shoulder. The light from the torch barely reached into this corner.

When she rested a hand on his thigh, he squeezed it between both of his own palms. For a while they sat together in comfortable peace and silence, content just to be in each other's company.

Eventually, Evelayna stirred and drew a deep, shaky breath. "We have to talk, but I... I don't know how to do this. It's not going to be easy for me. I'm afraid. Afraid you'll end up hating me when you hear what I have to say, or deciding you've made a terrible mistake and want to change your mind. It's hard to talk about." She drew another breath. "I've... I've made some terrible mistakes, and you're paying for some of them. I wish I could go back and do things differently."

He tightened his grip when he felt her hand shake. He tried to keep his tone as even as possible when he said, "Tell me."

Her next breath was something like a sob. "I tried to claim the lance myself." She spewed the words in one big gulp as though she had to get it out quickly before she choked on them.

"You did?" A jolting shock pulsed through him, making his stomach twist.

She nodded. "I did. I needed to find a way to save my mother's kingdom. I'm her heir and leader of our people. When the demons began to invade us, we were pretty much helpless. It was horrible, terrifying. They destroyed and killed...without conscience or mercy. Men, women, children, cattle, everything. It had been so long since we'd last been at war, and they had weapons that were so much more powerful than ours. We needed help, more help than our neighbors and allies could give us. I didn't know where to turn or who to ask for aid."

She sighed heavily and paused for a moment before continuing. "All my life I've heard the legend of the bronze lance, and that it's hidden on this mountain, waiting to

be claimed. The legend says it can be claimed by one who is proved worthy, in time of great need."

The torch sputtered when a cool breeze rippled around the chamber. Evelayna shivered and leaned closer in to him, as through fearing her words might drive him away. "I felt sure I was worthy enough, and my need was great. My need felt so great, in fact, that I elected to take a shortcut to get to the lance, though I'd been warned not to do so."

Shame made her head dip so he couldn't see her face. "The same offer you resisted twice during your trip up the mountain. I took it the first time. Truly I thought the urgency of my need justified not following the course." She drew another breath that sounded like a sob. "No. That's not entirely so. I knew it was wrong. I knew the lance demanded more extensive testing for its claimant's worthiness, but I was too arrogant and thought the rules didn't apply to me since I was a princess. I wish now I'd —"

"No," he interrupted. "There's no point in dwelling on what's done. You can't change the way things are, but you can learn from your mistakes. My father used to say that all the time."

She laughed harshly. "Mine was a very big mistake. The lance doesn't accept any who aren't worthy, and it punishes those who try to claim it without passing the tests."

"The curse?"

She nodded against him. "The curse."

"And I'm the one who can break it? Why?"

"I chose you. Part of the curse was that it could not be broken until I chose someone to be my champion, to fight for me and to win the lance for both of us. Of course, the real trick is that you couldn't want the lance just for my sake. You had to want it for a completely unselfish purpose."

"Why did you choose me? And how could you have? You came to me before I even got here to the mountain. How did you know?"

"Since my...failure, I've been staying with the guardians while waiting for the person I needed to decide to venture on the quest. Whenever anyone made the decision to attempt it, they told me and let me decide whether or not to approach the candidate. There have been many, but I... Something was missing or not right. Too many wanted the lance for personal gain and would never succeed in finding it. Others lacked the fortitude or other necessary qualities. After watching you for some time, I knew you would be the one. You wanted the lance for the right reasons, to heal rather than to destroy. And you have a sense of royal obligation and nobility."

"You chose me because I'm a prince?"

"I chose you because you're the right kind of man. I rejected two other princes and even one king before you."

That stopped him. His heart felt like it expanded a size or two in response. He squeezed her hand tighter. "How could you know what kind of man I am?"

"I watched you. There was a gap of time between your making the decision and when you actually set out. During that time I watched how you worked and relaxed, how you treated your family, your friends and your vassals, how you approached your duties and the favors others asked of you. The more I saw, the more certain I became." Her voice broke on a sob. "You were the man who could bear my burden. Please don't hate me for it."

It took him a few minutes to digest it all. "I don't hate you," he said, at last. "You made a mistake, and it sounds like you've paid a heavy price for it. But I want the lance, and I'll do whatever it takes to get it. If being your champion is one path to its claiming, then so be it. But how can I break the curse?"

She grimaced. "First I have to pay the rest of the price, and you'll have to help with that. I can't tell you any more about it right now. I don't know myself. Then, after you claim the lance, you must claim me as well, completely and irrevocably."

"I'm not sure I understand what that means."

"I know. I'm not even sure I know what it means myself and the guardians wouldn't tell me. I think it means that you acknowledge that I belong to you."

"Marry you?"

She tensed even more. "Not necessarily. I think you could claim me as your slave and that would serve too."

Chapter Ten

Shock hit him like a punch to the gut. "But you're a princess."

Evelayna sighed and shook her head, making her hair slide alluring across his chest. "I don't think I deserve that rank anymore. No doubt, by now my mother and her consort think I'm gone permanently and have named my younger sister as heir."

John considered how his own family would react should he disappear. "I can't imagine that's so. They'll not give up on you so easily as that."

"You don't understand. I'm not entirely sure, but I believe I've been gone over five years from my family's perspective."

All of this was beginning to overload his thinking capacity. "I don't know what more to say," he admitted. "There's a great deal to think on here. But know this. I don't hate you. I only hope I don't fail you."

"You won't." She drew a deep breath and sat up straighter. "It's getting close to morning. We'd best get you back to camp so you can get a little bit of sleep." They helped each other up, laughing as their knees creaked and locked up and they nearly fell back down. They helped each other dress and giggled when he got her shift on backward and his drawers inside-out. When they'd sorted out their clothes, she took his hand. After a moment of disorienting vertigo, they were outdoors, standing just outside the door to the barracks tent.

"No one will hear you," she promised. "Sleep well, my love." She pressed a quick kiss to his lips, and then disappeared, fading into the darkness as though one with it. That was not a thought he wanted to examine too closely.

So much had happened, and she'd left him so much to think on, he expected to have trouble falling back asleep. His exhausted body took command, however, and he barely got onto the cot before he dropped off. Nothing more interrupted his rest that night.

If he slept any less than he normally did, it didn't have any noticeable impact on his performance the next day. They'd advanced to training with warhammers and swords. Because he was lean and quick, the sword proved a better weapon for him, but Sir Rodolph insisted every student master as many as they could.

Over the next two weeks, John grew stronger, quicker, more wary, more agile and far more skilled with sword, knife, and staff, but he also worked himself farther into exhaustion than he would have believed possible. Yet he found surprising satisfaction in pushing himself to the limit and beyond.

He also learned more of the other members of his company, though the only one he felt close to was Marek, the boy who'd remained his primary sparring partner since the

first day. They sometimes sat together on their brief rest breaks and often took seats next to each other for meals.

Marek's father had been killed in the war, leaving his mother, himself and his sister struggling to survive. All his pay from the army went back to them. Hearing that startled John into a new awareness of how sheltered his life had been. It had never occurred to him to ask about pay for this. He'd never suffered from lack of anything here or before. When he was growing up, there had always been plenty of food, servants to perform whatever tasks needing doing, sufficient, good quality clothing for his needs, and comfortable living quarters.

Though he occasionally recounted stories from his youth, and mentioned his family members by name, John told none of the others about his status and was surprised by how few questions they asked. Apparently it was understood and recognized that many of them had things they'd rather not discuss. No one pressed for information that wasn't volunteered.

Some of his companions were more gregarious, however, and readily entertained the group with stories of family, friends and exploits from their backgrounds. Those same people shared legends and folktales from the area as well. The story of the lance came up, of course, as well as the fact that it was rumored to reside on that very mountain. Some of them considered the tale a myth, and those who believed in it mostly agreed it would be far too dangerous a thing to try to wield as a weapon. A few gave him sideways looks at that, knowing that he'd come seeking it, but none pressed him for anything more.

Only Marek himself admitted some desire to see the object and try his ability to be worthy of it. It made John wonder if the younger man had also come specifically to try to claim it, but as it appeared to be considered impolite to question others too closely, he said nothing. He also speculated on how many others in his group might be pursuing the same quest.

In fact, Marek boasted on several occasions that if he had the lance, he could end the war in a day or less. Its power would let them defeat the enemy easily, he believed. John doubted it was that simple, but he also doubted Marek had done anything more substantial toward seeking the lance than talking about it.

It was another three nights before he saw Evelyana again. She came to him late, waking him with a hand on his arm. His first impulse—to grunt in annoyance and shake off the touch—died when he turned and saw her there. She smiled at him, but it wasn't the open, joyful expression from before. She looked tense and strained.

"Please, you must come with me," she said. "Dress this time."

He nodded, rose, slipped into trousers, shirt and boots, and followed her out of the tent. He put his hand in hers when she reached out toward him. Almost immediately, they were somewhere else.

After a moment, his eyes adjusted to the torchlight in the new surroundings. This appeared to be the same chamber he'd been in before, the one with the luxurious bed and tapestries.

They weren't alone in the room, however. A group of people, some twenty or so, were seated in a somewhat formal arrangement at the far side, facing where they stood. Young, old, man, woman, it was an assorted gathering. Some of the faces were familiar. It wasn't until an elderly woman stood up and approached that he recognized many of them from the vision he'd had earlier of the lance. The person approaching them was the one who'd taken the lance from the dragon.

