



SUMMONER

By

Nicole Delonpre

© copyright August 2006, Nicole Delonpre
Cover art by Eliza Black, © copyright August 2006
ISBN 1-58608-936-6
New Concepts Publishing
Lake Park, GA 31636
www.newconceptspublishing.com

This is a work of fiction. All characters, events, and places are of the author's imagination and not to be confused with fact. Any resemblance to living persons or events is merely coincidence.

Chapter One

The keening cry of a bird of prey, or perhaps a feline echoed eerily through the pass guarded by the dark hulk of Castle Bloodsbane just as a weak sun breached the eastern peaks and spilled blinding streams of light along the valley floor. Muffled by the fog and snow that habitually cloaked the upper slopes of the range of mountains that formed the boundary between Morelock and Avator, bounced from tree to rocky slope and back again, it was impossible to tell whether rage or terror had inspired the cry by the time it raked along the ears of the men on watch on the castle bulwarks, lifting the fine hair along their necks.

It was equally impossible to identify the throat the scream had emerged from with any certainty and visions of horrible, unnatural creatures quickly dispelled the first impression of a less threatening, more mundane beast of natural origins.

The men shifted uneasily. Those close enough to do so exchanged questioning glances to see if the man next to them was as unnerved by the sound as they had been.

That momentary inattentiveness vanished in the next instant, however. They stiffened, tensing even more when Shadowclaw, moving as swiftly and silently as a wraith, abruptly appeared on the bulwarks. The dark cape he'd slung about his shoulders, the only concession he'd made to the bone chilling early morning mountain air, flapped around him like the wings of some dreaded creature of the dark side as he moved to the crenellated wall and lifted his head, almost with the air of a beast catching the scent of fresh prey.

The man closest to him felt his throat close as if an invisible hand had gripped it. For several terrifying moments, he thought perhaps it had, but as he struggled with the panic clawing at his mind, he realized that Shadowclaw's familiars lay dormant on his flesh, unthreatening for the moment beyond the reminder that the intricate images carved on his chest, his arms, and torso were far more than mere drawings of fanciful, nightmarish beasts.

He was a Summoner and he had only to call them forth to bring nightmare into the world.

His panic receded as Shadowclaw stood away from the wall, strode down the walk a few paces, paused, and then turned and moved toward him once more, his head still lifted with the air of one listening to something no one else could hear.

Caught by the sudden certainty that Shadowclaw was listening, he pricked his own ears, trying to detect the sounds that his lord heard. Dimly then, he heard a rhythmic, distant pounding. His mind took a moment more to decipher what he'd heard. Men fighting! The clash of sword on sword and shield.

He hadn't imagined that the beasts had stirred, he realized. Shadowclaw had summoned the keen hearing of one of his beasts.

Shadowclaw moved to the bulwarks again, ignoring the bloodlust that had risen to sing in his veins as he summoned the sight of his familiar and scanned the wooded slopes of the mountain that fell away to the valley below them. Abruptly, his diligence was

rewarded as the sunlight flashed briefly among the trees.

“There! Below the tree line, the southwestern leg of the pass,” he ground out, pointing to the spot near the narrow passage road where he’d seen the glint of metal. “Gamon--take half the men--and ride swiftly. I will peel the hide from your body one piece at the time if they have bounced back across the border before you reach them.”

Gamon, pinned briefly by his lord’s penetrating gaze, whirled abruptly, stumbling in his haste and nearly rolling to the bottom of the narrow stone stairs that reached upward from the bailey to the guard walk. “To arms!” he bellowed at the men below as he pounded down the stairs. “Bring the horses!”

Within moments, the men were mounted and spurring their horses to a gallop. The pounding of racing hooves on the thick timbers that formed the drawbridge echoed through the mountains like thunder.

Shadowclaw watched them through narrowed eyes, calculating their speed and the distance that separated them from the battle. Gamon would have to ride like the wind to save his precious hide, for the battle was well underway now and one side or the other could break and run at any time.

The terror in Gamon’s eyes at the threat he’d made reassured him. Gamon knew he was a man of his word. He would reach the battle if he had to run his horse into the ground.

He examined that terror curiously for several moments, wondering why it took no more than the threat of pain to goad Gamon--any of his men--to do their utmost to avoid it, or to shorten it with a swift death if they saw they could not avoid it entirely. They were not cowards. They were seasoned fighting men. The scars on their bodies were testament enough to the fact that they’d faced death more than once.

Had he ever felt such stomach churning fear of pain, he wondered? Delving briefly into a past that he had rarely examined, he uncovered nothing to indicate that he had.

Perhaps he had, but if he had, he could not recall it, he realized after only a few moments. Pain was life, life was pain. He did not fear it any more than he feared life--or death. And he still could not fathom why the others did, but it was as well they did, he decided. Terror inspired loyalty. Fear inspired men to strive beyond what they might ordinarily be capable of.

His overlord had entrusted him to secure one of the most remote, treacherous, and impossible stretches of his borders. So long as he did not fail Lord Ysuroth’s trust, he could continue to breathe, and so long as he could trust in the loyalty of his men, he would not fail his overlord. It was as simple as that.

He liked keeping things simple--sleeping, eating, whoring on those rare occasions when a female could be found, slaughtering any who dared trespass on the lands of his overlord.

And it enraged him to realize that the Overlord Sangrey’s men had so far forgotten themselves as to breach the border within his care. What, he wondered, could have inspired them to such rash stupidity as to think they could do so with impunity?

* * * *

Lady Angeline Delgado’s skull throbbed with the deafening sounds of battle that surrounded her. Her scalp, as well, since the pig, Darkraider, had caught her and dragged her by her hair to the base of the great tree where she now crouched.

She sent a dagger glare at his back where he stood over her, wishing she had a blade in truth so that she could bury it beneath his shoulder blade and cut his black heart out.

As bad as the others had been, the men Lord Sangrey had sent to collect the 'prize' her father had offered his overlord, his virgin daughter, they hadn't dared to violate her. No one had dared to so much as think it, let alone consider, deflowering the virgin bride-to-be promised to the dread Lord Sangrey.

Darkraider had less fear or less brains than the others, however, for, beyond her maidenhead, he had left no part of her untouched, unsullied by his loathsome touch, innocent of a man's touch. He had not been so foolhardy as to take that which was meant for his own overlord, Ysuroth, but he'd raped her all the same, over and over in the days since she'd taken her until sitting a horse was agony in and of itself.

Innocent that she had been, she'd had no inkling that a maid could remain a maid and endure what he had forced upon her, done to her, forced her to do.

As fearful as she'd been of the dread Lord Sangrey, becoming bride to that monster had almost begun to seem preferable to the alternative.

And then, for a few moments, it seemed fate had taken pity on her. They had scarcely crossed the border into Morelock when Lord Sangrey's soldiers had caught up to them. Freedom had beckoned with the first clash of the rival soldiers. Life had seemed almost within her grasp as her horse had gone down and she had rolled free, unharmed, not even greatly stunned. Fortune, she had thought, had finally favored her, had delivered her from the nightmare her life had become.

They were scarcely four days ride from the realm of Viridan. If she could only escape while the men of the rival lords fought over her, she could make her way there and disappear from the world, escape the fate planned for her.

She didn't think beyond escaping. She had no plans in her mind of how she was to manage it, or how she would live if she did. She didn't care if she lived in a sty and subsisted on dung, it would be better than being at the mercy of men such as these.

Even as she dashed toward the trees, however, she heard a shout behind her, heard the hooves of Darkraider's monster steed bearing down on her. He leaned low as he neared her, grabbing for her. She swerved away at the last moment, but not quickly enough to escape totally unscathed. His hand caught at the veils at her shoulder, twisted as she veered away. The fragile fabric gave at the opposing tugs against it, bruising and chafing her tender skin as it tore away.

Ignoring the burn, she raced for the trees again, still hopeful, still determined, but feeling defeat pounding inside of her to the rhythm of the running steps behind her as Darkraider leapt from his horse and charged after her. He leapt at her just before she reached the safety she'd sought, slamming into her back, driving her into the ground and crushing the air, and the fight, out of her. By the time she'd recovered from the stunning blow enough even to drag in a breath to fight darkness, he'd tangled his fingers in her hair and began to drag her.

She screamed then, with rage, with terror, with pain, the sound tearing its way along her throat and leaving it raw. She was too battered and breathless to attempt to flee again by the time he slammed her into the trunk of the tree and released her. For many moments she battled a great, heavy darkness, insulated from the full brunt of the battle by the enveloping fog. When she finally managed to roll over and open her eyes, she saw

the dead and dying littering the ground. Blood surged or spewed from wounds, trickled onto the ground, formed dark streams and then pools. Men and horses screamed. The steady keen ringing of sword against sword and the duller metallic thud of swords striking shields, the meaty thuds of flesh encountering blades rang through the clearing, less deafening than before, for more than half the men lay on the ground, but still painful to her ears.

Shielding them from the uproar, it was several moments before Angeline realized the pounding against her temples wasn't the blood surging in her veins but the thunder of approaching riders. Sangrey's men seemed to realize it at almost the same moment, for those who could broke off their private battles, dispatched their current opponent, or were struck down as they tried to whirl away and race to capture their mounts.

Mounted men raced into view, moving so swiftly they had to rein their horses sharply to keep from simply plowing into the milling men and horses from the battle. Rearing, screaming, the horses flailed the air with hooves, slashing at the men dashing about the ground beneath them.

Within moments a deafening silence fell over the mountainside as the last of Sangrey's men met his death.

Blood, Angeline saw as she pushed herself to her feet shakily, was the color of the day, for it was impossible to sort the dead of Morelock from the dead of Avator.

Hearing her movements, Darkraider whirled on her. Seizing her hair as before, he dragged her toward the mounted men. "I am Darkraider of Shroudskull, sent by Lord Ysuroth to claim his blushing bride," he said sneeringly. "Are you of Bloodsbane?"