Before she got to them, Evelayna spoke to him.

"John." Her voice sounded odd – tense and...fearful? "I'm sorry. This is going to be hard for you. But, please, *please*, do what they ask of you. It's necessary, I promise."

So much for the nice, long session of lovemaking he'd been anticipating. This sounded ominous.

"What is it?" he asked.

Evelayna didn't answer, deferring instead to the older woman.

"Prince John." The older woman's penetrating, dark gaze drilled into him. "You've done well so far in your quest for the lance. A few slips here and there, but no major faults. We're pleased. As it appears that you do have a realistic chance to win the lance, and the princess has chosen you as her champion, you must both begin final preparations."

A pair of men walked by them, but John kept his attention focused on the older woman, wondering where this was leading.

"Evelayna failed in the quest and she's been under its curse since then. The time has come for the final punishment for the pride and arrogance that led to her failure. As you are her chosen champion, it is your responsibility to administer it."

His stomach clenched into a knot that further tightened when the woman lifted her arm and he saw what she held.

He looked from the whip in her hand to her face when she started speaking again.

"I realize this is no easy thing we ask, but then few of the quester's trials are. All are necessary and have their purpose, though it may not be clear or obvious to you. You may never understand the reason for some of them. But that matters not. For now, this is your task. The penalty is fifty lashes." She held out the whip to him.

He stared at her in shock, making no move to take it.

After a tense, silent moment, the woman spoke again, a hint of impatience creeping into her words. "I know this is a difficult thing we ask, the more so because you care for her. Nonetheless, it's necessary. You *must* be able to do this. A prince must be able to do this, much less the wielder of the lance."

John closed his eyes for a moment. Evelayna had asked him to do it. This woman suggested he might fail in the quest if he couldn't do it. He sighed, opened his eyes and took the whip from her.

Five leather lashes about a yard long hung from the handle. He ran the thongs through his cupped palm.

"It's not heavy enough to do any damage," the woman said, watching him. "It will hurt, as punishment should, but it will cause her no lasting harm. On the contrary, it will do her lasting good." Her expression hardened. "It will serve neither of you if you do not do this as well and thoroughly as you are able."

Panic rushed through him. He couldn't do this. He'd had enough experience with whippings himself as a child to know how much it would hurt, and the most he'd ever had was twenty swats.

"Wait," he said, struggling to find an alternate answer. "I'm her champion. Can I elect to take the punishment myself, rather than her?"

"No!" Evelayna insisted.

The older woman raised her eyebrows. "A noble offer, Prince John. But I'm afraid it cannot be. The guilt in this matter is hers alone, and this is a necessary part of her being purged of it."

He turned to look at the woman he loved. Compassion and fear mingled on her face, but as their eyes met, her expression changed to brave determination. She nodded and said, "It is necessary. And please don't *insult* me by trying to spare me anything."

John drew in a long breath and let it out on a loud sigh. He looked from Evelayna to the older woman and back again. Finally he nodded.

"Good," the woman said.

At her nod, Evelayna walked to the foot of the enormous bed and stood between the high posts. The men who'd walked past him earlier had stationed themselves there, one on either side.

Evelayna made a motion he couldn't see and her shift slid down her body. She wore nothing underneath it. The two men fastened her wrists to bolts driven into the poles a foot or so above her head, and then tied her ankles to similar ones near the floor. They stepped back, leaving her standing spread-eagled and helpless.

For a few long moments, John stood frozen, unable to move, unable to make himself take the step toward the bed that would start it all. He had a flash of memory, of her asking him, some time back about being prince and whether that wouldn't require him to be harsh on occasion. He couldn't remember what he'd answered. Something brash and confident and ignorant, no doubt.

In the stillness of the room, Evelayna's harsh breath sounded like a sob. It made him realize his hesitation was its own kind of torment for her.

Steeling himself, he lifted the whip and walked up behind her. He'd never used one before, though he'd seen it done a few times. Never on a woman, though. She looked

tragically slender and fragile, standing there waiting for the first cut. Ripples or shivers shook her periodically.

It felt as though something was tearing and bleeding inside himself as he raised the instrument, shaking back the thongs, and then swung it around, bringing the lashes down across her back. It wasn't a hard blow, but enough to draw a gasp from her and leave a few faint pink marks.

The second time, he struck a little harder, higher on her shoulders. It took a few more swipes before he finally began to figure out how to swing it in a way that controlled where the lashes landed and how hard.

By the time one of the men who'd fastened her wrists said "That's ten," most of her was shaded pink and showed several rows of raised weals. After the first stroke, she'd made no sound.

He let his arm rest for a moment and tried to push away all the emotions that threatened to overwhelm him. At least the long shirt hid his engorged cock. That reaction angered him even as he knew it couldn't be helped.

The next ten lashes went mostly across her buttocks and legs, each stroke a bit harder than the last. By the time he reached twenty, the skin from the top of her hips to a couple of inches above her knees flushed pink and also bore a network of weals. Amazingly though, the original ones on her back had faded, leaving just a slight pink wash on the skin.

As he gave his arm another moment's recovery time, Evelayna turned her head toward him and said, "You're insulting me."

It stunned and confused him. Why would she want it to be worse? If he were in her place... If he had failed in his quest for the lance, was bedeviled by the shame of it, knowing he'd made a terrible mistake and someone else had to pick up the pieces...

She'd meant it when she said it was necessary. Perhaps not so necessary for his quest, although this was likely another test, but more so for her own sake. She needed this. Damn. She had far more courage than he did. Which was why he had to show that he could and would do this. His courage had to at least equal hers.

The next time he raised the whip, he struck so hard, he winced at the crack the lashes made as they bit into her bottom. Deep rose streaks rose into impressive welts almost immediately. Five strokes later, she moaned aloud for the first time. A network of weals covered most of her buttocks. Several strokes on the backs of her thighs brought more groans and even a loud squeal. She jolted and shuddered with each one.

He aimed higher for the next few, lacing her shoulders with a web of lines that shaded from deep pink into rose and purple in places.

By the time he got to forty strokes, his arm was getting sore from the strain. Evelayna bore a lot of welts, some turning blue and purple. For the last ten, he held nothing back, putting all the remaining strength of his arm into the effort. When number forty-seven bit deeply into the ravaged flesh of her buttocks, she screamed.

John almost threw the whip aside right then. He desperately wanted to, but his knowledge of her strength told him Evelayna would take it as a betrayal.

The last three were delivered as fast and hard as he could, not aimed but just sent to fall where they would. She screamed again one more time in the middle of it. When the man said, "Fifty," John tossed the whip across the floor and went to Evelayna's side.

Her head had flopped forward and she sobbed quietly. Tears ran down her cheeks. John leaned in and kissed her while the two men released her wrists and ankles. When she was free, he gathered her in his arms, picked her up and carried her to the bed, where he set her down gently on her side.

He straightened and turned to face the group watching. "Are you satisfied?" he asked.

The older woman stood up and came to him. "We're satisfied," she confirmed. "You've done well, once again."

John snorted harshly. "I wasn't the one had to endure the pain. *She* did well. Extraordinary well. I trust that this wipes her slate clean?"

The woman's dark eyes took on a faint shadow of sadness. "Not yet. You still have to win the lance to free her completely."

"And if I die in the attempt?"

"What you've now won and what you will win live on after you," she said.

The woman at the bottom of the mountain had said that, too. "What is that supposed to mean?" He didn't try to hide his anger and frustration.

"I can't tell you any more."

"Why does everything have to secrets and riddles around here?"

She smiled. "What kind of tests would they be if you knew all the answers in advance?" She approached and handed him a small pot that emitted a strong aroma of herbs. "Use this on her welts. She'll feel better quickly."

At a nod from the older woman, everyone else in the room departed, though not in the normal way. No doors for these people. They simply faded out of sight and were gone within a minute or so. The older woman disappeared last of all.

John went back to the bed and studied Evelayna's body. Most of the welts were already fading into the wash of pink color that shaded most of her back from shoulders to just above the knees. A few darker spots showed where she'd have bruises. Her bottom seemed to have more of them than any other part.

He walked around the bed so he could see her face. Instead of having her eyes closed as he expected, she was awake and watched him. A small, weak smile played across her lips and eyes when she saw him.

"John?"

He knelt beside the bed to put their eyes on a level. "Yes, my love. Are you all right?"

"Better than all right," she answered. "Wonderful. Thank you."

He sighed. "I don't see how you can be."

"John, come and hold me, please," she asked.

He moved onto the bed, lying next to her and carefully worked an arm under her neck. She shifted her head onto his chest.

"I don't want to hurt you any more than I have," he said, as he carefully put his other arm around her.

"You won't. I feel so much better now." She sighed. "I finally begin to feel as though I might be worthy of you."

"You're more than worthy. You're a marvel."

"No. You've resisted all the temptations so far, passed all the tests, while I succumbed to the very first one."

"My situation is nowhere near as desperate as yours was," he said.

"That doesn't excuse what I did."

He thought about that. "No. But it explains it."

She smiled at him again. "I'm so fortunate." She reached up and ran her hands over his face, rasping against the beard stubble on his cheek. "I love you."