"Aye. I am known as Gamon, captain of Shadowclaw's guard."

Darkraider snorted. "It took you long enough to get here," he snarled. Ignoring the men lying on the ground, he looked around for a horse and dragged Angeline over to one that stood docilely grazing among the dead. Releasing his grip on her hair when they reached the horse, he grabbed her waist and lifted her onto the saddle and nearly off the other side as he grasped an ankle and shoved her leg upward and across the saddle until she was seated astride the beast. Stunned, she was still trying to grasp the fact that he seemed to expect her to ride with her thighs splayed on either side of the horse when he caught the veils that formed her skirt and tossed them into her face.

He grabbed the ring then, the disgraceful, humiliating, painful thing that Sangrey's men had pierced her woman's flesh with. She felt his thick fingers fumbling with her fleshy nether lips moments before the painful tug at the keenly sensitive flesh. By the time she'd fought her way free of the veils obstructing her view, she discovered that he had clipped a chain to the ring, looping it around the pommel.

He leered up at her expression of horror. "You'll not run now, will you?" he purred smugly as he caught hold of the pommel and swung himself up onto the horse behind her. "But just in case the thought crosses your mind"

Grabbing her wrists, he twisted her arms behind her back and secured them with a leather strip.

Too stunned to think for several moments, Angeline stared down at the shredded veils that had barely sustained her modesty when they had been whole. Darkraider had torn the bodice when they had struggled and one breast was completely exposed, displaying yet another of the hated rings they had pierced her body with to mark her as Sangrey's woman. The veils of her skirt had settled, but it took little more than a harsh

breath to stir them. With her hands bound behind her back she could not wrest the fragile fabric from the wind and keep herself decently covered and it would not be merely her thighs exposed to interested gazes.

“At least allow me the dignity of covering myself,” Angeline hissed, knowing it would do no good to beg, might possibly inspire him to worse, but unable to keep her tongue between her teeth when she noticed the sly glances of the soldiers who surrounded them. “Do not bind my wrists.”

He snorted. “What? And deprive these fine fellows of the delightful view when they were so kind as to rescue you?”

Flushing with both anger and embarrassment, she subsided, realizing that it was just as she’d feared. She had only played into his hands. He’d hoped to frighten and humiliate her and she’d allowed him to know how well he’d succeeded.

Fury and fear washed over her as he nudged the horse around and the party headed back toward the keep that had expelled her latest tormentors.

Chapter Two

Magic had perched the castle upon the narrow plateau from which it sprouted, Angeline thought when the stone fortress came into view as the party followed the narrow road that wound in and around the mountain. For it seemed to defy the laws of nature, clinging to the very edge of a staggering precipice.

Angeline felt her throat close as she spied it, felt defeat settle heavily inside of her.

It could not be the fortress of Lord Ysuroth himself, she knew, for it was not nearly grand enough for such a one as he. But it was an intimidating edifice for all that, tall rather than sprawling, virtually windowless, cold as the mountains, dark as the heart of the lord in whose name it was held.

She would not escape this place.

She would never escape at all, not in this life.

Men and horses paused at the outer edge of the drawbridge, and Angeline stared musingly at the jagged ravine the timbers spanned, an image rising in her mind of pitching from the horse's back and soaring from the edge to escape beyond their reach. She tensed, trying to summon her courage and failing that to simply empty her mind for the task. A tug on the ring in her tender flesh as the horse was set into motion again dragged her back from that dark contemplation and she looked up to see the gate slowly opening. Along the upper walls, the faces of the men appeared, staring down at her avidly, gesturing.

It was too far, surely, for them to see her as she imagined they did?

Her heart fluttered uncomfortably in her chest. With an effort she resisted the urge to close her eyes, to shut out the sight of them if she could not shut herself from their heated gazes.

Keeping her expression carefully blank, she stared at the neck of the horse in front of her. She did her best to keep her mind as blank as her expression. She thought that she could almost feel their animalistic lust roll over her in heated waves, though, hear the speculation that ran through their minds that she was displayed for their perusal as if she was to be served up to them to slake their desires.

That thought made her cringe inside, sent a fresh tremor of fear through her. She tamped it, reminded herself that she was, to all intents and purposes at least, still a maiden and there had to be a reason why she was. Darkraider would have taken her himself if it hadn't been forbidden. For he had not been able to contain himself from examining her with his hands with disgusting familiarity from the moment he had dragged her onto his horse, pinching her breasts, tugging at the rings in her nipples until she whimpered with pain, digging his fingers into her woman's flesh.

The ring there fascinated him most of all for he had scarcely ceased to fondle it from the moment he had discovered it.

She couldn't make herself believe the lies she told herself. Innocence had been shattered from the moment Lord Sangrey's men had come for her, torn her clothes from

her and pinned her spread eagle upon the dirt to pierce her nipples and the flesh between her thighs. She knew now that there were many things they could do to her that would not entail breaching her maiden head.

Darkraider had scarcely contained himself until the first stop for rest to mount her from behind, and her screams of pain had only seemed to incite him to do his worst. She had never dreamed that a man might leave her maiden head intact and rape her there, or that any part of her body could be a source of such unrelenting pain, for it hurt as badly the second time as the first--it hurt as badly each time as the first. He'd forced her to pleasure him with her mouth, as well, but she had cured him of that, at least, by sinking her teeth into his engorged member.

It had nearly ended her suffering then. If not for the men with him it would have, and she might have been tempted to repeat the attack except that he had decided after that to content himself with shoving her face into the dirt and driving his engorged member into her rectum until her mouth was bloody from trying to contain the screams that seemed to excite him.

She tried not to think about that.

Surely, none of the others would dare to take the liberties that Darkraider had?

They wouldn't, she assured herself. She was a war prize for their overlord, the most powerful man in the realm of Morelock, some said the most powerful of all the rulers of the three kingdoms.

Perhaps their lord, but not the common men.

One then, she told herself. Even if he was as big a pig as Darkraider, she could endure the attentions of one.

She'd endured more than a week at Darkraider's tender mercy. This Shadowclaw they had mentioned could not be worse.

If she didn't struggle, if she simply allowed him to do as he wished, surely the pain would not be so great and she could stand it?

Despite the fact that she had focused her gaze, her entire consciousness, she thought, on the horse before her, she knew the very moment the lord of the castle descended the stairs into the bailey. Silence fell. The wind died. It seemed even the horses were silenced.

Slowly, she lifted her gaze to see what manner of man could have such a profound effect on so many.

Her breath caught in her chest as she watched him stride purposefully toward the group that had halted in the middle of the bailey as if suddenly frozen in time. Her heart seemed almost to stand still as her brown eyes swept over the tall, broad shouldered man who strode toward them, his dark cape fluttering madly about his bare torso with the briskness of his angry stride. She had no more than a vague impression of his features, however, none of his age. For she could not drag her gaze from the creatures drawn upon his body, the dread denizens of the dark world that seemed alive, that moved and shifted as the taut, bulging muscles beneath rippled with his movements.

A Summoner, she thought, feeling the blood freeze in her veins.

She'd heard terrifying tales of these beings, but she had never seen one in the flesh.

She had prayed she never would.

It was said Summoners lived for the ecstasy of pain. For them, to know ought else

was to know death. They were the ultimate warriors, not only because they were taken and trained almost from infancy to develop strength and skills and endurance beyond most mortal men, but because they knew no fear, not of anything in this life, or the next, not of man, or magic, or the gods themselves. They found pleasure only in pain, the giving and the receiving of it. Even their gift, magic wrought on their bodies in the form of elaborate images, was a testament to the limits of their endurance, for more perished than survived this rite of passage for the Summoners.

The images were far more than elaborate paintings of terrifying, unnatural creatures. It was the creatures, held within them by the magical runes and compelled to answer whenever they were summoned.

Her body, suspended by shock for many moments, began to function again in its own defense, her lungs expanding to drag in a harsh breath of much needed air. Her heart stumbled into a fresh rhythm, surging painfully against her chest wall and pumping a rush of blood into her cold limbs and deprived brain.

Her eyes, seemingly of their own volition, traveled upward from the snarling beast on Shadowclaw's chest to the face above it.

She was instantly sorry for the impulse.

His face was as deceptively beautiful as many of the deadliest things in nature, all harsh angles and plains, but cunningly wrought by whimsical fate to ensnare and captivate the unwary. It was the face of a man she beheld, not a monster, and more handsome by far than any she had ever seen before.

His narrow eyed gaze, she realized, was focused on her sex, or more specifically, she thought, the ring by which Darkraider had bound her to the saddle. Slowly, he lifted his head, stared for several moments at the ring through the nipple of her exposed breast and finally scanned her features for a moment with cool assessment before his gaze moved beyond her.

She felt Darkraider tense behind her. The horse shifted uneasily as his knees clamped around its sides.

It seemed to break the spell that had held everyone enthralled. Behind her she heard the creak of leather and the dull clank of armor as the men dismounted. Gamon, the man who'd come to their aid and led them here, appeared beside them, kneeling before Shadowclaw. "We have dispatched them as you ordered, my lord."

"All?"

Gamon looked up at him. "None escaped, my lord."

"See to the wounded," Shadowclaw said, ignoring the commotion stirred by his command and lifting his attention to Darkraider once more.

He did not glance at her, but Angeline did not make the mistake of thinking that he was not aware of her every breath. His gaze as he had studied her had been bold, but coldly assessing, without a flicker of interest in her as woman--not that she could tell, anyway, and she had become far more intimately acquainted with the look of lust on a man's face and in his eyes than she had ever thought to be.

Was he as disinterested as he appeared to be? Or merely far better at hiding it?

"You have business that brings you here?" he asked coldly, piercing Angeline's abstraction.

She met his gaze briefly before it dawned on her that he was speaking to Darkraider.

He was looking at her, though. A shiver skated down her spine as his gaze moved over her again, briefly, before settling on Darkraider.

"Lord Ysuroth's business," Darkraider growled, trying to hide his uneasiness beneath a pall of arrogance and anger. He made no attempt to dismount as the others had, and Angeline wondered if it was because he had not been invited to dismount, or if it was because he was too unnerved by Shadowclaw to do so and felt the need to retain the superior advantage of looking down upon Shadowclaw.

Toe to toe, she thought he would have no advantage at all. He was a powerfully built man, and yet Shadowclaw was more powerfully built still, and taller, she thought, besides.

The Summoner's dark brows came together over the bridge of his nose. "Only a fool travels with his layman to conduct business in the name of our overlord," he said coldly, drawing a heated blush to Angeline's cheeks and spawning the first spark of emotion she had managed since she had set eyes upon the Summoner.

Feeble though it was, anger flickered through her.

He saw it, or sensed it. She was as certain that he did as she was confused as to why she had the impression that he did.

"She is the business," Darkraider snarled, dismounting so abruptly that he nearly unseated Angeline. She winced, grinding her teeth together as the ring pulled painfully at her flesh. "Lady Angeline Delgado, offered as bride to Lord Sangrey," Darkraider announced, skimming a hand along her thigh almost possessively. "Lord Ysuroth sent us to pluck her from beneath Sangrey's nose and deliver her to him."

The Summoner's gaze moved pointedly to the ring. "She will have no pleasure of him if you mean to tear her woman's bud from her body before you hand her over to him," he said coldly.

Lord Darkraider laughed uneasily, turning and unwinding the chain from about the pommel to Angeline's immense relief. "Insurance that she would not try to fling herself from the back of the horse. Thrice now, she has attempted to elude us. I did not mar her flesh myself. The rings were there when we took her, to beautify her for her future husband, I have no doubt. Lord Ysuroth will have no interest, in any case, whether she has pleasure of him or not. Like the rest of us, it is his own pleasure that most interests him."

Angeline relaxed fractionally as the Summoner's cold gaze moved at last from her woman's bud to Darkraider's face. "You are better acquainted with Lord Ysuroth than I, then, or he has changed much since last I saw him, for the man I knew preferred his women to be very aware of everything he chose to do with them to amuse himself. If she is, as you say, Sangrey's woman and he sent you to collect her for him, then I would think he would find it doubly important with so valuable a hostage. He can not make her ... sing if she can feel nothing.

"He might feel inclined, once he has grown bored with her, to cut the tender, pierced buds of woman's flesh from her body and send them to Sangrey so that his enemy will know that he can never coax pleasure from her body--for I have known of him to do so--but it has ever been his inclination to reserve such treats for himself, not to make a gift of them to those beneath him."

Angeline felt her stomach churn at that cool announcement of what she was to expect once she fell into Ysuroth's hands, wishing abruptly that she had seized the

moment and flung herself into the ravine after all. Then it would have been ended quickly, at least. She would not have to endure what they had planned for her.

Darkraider shifted uncomfortably. "You are suggesting that I took it upon myself to make war upon Avator without my overlord's leave?" He growled threateningly, but not very convincingly. "Ysuroth sent me to capture her. She is valuable, far too valuable for me to try to take her any further without escort."

"Then it was most unwise of you to take liberties, was it not? Ysuroth is likely to me most displeased."

Darkraider reddened, glancing sharply at Angeline as if she had somehow managed to accuse him of the things he'd done to her. His eyes narrowed, but apparently it occurred to him that there were none to bear witness against him beyond her, and she would not be believed, for most of his men were dead already and the others probably not long for the world. "No doubt he would be if that were true, but I have taken no liberties with his property. Speak girl. Tell him," he growled, his hand tightening on the chain he still held and pulling painfully on her dark flesh.

Angeline ground her teeth against the pain, tempted to call him a liar then and there. She doubted, though, that it would benefit her beyond the satisfaction of knowing that he had fallen afoul of his dark overlord. And despite what the Summoner had said, she could not be certain that Darkraider would suffer for it.

She could be certain she would, however, perhaps at the hands of both men, for she would not be accounted innocent only because she had not been able to stop him.

He reached up and pushed a thick finger through the ring in her exposed breast, tugging on it painfully. "Speak, bitch, or I'll tear these from you now," he growled. "Tell him it was Sangrey's men who did this."

Angeline gathered moisture in her mouth with an effort. "Yes," she said finally, panting with the effort to keep from crying out in pain.

To her relief, Darkraider released his grip on the rings abruptly. Catching her arm, he dragged her off the horse. Unable to catch herself with her wrists still bound, she slammed against Darkraider, bounced back against the horse and finally landed in a heap at the men's feet.

She made no attempt to rise, certain that doing so would only provoke Darkraider into slapping her down again. She lifted her head to stare up at him, however, with hatred.

"Once we have taken our ease for the night," he informed Shadowclaw triumphantly, "I will need to take the men you have here to escort the woman to Ysuroth."

The Summoner's dark brows rose. He tilted his head, studying the man as if he'd discovered an oddity. After a moment, his face hardened. "You will take no men from this garrison," he said flatly.

Darkraider gaped at him. "You would defy your overlord?"

"I do not see my overlord. I see a sniveling coward who failed in his duty, lost good men for a very poor reason, and now postures before me making demands that directly counter the orders of my overlord.

"It is my responsibility and that of every man here to guard the pass. I would be derelict in my duty to my overlord to leave this castle poorly manned and vulnerable to attack from the army you no doubt have on your tail."

“Look you, Summoner”

“I am known as Shadowclaw,” the Summoner responded coldly.

Darkraider paled. He recovered himself after a moment, however. “Lord Ysuroth will have all of our heads on pikes if Sangrey’s men manage to snatch her back when she is all but his already,” he said in a low voice that was far more of a whining plea than a demand.

Shadowclaw glanced from Darkraider to the woman, studying her for a long moment. “Then leave her here and go petition Lord Ysuroth for more men. Despite your tasteless display of her and the fact that not a man here has had so much as a whiff of female flesh in many months, I can guarantee that you will find her well upon your return, and well guarded.”

“Very well,” Darkraider snarled angrily. “I will accept your offer to guard my prisoner and your reluctant hospitality for the night. Be assured, however, that Lord Ysuroth will hear of this.”

Shadowclaw slid a narrow eyed glance at the man. “Be assured he will, but I do not recall offering the hospitality of Bloodsbane. You have dallied long enough. You should be on your way. I doubt not that Ysuroth will be pleased to see that you, at least, are still hale and hearty.”

Darkraider studied Shadowclaw for several moments with a mixture of helpless rage and fear, but finally moved to the horse he’d dragged Angeline from and mounted.

“I will give Ysuroth a full report, never fear, and also assure him that his woman was untouched when I left her in your care. He will expect to find her that way when she is given over to him,” he said smugly, turning the horse and charging back the way he’d come before Shadowclaw could say more.

Shadowclaw watched his back through narrowed eyes until the man had vanished from sight. Nodding to the men at the gate to secure it, he looked down at Angeline and finally leaned down, grasped her by one arm and hauled her to her feet. Without a word, he led her up the steps to the broad, heavy timbered door that formed the main entrance to the castle proper and through the great hall.

Chapter Three

The great hall, Angeline saw as she stumbled through it, trying to focus on anything besides the fear gnawing at her belly, was so spartan it looked far more like the gathering room in a temple of holy men who had shunned creature comforts so that they might suffer humility in the worship of their god than the keep of a lord of Shadowclaw's stature. It was as clean, for that matter, as a holy sanctuary.

Several servants moved about the room, setting up the trestle tables for the noon meal, but beyond the great fireplace, there was nothing to offer any real comfort. The benches had no backs, nor were there any of the brightly colored cushions to be found in her father's great hall. The skins of beasts, still with the hair attached, lined the walls where tapestries should have hung to protect the occupants from the damp, cold drafts inevitable in such a structure.

The stairs Shadowclaw led her to, which wound upward directly off the great hall, were carved of stone and not even protected by a flimsy railing. She wondered how many had pitched off of them to plunge to their deaths, or worse, been mangled by their fall to live out the remainder of their lives broken and crippled.

Her feet were bare. Despite the fact that they had paraded her across much of Avator in nothing more substantial than flimsy veils, Sangrey's men had given her boots to protect her feet, but Darkraider had taken them after her first attempt to escape, and the cold from the stone penetrated even the unfeeling blocks her feet had become from exposure to the elements until each step was an agony. By the time they reached the second floor she was panting for breath, from pain, and from the effort to keep up with Shadowclaw.

He glanced down at her frowningly several times as he dragged her down the circular hallway to the next flight of stairs and finally snatched her off her feet and carried her up the next flight. Her head swam nauseatingly at the abrupt motion. For a moment, she struggled to regain her equilibrium and finally gave up, dropping her head weakly to his shoulder.

The warmth of his body immediately began to filter through her, thawing her, and she had to struggle to resist the temptation to snuggle closer, to draw heat for herself from his warmth. Beneath her cheek, she felt the steady, almost soothing beat of his heart accelerate, but she did not make the mistake of thinking it was desire that was responsible, for he had ample reason with no more than the exertion of climbing the stairs.

She tried not to think about the abyss of the stairwell, closing her dark eyes as they rose higher and higher and the threat of a misstep became more and more a certainty of death. She was so relieved she felt weak with it, however, when they reached the next floor and he set her on her feet, guiding her by the grip on her arm again to a room near the top of the stairs.

Weak light filtered through the scraped hide that covered the single, narrow window the room boasted, dispelling the gloom just enough for her to make out the

furnishings. There was little to see for all that. Beyond the wide bed, covered in furs, the room contained nothing more than a simple chest, a crude table, a hard, uncomfortable looking chair and a three legged stool. Pegs had been driven into the walls and here and there garments were hung.