"Even after I beat you?"

"Because you had the strength of body and of will to do what was needed. I'm... It feels good, my love."

He shifted his arm and it must have pressed on one of her bruises causing her to gasp. "I've got some salve for you. Let me put it on."

She lay still on her belly once he rolled her over. No sound came from her while he stroked the soothing ointment over her roughened, sore flesh. Except that as he finished up, he heard a soft snore.

He lay back on the bed and moved her so that her head was on his shoulder again. He dozed off himself and only woke when she shook him and called his name.

"John. It's near dawn. I need to take you back to your camp."

* * * * *

For the next two weeks, as he practiced with the same group of people, worked with them, ate and slept beside them, he became fond of all the members of the group. The training became even more intense. They moved from weapons training to working on tactical maneuvers, negotiating various sorts of terrains, and spending several days on mock battles with other training groups.

Their tension grew as they realized the time approached when they'd no longer be doing mock battles, but going into an all-too-genuine war. It brought them to

occasionally argue among themselves, and increasingly, John found himself mediating the disputes, trying to calm both sides, and settling issues before they came to blows.

They also looked to him for answers to problems, for direction when they were charged with some practice mission as a team, and for help when they were having problems with each other or in some other aspect of their training. He wasn't sure when he'd turned into their leader, but by the end of the fourth week, it had happened without anyone particularly noticing or marking it.

Increasingly the subject of their conversations was the fact that they'd soon be going to war. They couldn't help but wonder what the future would bring for them. Would they stay together or be split up into different units? Would they be immediately drawn into battle or have to wait around for it? And how many of them would survive it?

Sir Rodolph and Sir Swandon called John into a private meeting one morning some five or six weeks—he'd lost count of the days by then—after he'd started training. He accompanied them to a small tent furnished more lavishly than any of the others he'd been in, with a couple of tables, benches, banners on poles and maps and charts tacked to the canvas walls. More maps spread across the larger of the two tables.

The tent also held two men. John had seen them around the camp once or twice and had the impression they were important officers.

"Rodolph and Swandon." A short, dark-haired man greeted his companions, then looked straight at him. "Prince John. Come in and have a seat." He nodded toward the smaller table, which had chairs surrounding it. Rodolph and Swandon saluted the man and sat down, so John did the same.

"I'm Colonel Elswin," the man continued. He gestured to his older companion whose gray hair and beard didn't hide the fact that he was still a vigorous man. "This is General Maxey."

Maxey nodded. He didn't sit, but came over and rested his hands on the back of one of the chairs, facing them. "Prince John, thank you for joining us."

He looked at each man in turn, but he addressed John when he continued. "I don't know how much you know of this war. I assume the princess has told you some, but as you're a stranger to these lands, you likely don't know much. We know you only joined us because Evelayna asked you to be her champion."

John nodded. "She's told me some and I've heard more about it from my training mates."

"Good. Then you know that we're up against an enemy invading these lands that we find difficult to defeat. Many people think our enemies are demons. They're not, they're just different creatures. But they do have an unusual power backing them. Our intelligence indicates a powerful wizard is directing them and empowering their weapons. They don't even have all that many soldiers, but they don't need them. We have no wizards to equal the power of theirs."

Maxey looked at John and a grim smile curved his lips. "I'm sure you're wondering why I'm telling you this."

"Yes, sir," John answered.

"There is a weapon that might defeat this wizard, but we do not have access to it right now. That is why we've asked you here." Maxey stared at him so hard, John quailed under that stern regard.

"You are the first quester in a very long time who appears to have a good chance of claiming the bronze lance. You've passed most of the tests on the journey, you've developed well as a soldier, Princess Evelyana has chosen you, and you've emerged as a leader of your training company. Most importantly, you want the lance for completely unselfish reasons."

Of all the things he'd expected, that was close to the last. "You want me to claim the lance and use it to win your war?"

"That's the idea," Maxey confirmed. "People are dying each day. These creatures slaughter indiscriminately, without mercy or thought. We want only to drive them out of our lands, back to their own. You are our best hope for accomplishing that."

"You believe the lance can do that?"

Maxey paused a moment before answering. "Legend says the lance is a powerful weapon, which is why stringent tests are applied to he who would claim it."

"Surely there are more worthy questers among your own people."

Maxey shook his head. "We are the guardians of the lance, and it has brought us considerable benefit, but all of those among us would claim it for the wrong reasons."

"What are the wrong reasons?"

"For power, for glory, for any personal gain. Legend says the lance is most likely to be claimed by one who wants it for the most unselfish of reasons."

"Doesn't it provide you any protection against invasion if it's so important it not fall into the wrong hands? Aside from the wall around the mountain there appears to be little to stop invaders."

"There's more than you know. If—" He caught himself and stopped for a bare second before continuing. "If they didn't have a powerful wizard supporting them, it would not be a problem."

"There's still a dragon standing between me and the lance, if what I've heard is true."

"It's true. And it's also true that ultimately you and you alone have to defeat it. But we will provide as much help and support for you as we can. We propose to send your entire company with you to take it on."

"My company? You'd take them away from the war to come with me?"

"If you win the lance, we have a chance to win the war. A much better chance than the addition of a couple of dozen swords would give us."

John thought about that. He wasn't happy about the idea of facing the dragon, but it was his quest. "I suppose that means I would continue on the road I left to come here?"

Maxey nodded. "The dragon's lair is near the summit. Your way goes there."

"Can you offer any suggestions about how the dragon might be defeated?" John asked.

"I fear not." Maxey lifted his hands and let them fall. "Nothing is guaranteed, but you show the most promise, and we've trained you as well as we can for the task in the time we have." He sighed. "That is something else we haven't told everyone. Our time grows short. The enemy is bringing in reinforcements and will soon be marching forward again. We have few options remaining. What say you?"

John considered his possible choices, but he had so few, it didn't take long. "I don't know what the claiming of the lance will demand of me, and it's quite possible I will not be able to assist anyone after making the attempt. But if I can claim it and am still able to assist you, you'll have my efforts."

Maxey inclined his head. "We can ask no more. We thank you for whatever you can do on our behalf."

* * * * *

The next morning, instead of demonstrating some new technique or starting them on a new exercise, Sir Rodolph asked the entire company to sit down and listen to him.

"You've learned all I can teach you," he said. "And you've all done well, better than I could have expected, in fact. You're as fine a group of soldiers as I've had the privilege of teaching. Because you are the best we've had in some time, and there are circumstances that give us an opportunity to end this war in a stroke, we have a special mission for you. This mission is critical to our efforts to win the war, and, if successful, gives us a good chance to bring it to a rapid end."

That obviously jolted some members of the company and caused considerable talk among them. Rodolph let it go on for a few minutes before he held up a hand to quiet them.

"I cannot at the moment tell you the nature of this mission, but I would like to inform you that we've appointed John to be the leader of this company for the mission. He'll tell you what you need to know when the time is right."

Every member of the group turned to look at him. Most smiled, but a few looked surprised or dubious. Marek slapped him on the back and appeared delighted.

"You'd better not make us wait too long," one of the more thoughtful of his training mates said.

"You'll know soon," he promised.

Rodolph concluded by saying, "You'll leave tomorrow. Weapons and gear will be assigned this afternoon."

John spent the rest of the day fending off questions, practicing sword and pike moves with the group, and then playing a card game with the company until dark. He suspected that one or two of the brighter members of the group had already guessed where they'd be going, but if so, they kept the knowledge to themselves.

Evelayna finally came to him again that night. It had been a couple of weeks by then, and he'd begun to wonder if she'd been more hurt the last time than she wanted to admit, or if she'd finally decided to be mad at him about it. Relief flooded him when he saw her standing by his bed in the darkness.

Nothing about the smile she wore suggested anger or resentment. She held out a hand and he took it. He'd become accustomed to the moment of disorientation that accompanied travel with her. When it ended, they were back in the same bedroom as the previous trip. Momentary fear of a repeat of the events of that last visit stabbed at him, but, seeing his discomfort, she laughed lightly and said, "This time is just about us. Although..." She gave him an odd smile. "I love the way you master me. If you ever feel the need to discipline me again..."

John's expression must have shown his surprise because she laughed even harder. "It's amazing," she added, "but the day after last time, I wanted you so badly I was practically mad for it. It hardly hurt at all, but I was hot and wanting you. And every day since. But I was asked to wait since you were in an intense and consuming part of your training."

He still couldn't quite believe what he heard. "Do you mean you liked being punished? It made you...hot for me?"

She thought about it a moment. "Not quite. I didn't like being punished. It hurt terribly and at the time I only wanted it to stop. But afterward...it affected something inside me, and I wanted you very badly. I don't think it would have been the same if someone else had done it. It was because it was you."

"You don't really want me to whip you like that again?"

"No!" Her tone left no doubt. "It was far too painful, even if it was what I needed. But remember when you spanked me before? It was somewhat like that."

"I see. Perhaps you'll need some discipline tonight. But first...you're wearing too much."

She released the lacing on her overgown and let it slide down her body, then lifted her shift up and off, showing that she wore nothing underneath. His cock stiffened immediately, and he realized he wouldn't be able to control himself long.

He beckoned her to join him by the bed and had managed to shuck off his nightshirt and pants before she reached him. She walked straight into him, wrapped her arms around him and pulled his head down so she could reach his mouth. Perhaps she felt the same desperate need he'd built up over the last couple of weeks. She buried her fingers in his hair and clung tightly.

Somehow, they tipped over onto the bed. Evelayna landed on top of him, one of her breasts coming down practically on his nose. John couldn't let such an opportunity to

go by. He shifted just enough to reach the nipple and drew it into his mouth. The sudden, sharp squeal she let out combined astonishment and pleasure, spurring him to greater effort. It was no hardship. She tasted like strawberries and cream. He brushed his tongue around the nipple, probing and stroking, then he sucked hard until she was squirming and sobbing his name.

He reached down and brushed his hand along her stomach and abdomen until he got to the folds of her quim. They were slick and hot, moistly ready for him. Need rode him too desperately to wait, but he wanted something different.

"On your hands and knees," he told her and waited until she'd shifted into the position on the bed. He had to scoot her forward to make room behind her, then he knelt and probed for her cunt from behind.

Shock held her stiff for a moment before she wriggled back to meet him as his cock found the entrance. It felt awkward at first since the angle was different, but the heat and the slick tightness of her held him in thrall again as she took more and more of him into herself. The position also allowed him to reach around and under her with one hand, while the other supported his weight, letting him palm the delightful, pendulous handful of a breast.

She squealed in delight as he tweaked the nipple, squeezing it harder each time he rammed his cock all the way in. Shudders rippled along her frame, growing harder and stronger each time he pushed home. Their groans and pants mingled as they strained together. A squeeze on his balls made him jump and groan loudly. She'd reached underneath and now patted them regularly as they thumped against her slit. A couple of times, she held them down against her clit, rubbing in circles.

"Evelayna," he warned, but it ended as a shout when he climaxed suddenly and sharply. The exquisite relief and pleasure of it jolted him into pushing deep into her once more. The rolling spasms of orgasm engulfed her at nearly the same time, and it milked him of every bit of seed.

His head sagged onto her back, resting against the smooth, sweet skin and the rough bumps of her spine. He toyed with her breasts while she heaved in a near-frenzied series of jolts. His knees ached and his chest hurt from breathing so hard. It felt like heaven.

After a while he pulled away, helped her roll over onto her side, and pulled her against him.

"You're the sweetest thing that's ever happened to me," he told her. "I want to stay here and hold you like this forever."

"I do, too," she said. "I've never felt more complete, more sated or more loved." She sighed softly and nuzzled at his throat.

They lay together quietly for a while, until he felt a drop of warm liquid drip onto his cheek. It stunned him into lifting her face so he could see her expression.

"You're crying. What is it?"

She drew a shaky breath. "I'm trying to be brave. Truly I am. But you're going to face the dragon, and I might lose you. I wish there were some other way. I wish..." A frown of pain drew her mouth and eyes into tight lines.

"What?"

"I wish we could run off somewhere on our own and just live simply, without worrying about kingdoms, and wars and obligations. I wish I didn't have to worry about you so much." The words ended on a sob and she pressed her face into his chest, clinging to him tightly. "I love you so much, John, and I'm afraid of losing you."

"I'm not wild about the idea of losing me either," he admitted, hoping it would make her laugh. She managed a choked chuckle, but it might have come more from a sense of obligation than from any real amusement.

"I love you, too," he added, "and that will motivate me to do my absolute best to pass this test and succeed." He drew a breath, wishing he felt as confident as he sounded. "Is there nothing you can tell me of how to defeat this dragon?" he asked.

She shook her head, which still rested on his chest. "It's said that it *can* be defeated, and that when the right claimant for the lance appears, he *will* defeat the dragon, but more than that I don't know. I have no idea how it might be accomplished. I know almost nothing of the dragon save that it exists."

John drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Then I'll just have to trust to my luck and my training."

"John..." She lifted her face toward him. "You are the right man and you will find a way to defeat the dragon. I believe that."

He held her tight for a long while. They clung to each other in silence, drawing what comfort there was to be found from each other's company. Finally she roused and said, "We'd best be going back. You'll need your sleep."

John nodded and got up with her. Before they left the room, though, he held her close to him once more. "I love you," he told her. "And because I do, I'm going to win. I'll defeat the dragon and claim the lance. For my family and for you."

Chapter Eleven

They set out the next morning. The murmuring among the company began right away, when instead of heading for the road down the mountain, they returned to the door that led to the tunnel through which he'd arrived. John assured them that this was the path they were supposed to be taking.

They lit torches and proceeded into the tunnel. When they reached the intersection with his original road, John had them all sit and eat. After they'd finished, he explained to them what they were going to do.

His explanation elicited the same startled puzzlement he'd expressed himself when Maxey had asked him about undertaking the mission.

"We're going to face the dragon?" one man asked him, voicing the questions they all had. "Why?"

"Because it guards the bronze lance."

That silenced them for a moment, until the same man asked, "You're going to try to claim it?"

"That's the idea."

"A lot of others have tried and failed. What makes you think you can succeed?"

Marek broke in before the other had finished his question. "General Maxey and the others backed this mission, so there must be a reason to think John can do this."

John thanked him and added, "The main reason they did so is that I'm Princess Evelayna's chosen champion."

That caused another stir with several people making comments along the line of the one Samuel offered. "The princess disappeared years ago. She's presumed dead or captured by the enemy."

"She is neither dead nor captured, but I cannot tell you more of her now. General Maxey knows of her as well, and knows that she chose me."

"But how do we kill a dragon?" another man asked.

"I don't know," John admitted. "I don't know that it's necessary to kill it. I'm hoping that will become clearer when we get closer to it."

Some grumbling ensued and John didn't blame them.

"I'd be happier, too," he admitted, "If I had a better idea of how to handle the dragon. But that wasn't given me. I do know that so far I've either been given what was needed or found I had it already, and Evelayna has confidence in my ability." He didn't tell them that he wished he shared that confidence, but they were shaky enough on this enterprise as it was. "I also have confidence in you. Having trained and sparred with all

of you, I know how good you are. I can't think of any group of people I'd rather have assisting me on this mission."

Others continued to murmur and debate, but no one raised any more questions with him. Once they'd eaten, they set out again, emerging after a while into the tunnel at the original road. He turned them right, taking the fork he'd turned away from the last time he'd passed that way.

The tunnel ended not much farther on, emerging out onto the steeper slope on the other side of the mountain. Sporadic clumps of trees still grew along the edges of the road, but the underbrush was thinner and the wood interrupted more frequently by large rock outcroppings.

When they came to an opening in the trees where they could see down into the valley below, he was stunned to see how far up he'd come. Looking up, however, he realized they still had some ways to go to get to the top and the dragon's lair.

They walked on until daylight faded into twilight and pitched camp in the first level area they found that would accommodate their tents. They met no obstacles, had nothing uncanny happen, and heard no odd or threatening noises.

By midday the next day, they were close to the mountain's summit. John could no longer even dare to look down. The valley below showed only as a misty roll of plains and blanket of greenery. The road had become nothing more than an uneven path that climbed so steeply in places it was more of a rough staircase.

They stopped to eat when the sun reached its zenith but didn't linger. John shared the tension growing in the group as they neared their destination and wondered what it would bring. It surprised him that they hadn't seen the dragon soaring over them at all since they'd emerged from the tunnel. He couldn't decide if that was good news or not.

They rounded a bend and stopped. No more than ten feet ahead, the trail led directly into the mouth of a cave. There was no place else to go. The rocks rose sharply to a peak some ten feet above them. The only alternatives to going into the cave were turning around or forging a new path along the very steep slope to the summit or down the mountain's side.

His companions waited for his decision. After a moment or two, John said, "Draw weapons, light torches and let's go in."

For just a bare moment he wondered if they'd follow his orders. But after that short pause, they all hoisted staves or drew swords. John lit a torch and passed the flame around, then he drew his own sword and stepped into the cave.

Just a few feet in, the smell hit him. It didn't overwhelm him or knock him down, but it was too strange and unsettling to ignore. The last tunnel had smelled damp and slightly rank with the aroma of whatever grew in the darkness. This one had a much more animal smell—not unbearable, or even terribly unpleasant, but terrifying nonetheless, due to his suspicions about the source.

Before they'd gone much farther, just beyond the point where light from outside reached them, they heard noises from deeper in the cave, a huffing and snuffling, plus a series of loud scratches that could easily be claws scraping against stone.

A couple of members of the company paused. One woman cursed, while several other soldiers muttered under their breath. John looked back and laid a finger over his lips, demanding silence. He thought it likely to be futile as the dragon had no doubt already heard them, but it didn't pay to ignore caution.

They proceeded down the tunnel as silently as possible, stopping where the passage narrowed so much they could only pass one at a time. Not far beyond the short squeeze, the passage opened up into a wider tunnel, brightly lit by an unseen source of orange-red radiance. John's heart lurched, but his only other choice was to turn back. He raised his torch and led them forward. The tunnel ended at an enormous cavern, at least several hundred feet across. They found themselves standing on a narrow ledge some ten feet above the floor of the huge space. The roof was well above their heads and the chamber itself could easily accommodate a small army.

Right then it accommodated one large dragon.