“You will stay here,” Shadowclaw said, turning her so that her back was to him and tugging at the leather binding her wrists until he had released them.

Pain instantly assaulted her hands like someone stabbing her with sharp needles. She bit her lip, flexing her fingers as Shadowclaw stepped away from her and disappeared through the open doorway. Turning curiously to see what he was about, she watched him stride to the edge of the upper hallway to look down at the great hall far below them. “Bring up hot water and a tub for bathing!” he bellowed at the servants in the hall below.

Angeline’s heart nearly failed her as he turned and slid a speculative glance over her. It took an effort to lock her knees to keep from wilting to the floor as he strode toward her, slamming the door behind him as he entered the room without a backward glance to see if the latch caught.

Her heart fluttered to life again, beating against her ribcage like a frightened bird trying to escape. As he drew nearer, she felt her eyes growing wider and wider until he seemed to fill her vision.

He strode past her. Moving to the hearth, he squatted, taking up a log and using it to stir the coals until little tongues of flame began to lick at it. Satisfied after a moment, he placed the log carefully on the coals and just as slowly and methodically added one piece after another until he had assembled a sizable fire. After staring absently into the flames for several moments, he turned, summoned her with a gesture of his hand and pointed to the three legged stool.

Swallowing against a dry throat, Angeline responded to the silent command, sinking rather gratefully onto the stool, partly because it brought her close enough to feel the heat of the fire, and partly because she’d been afraid her knees would give out at any moment.

The door banged open almost the moment her ass settled on the stool and she jumped all over reflexively. It was servants, she saw, bearing a beaten tub of metal and pails sloshing water. Shadowclaw straightened at their entrance, vacating his spot on the hearth. Moving to the chair, he sprawled in it, hooking one leg over one chair arm and slouching sideways to prop an elbow on the other chair arm.

He gave every appearance of one who had planted himself to stay and after staring at him for a long moment, Angeline turned to watch uneasily as the parade of servants in and out of the room dwindled and finally ceased altogether with the banging of the closing door.

“Bathe,” Shadowclaw said when she made no attempt to rise.

She jerked all over at the command, but she didn’t turn to look at him.

She could refuse the comfort of a bath, of course, only to make her point, but in the end it would be nothing more than a statement of her helplessness. She could try to fight him if he tried to force the issue, but she would lose and she had learned from hard experience that it would be a painful lesson for her.

Swallowing with an effort, she got to her feet unsteadily and removed the swath of veils with shaking, clumsy hands. When she’d discarded them all, she moved to the

tub and climbed in, closing her eyes as she sank into the hot water with a mixture of pleasure and pain.

Her eyes shot open when she heard a splash. She watched the cake of soap sinking to the bottom, lifted her eyes to the cloth floating on the water's surface and beginning to sink far more slowly, and finally looked up at the man towering over her.

"Bathe," he said succinctly.

Nodding jerkily, she grabbed up the soap and cloth and began scrubbing herself. The soap had no appreciable smell beyond the clean scent of the soap itself, but it removed the smell of Darkraider from her skin and for that she was infinitely grateful.

The urge settled upon her the more she scrubbed to simply keep scrubbing until she'd peeled the feel of him from her flesh, scoured the memory of his touch from her mind. She was so intent with her obsession that she paid little heed to Shadowclaw as he approached her again until he caught her hands, peeling her fingers from the cloth. She looked up at him blindly as he tossed the soggy rag aside.

It landed on the hearth, hissing.

The sound pierced her self absorption, her gaze focusing at last on Shadowclaw as he caught her arms and pulled her to her feet. The water, she saw when she looked down, was a disgusting brownish red from the blood that had encrusted her skin from the battle.

Feeling vaguely nauseated, for she hadn't even realized before that moment that the dirt and blood from the battlefield was smeared liberally over her and her clothing, she stepped from the tub without urging. Once out, she stood shivering beside the tub until Shadowclaw nudged her in the general direction of the stool once more and finally settled uncomfortably on it, holding her hands to the heat.

Grasping the edge of the tub, Shadowclaw dragged the bath from the room and out onto the balcony type corridor that encircled the stairwell. Leaving it just outside, he returned to the room and closed the door, eying her speculatively. "Did he use you?" he demanded after a long moment.

Angeline's head snapped upward at that. She stared at him blankly, trying to decide how to respond.

"Are you untouched?" he asked, slowly, as if he suspected she was slow witted.

She supposed she must appear so, for she wasn't certain of how to answer the questions or even if it was a good idea to answer truthfully.

He loosened her tongue the moment he surged toward her.

"He ... uh ... he did," she babbled as he grabbed her arms, hauling her to her feet.

His eyes narrowed. "Did what?" he demanded. "Took your maiden head?"

Angeline gaped at him, realizing abruptly that, contrary to her first panicked thoughts, he had no particular interest in her, or her hide. He wanted to know whether that last smirking remark Darkraider had made meant that it would be his head on the pike when she was presented to Ysuroth.

"No!" she gasped as he dragged her toward the bed and gave her a push that sent her sprawling. "He did not!"

He caught her ankles, shoving her feet up onto the bed. The moment he settled his palms on her knees, however, she knew exactly what he had in mind. Without any conscious decision to struggle, she stiffened, tightening her thigh muscles and resisting as he tried to push her thighs apart.

She might as well have saved herself the effort, for he pushed them apart anyway,

without any apparent effort. Panic swallowed her in one gulp. She began slapping, clawing and kicking at him mindlessly, bucking against him and struggling to wiggle out from under him at the same time. He blocked her attempt to escape by throwing himself on top of her.

It knocked the wind out of her but not the fight. She continued to fight him, struggling to close her thighs and when she found that impossible because he had wedged himself between them, tried to insinuate a foot or knee between them. And all the while she alternately pounded and clawed at his shoulders or pushed at them.

When he finally managed to catch her flying arms, he shoved first one and then the other behind her back, using his weight and hers to pin them. Balked of the possibility of clobbering him, she uttered a snarl and tried to bite him. He reared back, narrowly avoiding the gnash of her teeth.

She felt his hands beneath her, shifting until he managed to lock one of his hands around both of her wrists. Expecting any moment to feel his fist connect with her face, she bucked again, managing to shift backwards, but her hair was trapped beneath her and all she succeeded in doing was tethering herself, her neck arched, her head tilted back at a painful angle that exposed her throat for easy slashing if he felt so inclined.

Instead, she felt his free hand as he shifted upwards and insinuated it between their bodies, felt his fingers raking through the hair on her mound. She gasped, jerking all over as one questing finger flicked against the ring in her bud, sending a wave of acute sensation through her. He pushed his hand further, parting the fleshy lips of her sex, searching her cleft until he found the opening of her body. She tensed all over as he pushed a finger inside of her. Her eyes, squeezed tightly shut until that moment, flew wide as she felt his invasion. He inserted another finger, pushing slowly, deeply inside of her.

Angeline caught her breath, panting as she felt him pressing against something inside of her, felt ripples moving through her belly. The muscles there clenched around his fingers completely without her command.

His gaze moved to hers. For a fraction of a heartbeat, he merely stared at her. Holding her gaze, he withdrew his fingers slightly and pushed inside of her again, and again the strange rush of sensation went through her, causing her muscles to quake around his fingers, cling.

Uttering a harsh breath, he removed his fingers completely after a moment. "He did not take your maidenhead," he said, his voice harsh.

She thought she heard a thread of accusation. "He did not touch me there," she said a little hoarsely.

He hesitated and slid his fingers further along her cleft, running the tip of one finger almost soothingly over her other opening. "There?"

She swallowed convulsively, but all she could manage was a jerky nod.

His expression hardened, but she didn't know what to make of the myriad of emotions that flickered in his eyes and disappeared. Releasing her abruptly, he rolled off of her and got up. Without a word, he crossed the room and she thought he would leave without saying anything else. He paused at the door, however. "I will have a maid see what can be had to wear and send her up to help you dress. I am afraid we can not offer what you are no doubt accustomed to."

Angeline stared at the door, dumbfounded, when he had left. Slowly, it sank into

her mind that she had fought a Summoner. She had clawed and punched at him and tried to bite him like some wild, mindless beast.

She lifted her shaking hands, staring at them as if she didn't recognize them as her own.

She'd drawn blood, she saw fearfully, clawed bloody, ragged trails through his flesh.

And he had merely proceeded to examine her to make certain that he would not be accused, later, of having taken her maidenhead.

A sob of reaction escaped her. She clapped a shaking hand over her mouth to prevent another. After a moment, when she had mastered the urge to simply yield to her emotions, she looked around the room a little numbly and finally climbed beneath the furs on the bed, curling into a tight, shivering ball.

It dawned on her as the shaking began to subside and she burrowed her face into the rough sheets beneath her that she could detect, ever so faintly, the scent of Lord Shadowclaw among the sheets.

He'd brought her to his room.

Chapter Four

Both physically and emotionally exhausted, Angeline drowsed as warmth finally seeped into her bones. A strange, almost furtive noise in the corridor roused her only a little later, however. Instantly fearful, she sat up in the bed, clutching the furs to her chest, staring wide eyed at the door as it slowly began to swing inward.

The creature that paused on the threshold looked more like a gnome than a mortal being. After peering at Angeline with hard, faded blue eyes for a moment, the creature shuffled into the room, lifting one foot and dragging the other, bearing a bucket from which water sloshed with each hobbling step.

Color mounted Angeline's dark cheeks as she realized the movements she'd heard weren't furtive, weren't threatening, but were merely the result of the creature's age compounded by the burden of the heavy pail.

She had no notion what the creature was beyond old, for the face with its bulbous nose, smattering of chin hairs and sagging jowls might have belonged to an elderly man or a woman. The frazzled white hair that stuck out around its round head told her nothing, and she found no clues in the sunken chest and protruding belly.

'It' was wearing a stained, much patched gown, however.

"Name's Sara, my lady," the creature murmured, dipping her creaky knees briefly in what Angeline supposed to be a curtsy. "There's nae fancy stuff around here, nae pitchers an' bowls fer bathin' an' such, but his lordship sent me ta bring ya a pail of water in case of need. An' I brung ya one of me own gowns ta wear fer now."

Angeline studied the stained garment draped over the woman's arm as she flapped it about and forced her lips to form a polite smile. "Thank you! That was most thoughtful of him, and very kind of you to offer."

The woman shrugged, looked around as if searching for something and finally shuffled over and set the pail on the hearth. "I did nae offer, but yer welcome ta it. There's nae holes in it."

Disconcerted, Angeline merely stared at the woman, the smile frozen on her face as she struggled to think of a response.

She found to her relief that none was expected. Once she'd settled the pail, the woman turned and headed toward the bed with the same shuffle-drag gate with which she'd entered the room. Pausing by the bed when she reached it, she favored Angeline with another piercing stare. "Yer a lovely one," she said matter-of-factly. "I do nae see so well any more and I'd a notion the rumors about ya might have been exaggerated what with the fact that the men hereabouts ain't seen no female atall save the old crones like me fer a spell now." She seemed to consider it for several moments. "Last Beltane, I'm thinkin' it must have been--a troupe of entertainers was caught in a snow storm at the pass and begged shelter here for a bit. Couldn't shake the dust of the place from their feet fast enough, though."

Angeline frowned. "Why?"

The old woman shrugged and then cackled. "Nigh pissed themselves the lot of

‘em when they got a look as his lordship, they did.”

Blinking, Angeline digested that in silence for a moment. “You aren’t afraid of him?” she asked tentatively.

Sara looked at her as if she had lost her mind. “Are ye daft, girl? Or do ya take me fer a fool? He’s a Summoner.” She thought that over. “If it comes ta that, the village idiot’s afraid of him. The trulls won’t come next or nigh the place, neither, not fer any amount of coin,” she added absently, dragging the gown off her arm and peering at it for several moments before she began searching for the opening.

“There’s a village nearby?” Angeline asked a little breathlessly.

The woman paused in her search, lifting her head to examine Angeline speculatively. “Nay,” she said finally, returning her attention to the gown and fumbling at the fabric until, at last, she found the neck opening. Gathering the fabric with an effort with her swollen, twisted fingers, she finally lifted it, holding the neck wide.

Angeline released the furs and slipped her arms inside, ducking to push her head through the neck opening. “But you said the trulls wouldn’t come from the village.”

“Aye, and they won’t. An’ the men ca’nae go unless they’ve leave ta be gone a few days, an’ they do nae get much of that, I can tell ya. There now,” she finished, smoothing her hands over Angeline to straighten the gown. “Looks like shite, I know, but tis clean an’ mended an’ it’ll keep the men from hasslin’ after ya like the randy dogs they are, I’m thinkin’. His lordship says yer ta go down ta the hall ta eat once ye’ve dressed.”

Angeline sent the woman a startled look. “I am to be allowed to go out?”

Sara frowned at her. “Unless ye’d rather I brung yer food up ta?”

Truth be told she did not particularly care for the idea of sitting among the soldiers to eat, but she was hungry, she discovered. Moreover, she could not allow her fear to hold her captive within Shadowclaw’s room when the possibility of escape might be open to her if only she had the courage to seek it.

Besides, she did not feel particularly comfortable about asking the old woman to climb the stairs again only to bring her food.

The gown, Angeline saw ruefully when she slipped from the bed and stood up, fell shy of her ankles. The neck was nigh as wide as the hem, but once she had gathered it with the drawstring sewn around the neck, it ceased to slip from first one shoulder and then the other. The fabric was rough against her skin, as well, and it was as stained as she had first thought, but it was warm and clean and she was more inclined to be grateful for the fact that it scarcely touched her beyond her shoulders than dismayed. There had been a time, before her father had sent for her and her life had become a nightmare, when she had taken pride in her appearance, when she would have thought anyone mad to suggest she appear publicly in such common attire, but her world had changed since then.

She did not regret the lack of a looking glass to check her appearance, or a comb for her hair. The worse she looked, she thought, the better. Shadowclaw had said that he would guard her well, and she knew his men feared him enough that it was doubtful that they would ignore his order to stay away from her, but she saw no sense in pressing the matter.

Nodding acceptance, she moved to the bucket of water and washed her hands. She saw when she turned that Sara had gathered up the remains of her bridal veils from the floor.

To dispose of, she hoped.

But she doubted it. More likely the woman would carry them to the laundry and bring them back again.

A wave of vertigo assailed her as she left the room and looked out over the vast, yawning opening at the center of the castle. Her belly took flight, settling somewhere around her toes.

The old woman, she saw, shuffled along the corridor with one hand along the wall and she trailed behind her, trying not to look at the drop beyond the edge. It was worse once they reached the stairs for they were narrower than the walkway. Once she had descended a few steps, she could not resist the urge to look about, and saw that the floor above was supported with vast timbers cantilevered from the stone walls. She didn't find the massive timbers particularly comforting, however.

Every expense and comfort had been spared in the design and construction of the fortress, she thought wryly, wondering if Ysuroth was as careful of his coin when it came to his own comfort as he was when it came to his men. She supposed, though, that like most folk of the upper classes, he saw no reason to 'coddle' the lower classes.

It made her wonder, though, if Lord Shadowclaw was not considered a part of the ruling class, despite the title.

She supposed not. The Summoners were a class in their own right, set apart from all others by their training, not their birth. And, if there was any truth to the dark tales that surrounded them, then perhaps they took pleasure in the discomfort?

She found it confusing, particularly since her experience with Shadowclaw thus far, little though it undoubtedly was, had not led her to believe that he was blacker of heart than many another man who laid no claim to the title of Summoner.

Darkraider, for certain had been despicable, vicious, brutish.

She was the daughter of their hated enemy, bride-to-be of a man they despised even more, which she supposed had made him more inclined toward brutality, but the same could be said of the Summoner.

Excepting for the fact that it was said they had no true master, felt no real loyalty to any man. They served the men they served because their master was the only living being that held power over them.

Did that mean that he was immune then to the desires that drove mere mortals? Did he not feel lust because he could not feel pleasure?

Perhaps, and yet when she recalled the look in his eyes as he examined her, she could almost have sworn that she had seen something there, something of the hunger that she had seen in Darkraider's eyes when he looked at her.

Had she only imagined it because she had expected to see it?

It dawned upon her abruptly as she reached the ground floor that she had told him what Darkraider had done to her, told him how the pig had taken his pleasure of her and left her maidenhead for his lord to pluck.

Dread filled her at that thought, for she could not help but wonder if he would have thought of it himself if she had not told him.

She knew very little about men, it was true, but it had not seemed a very 'natural' act to her, not the sort of thing, certainly, that men would expect of a lady.

She had had the sense, though, that Darkraider would willingly rut any warm hole, or a cold one if it came to that.

She should have kept her mouth shut, she realized in dismay, lifting her head uneasily as she discovered that silence had fallen over the diners in the great hall as, one by one, they glanced around and discovered that she had joined them.

Shadowclaw, she saw, sat at the head table alone. He met her gaze across the room and her stomach tightened, her heart fluttering uncomfortably in her chest. It seemed to her that his gaze compelled her to come to him, for she did not detect the slightest of gestures and still she knew he had summoned her.

As she watched a servant appeared from the kitchens carrying a platter of meat and cheese.

He had been expecting her that was all, she told herself, dragging her gaze from his and watching her feet as she threaded her way between the trestle tables and joined him. He rose as she reached him, pulling the bench out for her and helping her to seat herself.

Self-conscious, acutely aware of Shadowclaw, Angeline discovered by the time she'd settled on the bench that her appetite had all but vanished, squeezed out by the tight little ball her belly had curled into. She relaxed fractionally when he merely took his seat and resumed his meal.

She had sat a good deal closer to men and been far less conscious of them, however, in fact pretty much oblivious. There had been times when her father's castle was nearly bursting at the seams and everyone wedged so closely together on the dining benches that it was difficult to carry food to one's mouth without dropping it.

Perhaps, she thought, it was because the high table was occupied only by the two of them and not his proximity, for there was nigh enough room between them to fit another soul.

Or mayhap it was because the hand she could not seem to drag her gaze from had so lately, and thoroughly, explored her woman's place?

It was a strong hand, broad of palm, his fingers long and elegantly tapered rather than blunt and thick, but she hardly thought that accounted for the way those fingers had made her feel when they had delved inside of her, examining her in a way that had seemed far more of a caress than an invasion.

She could not help but notice that he bore no signs of their struggle. There had been evidence enough that he had not come off from the battle unscathed.

It was true, then, that the Summoners healed themselves with magic, she realized uneasily.

She jerked when the servant who'd brought her food returned and set a mug on the table beside her. She was glad for the distraction, though, because she was able to focus at last upon the food. It was simple fare, but surprisingly good, or she was uncommonly hungry. The knot in her belly seemed to ease as she tore off bits of meat and cheese and bread and nibbled at them.

She had almost begun to relax when she happened to notice that she had caught Shadowclaw's attention as she sucked the meat juices from her fingertips. Her belly clenched when she realized his gaze had settled on her mouth. It followed her moist finger as she withdrew it self-consciously and reached for the mug, returned to her mouth briefly and then slid to his own plate.

Confused, feeling oddly warm and tense, she sipped the drink incautiously and nearly choked when she discovered they'd given her ale--watered to be sure, but still ale.

A wave of dizziness washed through her as the brew settled in the pit of her stomach.