It lay curled in a shallow depression in the floor of the chamber. Rows of flaming torches around the walls kept the chamber bright and warm. Ripples of light flowed over the creature's iridescent scales and glittered off them in rainbow slicks of color, predominantly blue and green, but showing tinges of purple and black as well. Its wicked claws were tucked under it, out of sight, but spikes on its scales, serrated, scaly ridges along its back, and a snout as long as John was tall, with a few teeth protruding from it, ensured the creature looked terrifyingly fearsome even as it slept.

Then it opened one eye and looked up at them. For a few moments it surveyed the group standing on the ledge, rolling its eye lazily from one person to the next. After taking the measure of each man and woman in his company, it returned its gaze to him.

"Ah, the princeling arrives," it said. Its deep, grumbling voice echoed around the chamber in a way that made the words more menacing with each reverberation. "You've taken your time. I'm getting hungry."

A couple of his companions gasped and another cursed. They all raised their weapons. John and the dragon both ignored them.

"There's plenty of hunting area on the mountain and around it," John answered.

"True, Prince John. But I prefer something with a bit more savor than the local wildlife when I can get it. Something that offers a challenge. Royal blood adds a certain spice to the meal, but having to earn the food gives it even more."

While John was still considering that, Marek turned to him. "You're a prince?" he asked.

"Yes. But it doesn't matter right now. Except that our host here seems to favor royal blood with his meals."

"Indeed I do," the dragon confirmed.

"You won't eat us without a fight," John warned. "You may have the superior size, but our numbers give us some advantage."

"Of course," the dragon said. "Where would be the challenge if it was easy? But that wasn't exactly what I had in mind."

"No?"

The dragon's giant eyes pinned him with its stare. As he met its gaze, John felt dragged into it, almost hypnotized by the glittering depths. He shook himself and shut his own eyes briefly.

"Come closer to me," the dragon said. Its low, grinding voice turned the request into an order.

John hesitated, then moved toward the stone staircase at the far end of the ledge that led down to the floor of the chamber.

When his company filed behind him the dragon said, "Just you, Prince John. The rest should leave and go back the way they came."

They all halted, looking at John for direction. He stopped with his foot on the top step but turned to the dragon. "I thought you wanted a challenge?"

"I do. That's why they go and you stay."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"It doesn't matter." The dragon's head rose just slightly. It surveyed his company, arrayed on the ledge in a single row, facing the dragon. "If they stay, I could easily toast them all in a single breath."

"You prefer your dinner burnt?" John asked.

"I prefer people do what I ask."

There wasn't any way to argue with that, and John didn't see the point in risking his companions' lives so pointlessly. "Do as he says. Go back down the road. Wait for me for a while and if I don't return within a couple of hours return to the camp."

Several started to protest. "John," Marek said. "Sir...Your Highness, we don't—"

"John," he said firmly. "And I appreciate your concern, but do as I ask. This is my battle and only I can win it or lose it." He drew a deep breath. "I'm sorry to have brought you all this way only to tell you that you can't help me, but so it is. I have to do this alone."

They grumbled a bit more but turned and left the chamber. He walked down to the floor of the cavern. Though it smelled of fires past and charred meat, no bones, bodies or even piles of ash littered the floor. The place appeared to have been swept clean, recently.

"So, Sir Dragon," he said, "What kind of challenge did you have in mind?"

The dragon watched him approach but didn't move except to lift its head a bit from where it had rested on the floor. It nodded to an arch behind it. It appeared to give onto another chamber lit from within by torches. The dragon then looked back to him. "You

want to claim the lance," it said. "I guard it. You must defeat me to get to it. We'll have a contest to see if you can get past me to that arch without me capturing you first."

"All I have to do is get past you to defeat you?"

"That's all. But you can have no help from your friends. This you do on your own or not at all."

"And if I fail to get past you?"

The dragon lifted one wing in a kind of shrug. "I eat you. I haven't tasted royal blood in many years. It will be a treat."

John wondered if the chamber beyond was the same one Evelayna had taken him to. He recalled what had happened there. "I could call the lance to me right now."

"You could," the dragon agreed.

That made him suspicious. There had to be a catch, or the dragon wouldn't be so unconcerned that an enormously powerful weapon should fall into his hands. And, of course, there was. He'd been warned often enough that there were no shortcuts. He had to defeat the dragon *before* he could claim the lance.

From here it was only a matter of fifty feet or so to get to the arch leading to the other chamber. That opening wasn't big enough to admit the dragon, so once through it he would be safe. But he saw no easy way to get from his present position to that passage. No way at all, in fact, that couldn't be easily blocked by the dragon.

"Are there any other rules I should know about?" Mostly he was trying to delay the inevitable, but he used the time to check for possible hidden ways to the door or something that could provide assistance.

"None that I can think of," the dragon answered.

"When do we start?"

"Whenever you're ready to make the attempt."

John drew his sword, though he doubted it could offer much help or protection against a creature whose teeth were nearly as long as his arm. A desperate glance showed him nothing he hadn't seen before. The smooth walls of the chamber provided no assistance for him. The area didn't even boast a convenient rock or two big enough to use for cover.

He saw only one way that might offer a possibility. He ran to the left, hugging the curving wall of the chamber, hoping the dragon would have to rise to its feet in order to reach him. With its legs tucked under it, he couldn't tell how far they could extend. He didn't know how quickly it could move. Its size might make it slow enough to let him get by before it could stop him.

He was right about its legs, but he hadn't considered fully its tail. As he ran around the side, that long appendage swung toward him with lightning quickness and swept like a giant mop, pushing him all the way to the base of the staircase he'd descended into the chamber. He held onto his sword with an effort and just barely kept from

impaling himself on it as he rolled across the floor. The collision with wall stunned him and bruised his side.

"Round one to me," the dragon stated as John shook off a moment of dizziness and got back to his feet. It hadn't moved any part of its body other than its tail.

"Best two out of three?" he asked.

"I'll give you a few more tries," the creature conceded.

John recovered his breath. Without giving any warning, he raised his sword and charged straight toward it, hoping to bury the blade in the creature's long neck.

At the last second, it moved, dipping its snout and using it to push him back against a side wall of the cavern. He hit the rock with a crash, cracking his temple hard against it. A warm runnel of blood snaked down the side of his face. John wiped sweat and blood out of his eyes with his free hand and rolled to a sitting position.

"Oh, come, Prince John. You can surely do better than that," the creature taunted.

He tried to edge around it again, moving slowly at first. The dragon let him get about halfway there before it flicked its tail again. John held the sword out in front of him. The tail kept coming and impaled itself on the sword.

The dragon squawked as the sword pierced it, but the tail didn't stop moving. It swept him back harder, banging him sharply against the wall, knocking all the air out of his lungs. Several moments of struggle ensued before he could draw enough air back in and clear his head. He sat up cautiously, trying to ignore the throbbing of bruises on his head, shoulder and hip.

His sword still protruded from the side of the dragon's tail, looking about as lethal as a splinter in a finger.

Still it seemed to irritate the creature, which waved the tail around, trying to shake it loose. John scooted around to the other side, hoping to make it past while the dragon was distracted.

No such luck. The dragon twisted its neck and knocked him back with its snout yet again.

John leaned against the wall, huffing and puffing, desperately searching for ideas. The dragon shook his sword loose, and by a lucky stroke, it slid along the floor to end up not far from where he stood. He reached out and grabbed it.

At a spot near the ledge, a few stones about the size of his fist had been jarred loose. He edged over and picked one up. It would be like tossing a grain of sand at a person, but maybe...

Instead of tossing it directly at the dragon, he threw it at a spot on the wall above where the creature lay curled. The rock impacted with a dull thud and shook loose a small shower of dust and debris. As a bonus, the stone itself smashed into a multitude of shards, which joined the loosened debris in raining down on to the dragon's head and body.

The creature rose and shook itself. John saw his opportunity and took off, running, directly at the dragon again. He ducked under its head and neck, bending over as he raced beneath its body. The animal smell was strong, but not unbearably unpleasant. He worried the dragon might decide to sit down on him, and held the sword over his head, pointing upward.

Beyond the end of the dragon's body, the tail loomed, with the passage to the other room a little ways beyond it. He scooted along and cleared the tail. A surge of elation charged him with energy for the last run to the arch. He was just a few steps away from it, when something circled his waist and lifted him off the floor.

He was dead. Though he struggled and wiggled, trying to break free, the dragon's claw around his waist grasped him firmly. He still held his sword, though his arm was pinned by the claw, preventing him from bringing it up farther than his waist. He had no other defense.

The creature lifted him up until he was at the level of its raised head. Its eyes looked enormous at this close range, so big he could nearly crawl into their depths. He was due for a closer acquaintance with its insides but not through that route.

John couldn't keep himself from shaking when it opened its mouth. Teeth lined the pointed snout, some of them nearly as long as his arm, all sharply pointed. Its breath reminded him of the dog's when it had come close enough, the smell of a creature that ate mostly meat, but overlaid with the distinct aroma of smoke.

John forced himself to stillness, and to keep his eyes open. The dragon watched him steadily, possibly waiting for him to fight.

Though he could still move the sword in a limited range, he doubted it could help much. He needed something bigger, something more powerful. The lance.