With deliberation, she set the mug carefully on the table again, wondering if there had been design behind it, or if it was all they had to offer.

It seemed more likely that the latter was true, but she was not accustomed to strong drink, regardless, and she had eaten very little since she had been taken. It would not take much to send her wits a begging.

Focusing on her food once more, she glanced as casually as she could toward the tables around them. The men had returned their attention to their food when she had sat down and they seemed unaware of her, but she did not like to think they might take her glances as an indication of interest.

There were four trestle tables set up besides the high table. From what she could see, there seemed to be six to eight men at each.

"Fifty," Shadowclaw said succinctly.

Angeline shot a wide eyed glance at him, feeling the blood rush dizzily from her face. She did not have to feign blank surprise. She was startled.

He studied her wide eyes for a moment. "Fifty men-at-arms. Fifteen are on patrol. Perhaps a dozen guard the walls at all times. That is what you were wondering, is it not?"

The blood that had so lately abandoned her, rushed back with a vengeance. "I was only curious about this place," she stammered.

He hooked a finger on her chin as she looked away, forcing her to look up at him again. "Do not allow your curiosity to lead you into trouble. I gave my word that you would be well guarded and it would be found that you were untouched when your escort comes to collect you. There are ways, and then there are ways of commanding obedience, my lady, and you may be certain that I know them all."

Angeline swallowed with an effort, struggling without much success to prevent her mind from conjuring horrific images. When he released her at last, she turned to stare blindly at her food, struggling with the breathless rush of her blood through her veins and the frantic pounding of her heart.

After a moment, she forced herself to pick up another morsel of food, commanded herself to take a bite and chew it slowly. She wasn't certain of whether she did so because she hoped to allay his suspicions, or if it was because she knew that to ignore her body's need for substance was to invite weakness she could not afford. Perhaps both, perhaps neither. Of a certainty, the food tasted like so much saw dust after his subtle threat, but she persevered.

Shadowclaw pushed his own plate away after a few moments. Lifting his hands, he unfastened his cloak. "When you have finished, return to my room," he murmured as he leaned down to push his boots from his feet beneath the trestle. "It is blatantly clear that the sack you wear now will not dissuade the men from their dangerous fascination with you. I suppose because, like me, they have only to look at you to conjure the delectable image of you upon your arrival. Lust can be a madness that overcomes the instinct for self-preservation."

Angeline sent him a startled look as he stood, stepped over the bench, and unlaced his breeches. Shock washed over her as he very calmly and deliberately peeled the leather from his hips and stepped out of them. For several heartbeats she could do nothing but stare, too stunned to fully assimilate anything but bare flesh. Her eyes

focused after a moment, however, on the man root that sprouted from the nest of dark hair low on his belly and her mouth and throat went dry as dust.

He leaned down and for one horrifying moment she thought he meant to snatch her up and drag her up the stairs. Instead, she saw that he had hunched his shoulder forward so that every muscle along his arms and on his chest stood out, rock hard. His face contorted, as if with pain.

His face and body began almost to undulate as he fell to the floor on his hands and knees. Golden hair emerged from his pores. His fingers curled, became paws rather than hands, tipped with deadly claws. She blinked. When her eyes opened again, focused again, the dread beast that stood where the Summoner had stood looked nothing like the man he had been moments before.

For several moments he held her enthralled with his golden gaze. Finally, blinking slowly, he turned away from her and padded across the room. Pandemonium broke out--had erupted, Angeline realized dimly the moment he had begun the transformation. Benches screamed against the stone as the men who'd been seated on them leapt to their feet, overturning the heavy seats in their haste to clear a path for the beast.

He paused at the door, lifting the great leathery wings that sprouted from his back. Turning his head to fix those nearest to him with a cold, deadly gaze, he opened jaws lined with sharp teeth and uttered a roar that seemed to vibrate through every surface.

The man caught in his gaze froze as if turned to stone. The man beside him fell over his feet in a mad dash to open the great door. Flinging it wide, he flattened himself against the stone wall as the great winged cat trotted past him and out into the courtyard.

Angeline was not even aware of having moved from where she sat, but she found herself standing in the doorway, watching as the beast trotted up the stairs to the walk at the top of the wall, leapt onto the crenellated ledge and then spread his great wings and vanished over the side.

Chapter Five

Too numb to feel much of anything, Angeline looked around a little vaguely as the door finally closed, blocking her view, and then moved to a bench along one wall, dropping heavily onto it.

Around her, chaos still reigned. It was just as obvious that the men were trying to behave as if nothing particularly unsettling had happened as it was that they were greatly disordered. For many minutes after the Summoner's departure, some simply remained frozen in place, and some in the same position as they had assumed the instant they noticed Shadowclaw had summoned his familiar. Others wandered aimlessly about the room as if searching for something. Finally, almost as if their minds had seized on familiar tasks since they were unable to function freely, the men began to vacate the great hall until, at last, no one was left save Angeline. When the door had closed behind the last of them, servants began to poke their heads out of hiding places here and there around the room; the kitchen door, beneath trestle tables and benches.

Still white faced and shaken they fell to cleaning the mess left behind.

Angeline watched them absently, her mind still far too chaotic to make much sense of what was happening around her, of what she had seen happen before.

The beast had been far more terrifying than anything she could have imagined, she realized. She had thought that she had been braced from the moment she had discovered that she had been left in the hands of a Summoner. Nothing, she realized, could have prepared her for such an experience, however. No matter how frightening, how gruesomely detailed the tales that had been told to her, her mind simply had not been able to fully grasp the actuality of a Summoner.

It still couldn't.

She had fought ... that, she realized after a time, feeling cold terror seep into her already freezing flesh. The gods preserve her, it was nothing short of a miracle that he had not summoned his beast to shred her flesh from her bones only for her audacity.

It had not truly been daring, though, she thought wryly. It had been mindless panic, the behavior of a cornered animal.

Perhaps he had understood that and that was why he had not slain her?

She shrugged inwardly. More likely he had simply not even noticed her puny efforts.

Possibly, if the tales were true, he had actually enjoyed it.

She could not recall anything to indicate that, though.

And yet he had insinuated that he felt lust for her.

A peculiar flutter of something unidentifiable awoke inside of her. It blossomed as the image, unbidden and unwelcome, slipped into her mind of those moments when she had lain pinned beneath his body, when she had felt his fingers gliding slowly in and out of her passage.

Her throat closed. With an effort, she banished the image from her mind, dismissed the one that replaced it of his broad hand resting on the table beside her as she

had struggled to eat. And the one that replaced that one of his man root as he had stood naked to her gaze. And the none too subtle threat that he could use her body to torment her without leaving any tell tale signs.

She had developed an unhealthy fascination with the creature--for she reminded herself that he was no mortal man, but a creation that straddled both the world of mortals and that of magic. He was both, and neither, and if she had become enthralled it was either because he had woven a spell upon her, or it was the same sort of sick fascination that held one enthralled when one was faced with a deadly snake that was poised to strike.

It was yet one more threat, a new, unforeseen danger. She had to escape. There had to be a way.

There was a village nearby. She had scarcely been able to hide her excitement when she had learned that. Her mind had instantly leapt to escape, to fleeing there to find shelter.

Even if she could accomplish it, though, that would be the first place they searched for her.

She could not go there. Even if she could discover the way, she would only seal her fate by heading directly to the first place they would expect her to go.

She knew, though, that she was not many days from Viridan. She was far closer to her own country, Avator, but she did not intend to go back. She was no more thrilled with the notion of becoming Lord Sangrey's bride than becoming Lord Ysuroth's. She had never met either one, but she did not need to. Their reputations, the dark tales that surrounded their bloody reins, were enough to convince her she would not live long to regret capture by either of them. She had not needed to hear Shadowclaw's comments about his own overlord to know the man was far worse even than his lieutenant, Darkraider.

She knew almost nothing of Lord Malik of Viridan beyond the fact that he was not accounted to be nearly as powerful as either Ysuroth or Sangrey, but it seemed unlikely he could be more evil. In any case, dressed as a common woman as she now was, she could hide among the common folk, she thought, if only she could reach Viridan.

She would stand a far better chance if she had a head start and a horse to carry her.

Fear crawled into her belly at the thought, but she resolutely ignored it, pushing herself to her feet. Shadowclaw was gone. She had no idea how long she might have before he returned. His men had left, disordered by Shadowclaw's departure. Despite what he had said before he left, she hardly thought their minds would be on carnal matters at the moment.

In any case, she had no idea at all of how long her respite from Darkraider might be since she did not know how far he would have to travel. He could return within a few days and once he did she had even less chance of escaping her fate.

She paused uncertainly when she had stepped outside the door and surveyed the activity within the bailey. Several men glanced at her as she slowly descended the steps, but no one approached her.

Trying to appear as if her interest was casual, she wandered about the inner yard for a time instead of heading directly toward the stables. It served her purposes well

enough. The men seemed to dismiss her presence after a while and focus on their tasks.

Moreover, she knew that leaving by way of the main gate was an impossible feat. She would have to discover another way out.

There would be a postern gate, she knew. No one built a castle that had only one way in or out. Two gates meant two possible entrances for their enemies, but it also meant the possibility of escape for the occupants of the castle in the event that abandoning the place became necessary.

There were, in fact, three gates, she discovered after wandering around the courtyard for more than an hour. One was no more than a stout door set into the outer wall and guarded by one man since it was too small for more than one man to pass through at the time.

Or one woman leading a horse.

She would either have to wait until he was distracted, or think of a way to distract him, or think of a way to eliminate him as a threat.

She pondered the dilemma as she wandered seemingly aimlessly in the direction of the stables at last.

One of the men in the yard lifted his head and stared straight at her as she reached the stable entrance. Her heart seemed to stand still in her chest and for several moments doubt shook her resolve and she wrestled with whether to proceed as she had planned, or to simply keep walking.