Evelayna had told him he could call it when he needed it, and it would come. He could call it in his time of greatest need and when he knew himself worthy of it. But he'd also been told he had to defeat the dragon to claim it. Everyone said there were no shortcuts. He knew all too well he wasn't worthy of it, certainly not if he summoned it without earning it. Despair clouded his thinking. He'd failed. Failed his father, his family and his kingdom. Failed Evelayna, failed the companions he'd led here on this disastrous mission, failed the army that had trained him to win their war.

Still, if he called the lance now, it might yet save him. Or would it? If he couldn't legitimately claim it until he'd defeated the dragon, then it might not save him. Or it might curse him in the same way it had Evelayna.

But what good would anything do him if he died?

He wiggled again and brought the sword up as far as he could get it, turning it to try to cut into the claw that held him. The dragon brought up its other claw and wrapped it around him slightly below the other one, pinning his arms tighter still against his body, effectively ending any possibility of using the sword at all.

If he called the lance, would it not only come at his command, but toss itself into the dragon at his command as well? Quite possibly. Would that be a failure in his quest, though? Almost certainly.

When the dragon tried to swallow him, he should have a very brief opportunity, after it had put him in its mouth, when he could cut it from inside with the sword. If he could do it fast enough, he might be able to slide back out, with only minimal damage. It was a long shot, but the only alternative he could think of.

He didn't like either of his choices. Call the lance and possibly save himself, but almost surely fail in the quest. Or not call it and likely die, with only a minimal possibility that he'd succeed in the quest in the process.

Perhaps if he did defeat the dragon, even if he himself didn't survive, his family and those who depended on him would get the benefit of the lance's power?

What you win lives on after you, the old woman had said. He'd thought she was referring to him becoming a legend or making history. Perhaps she'd meant it much more literally. Evelayna had hinted at the same thing. There was some comfort in that, and enough direction to let him make a decision. In death his soul could move beyond all physical obstacles.

He blinked, drew a deep breath and mentally prepared himself for a close meeting with the dragon's gullet.

Nothing happened. The dragon continued to stare at him and seemed to be waiting for something. Its eyes gleamed with interest, and it huffed out a smoky breath.

"Are you looking for the salt shaker?" John asked. "I can guarantee you won't like the way I taste – with or without salt."

"Why haven't you summoned the lance?" the dragon asked, sounding perplexed and more than a bit chagrined. "You know you can."

"I also know I'll fail in my quest if I do."

"But you'll save your life."

"What will it be worth, though, if I fail and am cursed as a result?"

"Perhaps you won't be cursed. You resisted most temptations," the dragon said. It lifted John closer to its mouth, so close he could have reached out and touched the end of its snout had his arms not been pinned to his sides.

"Why are you telling me this?" John asked. "Do you want me to defeat you?"

The dragon opened its mouth wider. John struggled and tried to wriggle out of its clasp as his head was pushed into the dragon's maw. The point of a sharp tooth dug into his chest. He tried to bring the sword around, but couldn't. With only moments to live, he considered the lance again. He wouldn't be cursed, but he'd still have failed. Could he live as a failure? No, not when there was a way to win, even though his life was the price of victory.

Again, though, the dragon waited, not biting down to deliver the coup de grâce. Several long moments went by. To John, now resigned to death and just wanting it to be

over, the wait seemed like years. Years of temptation to call the lance and save himself. He didn't want to die. He didn't want to fail. Despair made his muscles go slack and tears gather in his eyes.

Chapter Twelve

The dragon pulled him back out of its mouth, careful not to scrape him over its teeth. John's heart lurched, missed a beat, and then pounded hard several times when the creature set him back down on the floor of the cavern and released him.

It huffed out a long, steamy breath that sounded remarkably like a sigh. "You've bested me," the dragon said.

John was struggling to stay upright on his wobbly legs and shaky knees, so it took a moment for the words to sink in.

"What do you mean?" To his chagrin, his voice shook, too. "Why did you...put me down?"

The dragon chuffed out another cloud of steam. "You win. You may claim the lance."

"How did I win? You had me in your mouth, ready to bite me in half. How is that winning?"

"You don't know all the rules of the game. My mission wasn't just to keep you from physically passing through this chamber to the next. It was also to induce you to call the lance to save your own life. You didn't, even when you knew you were about to die. You win. You are worthy of the lance, Prince John."

"As simple as that?" he asked. "I refused to summon it, so I'm worthy of it."

A horny brow ridge puckered as it watched him. "Was it truly simple? You came within inches of being bitten in half."

"No," he admitted, shaking his head to clear the threatening dizziness. "Not simple. Just unexpected. I thought I was dead. It's being a bit difficult to get used to staying alive."

"No doubt. Take the time you need to catch your breath again. But don't take too long. There are others waiting for you in there." The dragon nodded to the passage he guarded.

John had to wait another few moments before he felt certain his legs would hold him up long enough to get through the arch. He saluted the dragon with his sword as he walked past it into the other room. Until he actually passed the arch, he wasn't one hundred percent certain the dragon wouldn't change its mind and decide to have him for a snack anyway.

At the end of the short tunnel between chambers, a shimmery screen blocked his view into the chamber holding the lance. It reminded him of the shimmering wall he'd walked through early in his trek up the mountain. He hesitated only a moment before stepping through.

He recognized the cavern as the same one Evelyayna had brought him to earlier. The niche holding the lance was on the far side. He didn't remember another entrance, but it had been mostly dark in the chamber that night. Now it was lit by numerous torches. A surprising number of people had gathered there as well. They cheered when they saw him in the arch. He stopped, startled and not sure how to react.

He searched for Evelyayna in the crowd but didn't find her. Instead he met the gaze of the older woman who stared hard at him. It took a moment before he recognized her because she now looked regal and commanding, where before she'd looked disheveled and scraggly. He wondered now why he hadn't realized the woman who'd accepted the lance in the vision on the road and who'd demanded that he punish Evelyayna was the same one who'd given him directions when he set out. Beside her stood the enormous warrior who'd blocked his way.

A soft woof drew his attention to the dog, which also waited in the group. He'd wondered what had happened to it and was pleased to see it again.

Most startling, though, the entire company of soldiers who'd accompanied him to the dragon's lair waited to greet him.

For a minute or two, he couldn't move, except to brush away a trickle of blood that ran down from the scrape on his forehead into his eye. The ache from several bruises and the sting of other cuts on various parts of his body started to assert themselves. His right shoulder throbbed badly.

At a nod from the older woman, the enormous man in leather armor went to the niche where the lance rested. He reached up and took hold of the shaft, pulled it down from the shelf and handed it to the woman. Its radiance diminished slightly when removed from the depression in the wall, but it still glowed with a soft bronze shine.

When she let the blunt end rest on the ground in front of her, the blade of the lance was above her head.

"Come forward, Prince John," she demanded.

His legs still wobbled, but he tried to hold himself straight and tall as he negotiated the short step down into the chamber and crossed the floor. He halted a couple of feet in front of the woman.

She smiled at him. "I'm the Guardian Loisana. We've met on a couple of occasions, though I think you didn't recognize me as the same person."

John didn't know how to answer that, so he just nodded in acknowledgement and said, "Yes, madam."

"You have passed all the tests, and we have confidence that you're worthy of this. Congratulations. We give the bronze lance into your keeping." She handed the lance to him. "Its power is beyond anything you guess right now, but not unlimited. Learn what it can do and use it wisely."

When he wrapped his hand around the shaft of the lance, he felt a tingling warmth pass into his palm from the smooth metal surface. It spread through him, in a surge of heat that seemed to expand him as it ran into his limbs and up to his head. Knowledge

came with it, but not the kind that would seep automatically into his brain. It would sit there, waiting until he needed it or had time to explore it on his own.

"My thanks, madam," he answered. "I'll try to use it wisely." He fought off another wave of dizziness that made the entire room seem a bit out of focus.

She nodded at him.

The cheering broke out first among his company of fellow soldiers but spread rapidly around the room. John felt himself blush and shifted uncomfortably. He looked around the space, still searching for Evelayna. Why wasn't she there? This was her victory as well as his.

"She's here. Call her," Loisana directed.

"Evelayna!" he demanded, searching the crowd. Given her height, he didn't understand how she could be hiding in the group. The dog gave a soft "woof" and moved toward him. It looked up at him and something in its eyes...

"Evelayna?" he asked, not sure he believed what seemed to be the case.

"Touch the dog with the lance," the older woman advised.

Dubiously, he lowered the lance toward the dog, expecting it to cringe and run away or bite at it. The creature did neither, standing with tail down between its legs and head drooping, waiting.

He touched its head with the shaft of the lance, careful that the blade didn't make contact. Within seconds, the dog's shape blurred, twisted and dissolved into a smoky cloud. When the dust and smoke cleared, Evelayna stood in its place. The eyes, those wicked, cruel, deep blue eyes, were somehow the same as the dog's. He wondered why he hadn't seen it before. She was naked, but the large warrior found a cloak somewhere and wrapped it around her.

Shocked murmurings ran through the room. John was as stunned as the rest of them. It took him a moment to find his voice. "You were the dog, too?"

She drew a deep breath and nodded. "That was part of the curse. By day I took the form of a dog, by night a demon. You've removed part of the curse now by dissolving the one alternate shape. I thank you, Prince John, and congratulate you on your victory."

He met her gaze. Even though she still wore the demon-woman aspect, the pride, admiration and gratitude in her eyes warmed him all the way through and magnified his joy. It also reminded him there was more he needed to do.

He held up a hand, asking for quiet. After a few minutes, the cheers died down as people waited for him to speak.

John studied her face, the vivid black hair and pale skin, the cruel tilt of eyebrow, the twist of red, red mouth, and the pointed teeth. Even when she was in this guise, his body responded to her, and a possessive flame deep inside recognized the connection between them.

The crowd murmur grew louder, and even John was shocked when she dropped to her knees on the stone floor, in front of him. She didn't say anything but dipped her head submissively for him. He recalled what she'd told him about how to break the curse.

"Princess Evelayna," he said, for all the room to hear, when he'd recovered from his surprise. "I claim you. I claim you as my prize, my slave, my lover, my treasure and – if you are willing – my wife."

Her head jerked up, and she stared at him, eyes wide. "Prince John. You do me a great honor. I will surely be your prize, your slave and your lover. I hope to be your treasure. But I cannot think I'm worthy to be your wife."

"More than worthy in my eyes." He reached down to her with his free left hand and drew her to her feet. His heart did an odd, painful flip-flop when he feared she would continue to refuse him. She was just stubborn enough to cling to her own sense of failure and shame. He didn't want to think how empty this victory would be without her. "I would have you for my wife."

For several long, heart-wrenching moments he watched her wrestle with it. "You truly mean that?" she asked.

"How can you doubt it, after..." He looked around at all the delighted, fascinated watchers. "After our times together."

She sighed and nodded. Her smile was still the wicked and cruel one when she said, "Yes, then, my love, I will."

He waited for the transformation, but nothing happened.

Loisana edged closer to him and said, "Touch her with the lance again."

He should have guessed that. John tilted the lance forward, watching carefully where the point and blade went, until the shaft rested on Evelayna's shoulder.

She stiffened as though in sudden, sharp pain. Her eyes went wide, then narrowed, and lips parted in a grimace. She caught her breath once, then again, before a series of ever harsher pants confirmed her agony. Because he held the lance, he couldn't try to catch her when her knees gave way, but the huge warrior moved up behind her to support her as she writhed in pain, holding her so that the lance remained on her shoulder.

When he started to lift it away from her, Loisana put a hand on it to keep it in place and said, "Wait."

Evelayna's breathing grew louder and more gasping. John hated seeing her in so much pain and hated even more that he seemed to be causing it. He wanted to jerk the lance back and away despite the guardian's warning. He could scarcely bear watching her suffer.

Just when he was ready to pull back the lance anyway, Evelayna screamed and began to change. Her skin color warmed and the cruel twist left lips that plumped and became more sensual. Teeth lost their sharp points and her eyes rounded and softened.

The demon-woman aspect faded until she was again the pretty princess he'd grown to love. She gave a soft sigh and closed her eyes, resting against the huge man for a moment or two as she recovered from the ordeal of changing.

Loisana lifted her hand off the lance. John took that as his cue to remove it from touching Evelayna. They all waited. After a moment or two she opened her eyes and straightened up.

The look she gave him made his heart do flip-flops in his suddenly tight chest. All the love, admiration, gratitude and pure elation of victory and her freedom from the curse showed in her damp, glittering eyes.

He moved the lance to his left hand and used his right arm to draw her to him. In front of the gathered throng, he kissed her, hard and deep. She melted against him. His heart and his cock both swelled with love and desire for her. But another round of cheering reminded him this wasn't the time or place for what he most wanted to do.

When he broke off the kiss, Loisana held up a hand for silence.

"This has been a long day for many of you, with hard trials, particularly for Prince John. For many of us it has also been a long-awaited day. To celebrate the victory, the guardians invite all of you here present to join us in a feast, commencing at once. If you prefer not to participate, leave the room now."

She waited but no one moved toward an exit. After a few moments it became clear no one would, so Loisana waved an arm and said a couple of incomprehensible words.

The scene changed drastically, and John could never say exactly how it had happened. One moment they were in the cavern where the lance had rested, the next they stood in an enormous banquet hall. Two rows of carved columns painted with gilt and crimson supported the high ceiling. Windows along one of the long sides of the chamber admitted brilliant sunlight through stained glass panels. Long trestle tables covered in gold-embroidered white damask bore silver pitchers and cups. Gorgeous tapestries showing scenes of festivals in a town or city, with parades, clowns and ceremonies lined the walls.

John looked around in wonder and amazement, but when a drop of blood ran down his face, tickling his cheek, he realized that his ragged, dirty, disheveled condition made him out of place amid the splendor. Loisana touched his arm.

"Will you leave your lady and your fellows a moment and come with me, Prince John? I've no doubt you'd like to clean up before settling to eat, and I have someone waiting to tend your injuries."

Evelayna nodded for him to go, so he accompanied the woman out of the room and along a series of corridors to a chamber where an older man awaited, with a steaming bathtub set up in the middle of the floor. John set the lance aside, and with the man's help, stripped off his torn, dirty clothes, before stepping into the bath. Hot water soothed some of his aches and washed away the sweat and grime. When he'd finished bathing, the man put a light coat of some clear ointment on the scratches and cuts. It

halted the bleeding and removed the sting. The man then shaved him and brushed out his hair.

The clothes they provided for him were finer than anything he'd worn at his father's court, even on the most momentous occasions. The breeches were of supple lamb's wool knitted tight and even, with a linen shirt soft against his skin, topped by a magenta damask tunic, embroidered with gold and silver over most of the top half. His own boots had been cleaned and polished to a high shine.

He'd never been one for making grand entrances, but it couldn't be helped then. Everyone else had gathered and seated themselves in the banquet hall when he returned, though no food had yet been served. By then the sunlight had faded and only darkness showed beyond the windows. Massive stands lining either side of the room bore dozens of lit candles to illuminate the room.

When he walked in, everyone stood. The cheers and applause echoed in the magnificent hall, making John feel hot and awkward. He feared falling over his own feet, flat on his face, as he crossed the room. When he stopped, unsure of where to go, Loisana stood up from her spot at the head table and waved him to the empty seat in the middle of it, next to Evelayna.

Even more mortifying, the guardian didn't sit down when he did, but made a speech to the assembly extolling his bravery, his cleverness and a ton of other virtues he knew he didn't possess, all of which led her to congratulate him on his achieving guardianship of the lance. He let his gaze roam the hall while she spoke, and was surprised to find General Maxey there, along with Colonel Elswin, Sir Swandon and Sir Rodolph. It thrilled him to know he'd justified their faith in him. He hoped his possession of the lance would prove as effective in ending their war as they thought. From his brief interaction with the weapon, he suspected it would prove true.

Once Loisana's speech ended, amidst more applause and cheering, servants poured into the hall bearing trays, bowls and platters of food. John remembered little of what he ate or drank, save that the wine was good and went quickly to his head. Or perhaps it was having Evelayna next to him, occasionally turning her smiling gaze on him during the meal and ducking her head toward his at times to make a comment or ask a question. Her breath tickled his ear and even that small caress sent lust for her raging through him. She'd changed clothes at some point as well and now wore a pale blue shift with a darker blue overdress, embroidered in silver.

She sought his hand under the table and held it for a while after they'd finished eating. A group of jugglers entertained them, followed by a quartet of musicians.

Eventually it ended. He stood when Loisana did and people began to file out of the room. John waited since he had no idea where to go. It appeared Evelayna didn't know either. The guardian came to them after saying good night to several other people.

"I'll escort you to your chamber," she said. "The corridors are confusing for newcomers. It takes a while to sort out what goes where. I presume the two of you will want to be together?" She glanced at their joined hands.

They each nodded. "Well enough."

Still hand in hand, John and Evelayna followed her to the room he'd bathed and dressed in earlier. The manservant had disappeared, but John felt no need of his services that evening. Loisana didn't leave immediately after showing them in.

"I doubt it concerns you overmuch, but the guardians approve and bless the union between the two of you." She beamed at them. "There are other things you should know. Your family has never given up hope of your return, Evelayna, and you are still your mother's heir. With the lance-bearer as your consort, you should be most welcome as the princess royal."

She turned to John again. Her worried expression made him wonder what bad news she had to deliver to him.

"Prince John," she said, "I hope what I tell you now doesn't dismay you unduly. I understand that you are a prince in your own kingdom and will want to return there with the lance for your father's benefit, but it is not your destiny to rule that kingdom. You are needed much more desperately here. With you and the lance heading our troops, the invading hordes will soon be defeated, along with the wizard directing them, but there will be others. This kingdom sits at a crossroad where worlds meet, and it's a rich, sweet land, far too tempting to greedy men or others. We need the lance-bearer here, to protect this kingdom and many others beyond it that would be at risk should this realm fall. You will become joint heir to the kingdom with Evelayna and will be king here on her mother's death."

John thought about that and was surprised to realize that not inheriting the rule of Serendonia didn't bother him as much as he would have thought. He'd miss his family, of course, but presumed they would have opportunities to visit. "My older sister and her husband will make excellent rulers for Serendonia," he admitted. "But I do have to return there for a while with the lance."

Loisana smiled. "Despite his wound, your father is not an old man and is in good health. And Evelayna's mother is still quite vigorous as well. You both likely have a long time before settling in one place or another becomes a necessity."