He looked away after only a moment, to her relief, and she ducked inside the gloomy interior, moving as quickly as she could beyond view from the door.

The horses inside were great warhorses, savage beasts the lot of them. Apparently, none of them saw her as a threat, however, for they merely moved curiously to drape their great heads over the poles that kept them in their stalls, snuffling at her as she walked by, occasionally nudging her with their soft noses hard enough she staggered.

There were no palfreys, not even a small mare, Angeline discovered without surprise but with a great deal of disappointment.

It would have to be one of the warhorses, she realized, or she would have to discard the notion of a mount at all.

She had moved down the row of stalls, examining each horse and trying to decide which looked the least likely to throw her to the ground and stomp her when a shadow blocked the light spilling from the open doorway.

Her breath caught in her throat as she looked up. One of the men-at-arms, not a stable hand, stood in the doorway. The light behind him threw his face in shadow. "I've a notion yer nae supposed to be in here," he murmured, moving slowly towards her.

Angeline stood her ground, more because fear had frozen her to the spot than because of her mind's frantic command that to run would only make her appear guilty. She tried for a look of innocent surprise that she had been caught. "I was merely bored," she managed to say, although her voice was barely above a whisper.

A slow grin spread his lips. Even in the gloom she could see the gleam of the few white teeth he still had. "Bored are ya? An' ye've nae been with us a full day. From all the screechin' we heard, I'd thought his lordship entertained ya right well."

It struck Angeline a split second before the man leapt at her, covering her mouth with one filthy hand that he had come with a purpose she hadn't anticipated. He had moved so slowly toward her she had not realized before that his intent was to keep her

where she was.

She managed no more than a muffled scream against his palm, a palm that covered most of her face, cutting off her air even as it effectively stifled the full effect of her cry. Galvanized more by the sudden obstruction of her air than anything else, Angeline erupted into a whirling dervish of motion even as he caught at her waist with his free hand. Snuffling against the suffocating hand over her face in a frantic effort to drag in air, she flailed at him mindlessly, clawing uselessly at his leather armor. He shoved her away abruptly, slapping her cheek with an open handed blow that whipped her head sideways and sent her flying backwards. She landed flat on her back on the packed dirt hard enough it knocked what little air she had left from her lungs, skidding along the ground until she slid into a mound of hay.

He was on top of her before she could recover enough to roll away, pinning her to the dirt. Grimly, in teeth clenched silence, she slapped at his hands as he caught the tie at her throat and snatched at it, bucking against him in an effort to dislodge his weight. Levering his upper body upward, he caught at her wrists. For several moments, she managed to elude his determined pursuit, clawing at his eyes when he managed to grab one of her wrists, digging her teeth into one of his hands when he slapped her again and managed to grab her other wrist.

He wrenched her arms over her head, trying to manacle both wrists with one hand. She jerked at her arms, bucked beneath him and finally managed to get one arm free again.

Apparently deciding to simply ignore her flailing blows on his head and shoulders, he buried his face beside hers in the hay and grabbed at the hem of her gown. Cold air caressed her bare thigh as he dragged it up, and Angeline's panic multiplied as she felt his hand fumbling with the opening of his breeches.

His frantic movements stopped abruptly, so suddenly that it was several moments before Angeline realized that he had stopped.

"Get up."

The voice, a deep, rumbling growl, was not immediately recognizable to Angeline, but it made her eyes pop open wide, made the man on top of her begin to very carefully and slowly ease away from her. "She was trying ta steal a horse an' escape," the man babbled as he climbed to his feet. "I was only doin' my duty, my lord, an' tryin' to stop her."

Uttering a deep chested snarl, Shadowclaw drew his fist back and punched the man in the face so hard his entire body lifted clear of the ground and flew backward almost two yards before it slammed into the ground, skidding out the door of the stable before it finally came to a halt.

Angeline was too stunned even to move. She dragged her gaze from the still form of her attacker and looked up at Shadowclaw as he leaned down, caught her by one arm and jerked her to her feet, almost wrenching her arm from the socket in the process. Releasing her arm, he caught her and hauled her upward. She landed on his hard shoulder so hard it knocked the wind out of her.

Still struggling to catch her breath, Angeline saw as they reached the courtyard that several men had gathered round the fallen man. Shadowclaw paused, staring down at the man dispassionately. "When he comes around, tie him to the post and give him twenty lashes," he said in that same rumbling growl he'd used before, the one Angeline

abruptly realized with horror sounded unlike his own voice because his beast was still at war with his human side.

Gamon looked up at him. "I think he's dead. His neck's broke."

Shadowclaw's eyes narrowed. "Then give him fifty lashes," he said coldly. "And leave his bloody carcass there. I do not want anyone in any doubt of what I will do to the next man that disobeys me."

It would have been inaccurate to say that Angeline had recovered enough from her shock and fright to begin to struggle by the time Shadowclaw mounted the steps and entered the great hall. More accurately, as his intent became crystal clear to her, a fresh panic seized her.

Chapter Six

Angeline's efforts to free herself from Shadowclaw's grip went unrewarded. Regardless of how hard she wiggled and pushed at him, trying to loosen his grip on her, she made no headway. Ignoring the gaping, open mouthed stares of the servants as Shadowclaw, as naked as when he had left hours before, crossed the great hall with her slung over his shoulder, ignoring the growing sense of hopelessness inside her, she persevered. By the time he had reached the second floor, however, she was not only exhausted from fighting, she was torn between her fear of the Summoner and her fear of falling to her death.

Subsiding, she switched her battle inward, trying to steady her nerve, catch her breath, gather her strength, and her wits.

He would not slay her. If he had intended that, he could have snapped her neck far more easily than that of the great brute that had attacked her.

He would do nothing to mar her flesh, not because he had no desire to, she was sure, but because of his overlord.

He had said that there were ways and ways of punishing her, however, if she disobeyed him.

Her throat closed with fear.

With an effort she tamped it as he reached the third floor and headed into his room, trying to think of something she might say to turn him from his intentions, something she might do that would win her freedom, or even a few moments more of it.

She tensed as he closed the door behind him and allowed her to slide down his body until her toes touched the floor. Before she had calculated her chances of whipping around him, snatching the door open, and fleeing down the stairs again, he caught her upper arms and walked her backwards until she was wedged between his body and the wall.

The gown, which had seemed so coarse and thick before, might have amounted to nothing more substantial than air as he pressed his naked flesh against her, for she felt his heat and hardness as if nothing at all separated them.

She licked her lips, tried to gather enough moisture into her mouth to swallow as he snapped the knotted tie at her neck and shoved the gown from her shoulders. "I did not go to steal a horse," she stammered as he caught the edges of the cloth and dragged it down her arms, releasing it when it settled at her waist, trapped by their bodies.

His gaze met hers. "Mere curiosity?"

She swallowed convulsively. "To ... to pet them."

His dark brows rose. "War horses?"

Blood crept into her cheeks, thawing them, melting her shock, so that her cheek began to throb with the pain from the man's blows. "I was not trying to escape."

His eyes narrowed, he lifted one hand, threading a finger almost idly through one of her nipple rings. "And yet a man is dead. And I am now one soldier the poorer when even now your beloved Sangrey is gathering an army to overrun our borders."

Whatever outrage Angeline might have felt at the accusation was stifled by his hold on the ring. He tugged on it. The bud tightened as blood surged into it, magnifying the sensation tenfold as the pressure built until her nipple was throbbing with every beat of her heart.

"You are fortunate," he said coldly, "that I was near enough to hear your cry, else you would be suffering far more now than bruises. I told you to return to the room, did I not?"

Angeline swallowed again. "I forgot," she said weakly.

His eyes narrowed. "It has been my experience that pain is the best of teachers. One never forgets a single painful experience. Have you not noticed?"

Angeline bit her lip. By now her heart was pounding so hard against her chest wall that she could scarcely breathe. She felt faint, dizzy. She prayed for oblivion, even as she accepted that whatever he did to her was not something that she would remain unaware of.

Removing his finger from the ring, he skated his hands down her arms, pulled her hands free of the fabric, and manacled her wrists with his hands. Her eyes widened as he lifted her arms above her head, lifted until only her toes were touching the floor, and then higher still. The gown that had snagged on her hips, slipped free, puddling on the floor beneath her feet as he pinned her to the wall with his body again, this time with his hips wedged against hers, his engorged member digging into the softness of her belly.

Slowly, holding her gaze, he leaned closer until his mouth hovered so close to one nipple that she could feel the heat of his breath caressing her skin. With deliberation, he opened his mouth and caught the distended tip between his teeth. The air left her lungs as if he'd punched it from her.

Despite every effort, a whimper escaped her as he bore down on the sensitive tip with the sharp edge of his teeth, increasing the pressure with careful deliberation until pain began to threaten its way through the morass of nerves bundled there. She gritted her teeth, fighting the impulse to try to snatch free, uncertain if she tried what he might do.

Perhaps, as he had said Ysuroth had done, cut the sensitive buds from her body so that she could never feel again.

It would be no great loss, she thought a little wildly, and yet she could not bring herself to urge him to give her more pain.

And still it built until she was panting with the effort to keep from crying out. When she had reached the point where she thought she couldn't bear any more, when tears had filled her eyes and begun to overflow down her cheeks, he released her nipple. The sudden absence of pressure only seemed to make the tiny nub of flesh throb more, however.

Lifting his head, he studied her for a long moment and leaned to take her nipple into his mouth again. Her flesh jerked as she felt the heat of his mouth. Instead of his teeth, however, she felt the soothing lather of his tongue. Something jerked low in her belly, knotted painfully.

He closed his mouth over the abused tip, sucking.