She nodded at them. "I'll leave you now. I'm sure you have much to...talk about. Happiness, health and love be with you all the days of your lives." The woman then marched quickly out of the room, closing the door behind her as she left.

For a moment, they could only stare at each other. John still felt a bit dizzy with relief and joy, but not quite secure in it yet. It hadn't entirely sunk in that he'd won. His victory brought a new set of problems and obligations with it, but that was for worrying about later.

He met Evelayna's blue eyes and saw the doubts that lingered there as well. Lowering her head, she said, "My lord, I am your prize, a reward for a difficult job well done."

He nodded and moved to sit on the side of the bed before answering. "Then let me see more of what I've won. Undress. Slowly."

A shy smile accompanied the rising color in her cheeks. She undid the laces of the blue overdress and slid it off her shoulders, standing before him in the shift, her arms bare. After a moment, she lifted the shift as well, slowly hiking it up and then peeling it over her head and dropping it on the floor. She wore a pair of thin, silk drawers and a lacy camisole beneath, showing off her slim, but gracefully rounded hips and breasts. Her long legs, bare below mid-thigh, were the loveliest he'd ever seen.

He nodded to let her know he was enjoying the show and waited for her to continue. She grabbed the lower edge of the camisole and lifted it up, slowly, maddeningly slowly, revealing inches of snowy flesh at a time. His breath caught in his throat and his cock engorged painfully as her luscious breasts gradually appeared. She wriggled deliciously as she lifted the fabric over her head and off. Fire lit in his veins, sending his blood racing through them and his heart pounding hard.

Only the silky drawers remained. She released the ribbons holding them in place and let them slide down her legs. For a moment she stood still, allowing him to study her. Possessive pride shook him. She belonged to him, this lovely woman, this graceful princess, his soon-to-be wife.

She walked toward him, but when she reached him, she dropped to her knees. "I'm your slave," she said.

"Undress me then, slave," he ordered.

She pulled off his boots and removed his tunic and shirt. She let her hands rest on his chest, kneading the muscles for a moment before she asked him to stand up. When he rose, she worked on the laces of his breeches until they came loose and the fabric dropped down to his feet. Once she'd tossed them out of the way, he sat down again.

"Kneel," he ordered. When she'd done so, he nodded to his cock. "Touch it."

The press of her fingers on his flesh sent shards of pleasure ripping through him so strongly he feared he'd explode right then. He moaned and shut his eyes despite the pleasure of watching her long, graceful hands wrapping his cock. She cupped his balls tenderly and squeezed just hard enough to mix warning ripples of pain into the crashing pleasure of it. The pain magnified the pleasure.

He didn't see her lean down, but he felt her hair sliding over his thighs, then her hot, silky mouth touched the tip of his cock. He gasped sharply. He saw stars, flashes of lightning, fires burning behind his tightly closed eyes. Every muscle in his body drew tight. White-hot fire tore through him.

She worked his balls at the same time her lips moved up and down his cock. After a few minutes of that excruciating torment, her mouth pressed down as far over him as she could manage, drawing him deep into the hot, sweet recesses of her throat.

"Evelayna," he moaned. "You're so good. Ah, it's heaven, heaven, but I don't think I can bear it."

Teeth scraped along the tender ridges and it brought him close to the edge of a precipice.

He opened his eyes and scooped her up, pulling her to her feet and onto his lap, facing him. He slid back far enough that she could put her legs on the bed, then he positioned her slit over his cock and pressed her down on him. It didn't occur to him to worry about whether she was ready enough to accept him without it hurting her, but her groan was one of pleasure, not pain, when he'd buried himself as far as he could get inside her.

She gasped when he touched her breasts, circling the nipples with his finger. He had to support her and move her up and down on him as the position she was in gave her no leverage to lift herself, but she held onto his shoulders and helped as much as she could. His mouth found and clung to hers as she wrapped him and squeezed him within her. The friction sent ribbons of fiery sensation through every nerve and sinew of his body, tightening muscles, making his heart pound and his breathing get faster.

It didn't take long for his cock to swell past bearing. He roared as he spent in a series of long, furiously strong spasms. Breath and strength deserted him along with the seed he poured into her, and he let his head sink onto her shoulder and rest there while he recovered. Her legs held tight to his sides and her arms wound around his shoulders, drawing them close against each other.

"You're my treasure," he said into her pretty pink ear while digging his fingers into the silky mass of her long, dark hair. "A joy beyond my expectations, a bonus I could never have imagined, much less sought." He sighed on a long, gusty exhalation. "I love you. Not just because you're beautiful. I love your grace, and your courage, your strength, your devotion to your people and your faith in me. In truth, I think you had more faith in me than I had in myself."

"I love you, too, John, but then how could I not?" She raised her head from his shoulder and drew back enough to look him in the eye. "You rescued me from the consequences of my own mistakes. You had the courage and intelligence to avoid those same mistakes. I knew you were someone special when you touched me even though it caused you horrible pain."

"It also brought me pleasure mixed in the pain." He kissed her again, a quick peck this time. "I think it was because something deep inside me knew you were the one woman who would partner me and complete me. Those tests you sent—the night scenes of people fucking—were those to make me realize you were the one or to find out if we were compatible that way?"

She smiled archly. "Both, perhaps. But I didn't send those. The guardians did. I can't speak for their purposes, but they always have them and sometimes the reasons are so deep and twisted it's nearly incomprehensible."

"It seems they served their purpose, whatever that was." His muscles had started to cramp, so he moved her off him and laid her tenderly on the bed before stretching out next to her.

"Perhaps it was to help you determine what you really wanted in and from a woman," Evelayna suggested. "Or if you preferred more than one."

"It was an interesting novelty, but I prefer to concentrate on only one woman. You."

He let his fingers roam her body, stroking shoulders, breasts, abdomen and thighs, exploring further the places where his touch evoked a gasp or a sigh. She was so gloriously sensitive. It felt as good to give her pleasure as to get it from her.

His mouth followed the trail blazed by his fingers. Her nipples were particularly tasty and he lingered there for a while, stroking with his tongue, swirling it around them, sucking, and even nipping with his teeth. She buried her fingers in his hair and held onto him. Her moans and gasps expanded him, filling him with pride that he could give her such pleasure. He kissed his way down her abdomen and along the insides of her thighs, where the skin was downy soft and smooth as satin.

After nudging her legs farther apart, he shifted to get a better angle on her quim. She was beautiful, even there. Especially there. Moisture coated the folds of flesh that hid her secret recesses, emitting a sweet fragrance that drove him wild with desire. He parted the outer lips with his fingers and studied the deep pink tissues revealed, including her pearl. When he blew on it gently, she shivered and moaned.

A gentle stroking around the bud, then over it, made her jump and writhe, and drew a series of moans and sobs from her. He watched the muscles in her legs bunch and tighten as her pressure grew. It was making him hot again, too. His balls developed again the sweet ache that would lead to a demand for release.

He dipped his head and ran his tongue along the pink crease. She screamed and jumped.

"John," she moaned. "What are you doing to me?"

He lifted his head to ask, "You like it?"

"You know I do – aaah!"

He'd drawn the sweet little bud into his mouth and sucked on it gently, swirling his tongue over it. The quivering tension grew until she was writhing on the bed and straining toward him.

A few quick strokes of his tongue and she exploded in a huge jolt, accompanied by a shrill scream of pleasure. He continued swiping the flesh while spasm after spasm rolled over her, making her jump repeatedly.

His swollen cock throbbed with need so he stretched out over her, supporting his weight on his knees and elbows, probing at her slit. She adjusted herself to him and welcomed his entrance.

The heat, the snug fit, the slick wetness of her always came as a gloriously pleasant shock. He slid in and out more slowly this time, trying to take it at a more sedate pace and bring her along with him. The tension surrounding him let him know she still had unfulfilled need to assuage.

He watched her face as he drove in and out, rejoicing in the pleasure that made her eyes narrow and lips tighten. "You're my lover," he said to her. "My only lover. We belong together. You're the only woman I want, the only one I'll have from now on."

"I've never met any man like you," she admitted to him. "I've never had one like you. I never will. There won't be any other man for me. You're all I need and want." The word ended in a gasp and sob.

Then the tension grew so great they couldn't speak anymore. They could only feel, pressed on to crashing against each other harder and faster as their bodies surged toward a final release and completion.

Together they sweated and moaned and squeezed and pushed and drove each other to near madness with the demands of the growing tension. John felt himself swelling, surging, pushing forward, growing, groaning as he strained after the last step of a long ascent to...

Evelayna screamed and the hard, gripping spasms of release jolted through her again. It sent him over as well. He roared his mastery, his manhood, his victory as he came into her, planting a piece of himself in her body, staking his claim.

For a while he drifted on the remains of a pleasure so great it could hardly be possible. He let his head sink into her shoulder and she cradled him there, panting against his ear as she came down from it also.

When he withdrew from her quim and stretched out alongside her on the bed, she rolled toward him and drew him against her, kissing him wildly and thanking him.

He brushed damp strands of hair back from her flushed face, studying her sated expression. "You are my wife, Evelayna," he said. "My lady, my love, my life. From this day forward."

She took his hand and kissed it. Her smile as she watched his face was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. "You're my husband, John. My love, my lord, my master and my prince. From this day on."

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