Angeline's flesh erupted with a rash of sensation as the fine hairs all over her body lifted to attention. She gasped, feeling a heady rush fire in her mind and her blood like strong drink that left her weak and disoriented in its wake. Feeling almost as if a hand had tightened around her throat, she struggled to draw breath, to swallow as the

pressure in her woman's place increased. Blood flushed her lower body, making her nether lips feel as painfully swollen and sensitive as her nipples.

It took an effort to lift her eyelids to look at him when he finally ceased to suckle her.

"Will you remember this?" he asked, his voice harsh, grating.

Angeline moistened her dry lips with the tip of her tongue, trying to gather her wits. Before she could force any sound through her parched throat, he dipped his head and bit down on the tip of her other breast, hard. Pain stabbed through her, for simply by virtue of him having ignored it up until that moment, the blood had merely built more and more pressure until it was so sensitive the slightest touch would have been painful. She cried out hoarsely as the sharp edge of his teeth dug into her, groaning, struggling against him mindlessly.

He arched his hips against her, grinding his engorged member into her painfully swollen nether lips. Almost of its own accord, her hips curled to meet his thrust and she felt his member grinding against her woman's bud with a mixture of exquisite pleasure and pain. She whimpered, subsiding, biting her lip to keep from crying out again as he bore down on her flesh relentlessly until she'd begun to think he would remove it with his teeth.

Instead, when she thought she could not bear it any longer, he released that nipple as he had the first, lathing the bud with his tongue and then sucking on it until her entire body began to feel as if it was on fire. She felt feverish. Hot moisture pooled in her sex, coating it as the muscles there began to clench and relax rhythmically.

He drew away when Angeline had become mindless with the exquisite sensations rocking her. She panted, struggling to catch her breath, hoping that he would end the torture--fearful that if he did not she would begin to enjoy it far too much.

After studying her for several moments, he eased away from her, allowed her to slide down the wall until her feet were resting against the floor. Her knees wobbled when he released her wrists. She locked them with an effort, grateful for the support of the wall.

She was far more grateful, however, when he finally turned away from her and left the room.

For several moments, she merely stared down at her throbbing, aching body. Finally, she yielded to the weakness in her knees and slipped down the wall into a boneless puddle. After staring at her gown for several moments, trying to ignore the insistent clamor of her body for more of what he had given her, she picked it up with trembling hands and spent several moments more trying to figure out how to get into it again.

She solved the dilemma eventually, pulling the gown on, adjusting it the best she could and then struggled to her feet as she heard footsteps beyond the room. A servant entered, carrying a dripping bucket. The wizened old man looked startled to find her behind the door, but looked away almost at once. "His lordship sent me ta fetch this fer ya."

Curious, Angeline crossed the room to stare down at the contents of the bucket as the servant set it on the floor and departed.

Snow. The throbbing pain in her cheek answered the question before it fully formed in her mind.

Puzzling over her conflicting impressions of Shadowclaw, Angeline dipped a handful of snow from the bucket and pressed it against her cheek. Her nipples instantly became painfully erect, but the effect on her cheek was even worse. Sucking in a sharp inhalation of pain as the cold bit into her cheek, she dropped the snow into the bucket again, slinging the freezing residue from her fingers.

After glancing around the room, she spied the wash cloth on the hearth where Shadowclaw had tossed it earlier and went to retrieve it. It was dry now, hot from the fire. Smoothing the cloth, she waved it in the air until it cooled and returned to the bucket to scoop out another fistful of snow, packing it into a hard ball before she twisted the cloth around it and lifted it to her bruised cheek again.

Very likely her cheek would be swollen and bruised no matter what she did, but the cold compress was as soothing as it was painful and she kept it against her cheek as she looked around for a place to sit and finally settled on the stool by the hearth.

The pain subsided after a while. The strange, restless tension inside of her did not. It continued to tease her until she gave up the effort to ignore it and began to try to understand why she felt ... let down that Shadowclaw had stopped.

She'd thought the pain he inflicted was nearly unbearable, and yet it diminished considerably beside the pleasure she had felt as he had suckled her breasts. She had not expected that. It was not at all clear to her how he had managed it. Her reaction to him baffled her, disturbed her in an inexplicable way.

She was afraid of him. She knew that without a doubt. She was not particularly disturbed by that fact, knowing she had every reason in the world to be afraid, knowing, too, that she was still far more anxious about the fate that awaited her if she failed to escape and was delivered into Ysuroth's hands.

A cold shudder clawed its way up her spine at the thought. It had been frightening enough to discover she was being offered up as Sangrey's bride, but she had been too numbed by shock to feel much of it. From the time Darkraider and his men had descended upon her party, slain them to a man, and set out to deliver her to Sangrey's mortal enemy, not even shock had protected her from the knowledge that Ysuroth would delight in torturing her only to infuriate his enemy.

As terrifying as the thought of death was, it paled beside the agony she might have to endure before Ysuroth granted it.

Shadowclaw had said that he had known of Ysuroth slicing a woman's most sensitive flesh from her body and she had no trouble at all envisioning that fate for herself, imagining him carving her body piece by painful piece to send as 'gifts' to taunt Sangrey.

Her stomach cramped at the thought. She shot to her feet and began pacing the room in a mindless panic.

More to calm herself and focus her mind than anything else, she squeezed the water from the melted snow from the cloth and packed more into it. The jolt of cold that went through her as she lifted the cold compress to her cheek was bracing.

Trying not to think about the potentially horrific results of failure, she turned her mind to trying to figure out a way to escape.

Without help, she realized, there was no way she could take a horse to help her flee. Aside from the fact that they were war horses and probably completely unmanageable for someone of her stature, there were far too many men around, and far

too few women for her actions to go unnoticed.

She had learned that the hard way.

And so had the man who had attacked her.

Guilt pricked at her conscience, but she firmly dismissed it. The man's stupidity had gotten him killed. She had had no hand in his death. She was not responsible for his actions.

Pushing it from her mind, she struggled to recall the details of the castle. It was difficult, for she had been distracted all the while by her anxieties, more focused on behaving in a manner that would not arouse suspicion and her desperation to reach the stables.

The postern gate, she finally realized, was not only her best hope. It was her only hope. Somehow, she had to devise a way to reach it, and time, she knew, was no friend to her.

Chapter Seven

Angeline was far less anxious to go down to the hall for the evening meal than she had been the first time.

“His lordship said ya was ta come down,” Sara informed her when she asked the woman to bring her tray.

Angeline’s belly clenched, more, she thought, at the reminder of the man who had given the order than the order itself. Instantly, the comment conjured the incident between them earlier, when he had shown her in excruciating detail the results of defying him, or simply ignoring his orders.

Nodding jerkily, Angeline followed Sara from the room. Sara had helped her to bathe off the soil from her struggle in the stable, had brought a comb to work the tangles and debris from her hair.

She had also returned the filmy bridal veils, laundered, mended, and still far more revealing than Angeline was comfortable with, particularly after the man had assaulted her in the stables.

The sounds from below were far more subdued than they had been at the noon meal. Angeline did not have to search far for the reason. She had not had to see or hear the beating to know that the men had tied the soldier’s carcass to the pole and flogged him.

No one defied Shadowclaw with impunity.

Several of the men stiffened as they heard her cross the hall toward the high table, but none of them looked up.

Shadowclaw’s glance was coolly assessing as he rose to help her seat herself, but she could see nothing at all to indicate that he was the least troubled by anything that had transpired between them. She wished that she could say the same. Her belly clenched almost painfully as his hand closed around her upper arm to assist her, the warmth and strength of it instantly conjuring an image of that hand cupped over her mound, his fingers moving slowly inside of her and stirring strange currents of longing. A glance at his mouth was sufficient to make her nipples instantly stand erect, as if begging for his attention.

Swallowing convulsively, she settled, staring at the food lain before her with a vague sense of nausea.

“You will grow thin if you do not eat ... and Ysuroth will not be pleased,” Shadowclaw said coolly when she made no attempt to sample the food.

Nothing he might have thought of to say could more surely have dampened her interest in eating. Her throat closed and it took an effort even to gather saliva into her mouth and swallow. “He will come?” she stammered.

He slid a speculative glance at her. “Unlikely. He must prepare, now, for the war he has begun.”

Angeline thought she sensed accusation in the comment, but she was not certain if that was the case, or if it was only that she somehow felt responsible, even though she

knew she was not. "It is a great distance from here? The palace where he lives?" she asked, trying to sound as if the question was only casual interest.

She saw when she glanced up at him that he was eyeing her speculatively. Instead of telling her what she desperately needed to know--how much time she might expect to have before they came to collect her--he shrugged.

"Shroudskull? As the crow flies, not a great distance, nor a great distance by land if it comes to that. You are anxious, little bride, for your husband's ... tender embrace? Or are you hoping that Sangrey will arrive before Ysuroth can send men to collect you?"

Bile rose in Angeline's throat. She grabbed up the mug of ale that had been set out for her and took a gulp. It was hardly soothing, burning a trail from her mouth into her belly.

"Curiously enough, I had thought Sangrey wed already."

Angeline caught her breath with an effort. "She died in childbed."

Shadowclaw's lips flattened into a thin line. "Convenient," he murmured succinctly.

Startled, Angeline glanced up at him in surprise. "Convenient?" she echoed.

He sent her an assessing glance. "She had miscarried three before and looked unlikely to provide him with an heir."

Considering all the awful tales that she had heard about Sangrey, she supposed she should not have been surprised by the suggestion that he had simply disposed of his wife. It was still a shock, however, to realize that her father had to have known when he had offered her up as sacrificial lamb to the slaughter, and the blood drained so quickly from her face that Angeline felt dizzy.

She had known she could not flee to her father for help even if she managed to escape, but she had told herself that was only because he could not protect her. She had not accepted, even in her own mind, that he would not try, that he cared nothing at all for her beyond the power he hoped to gain in bestowing her upon his overlord.

Nothing that he had told her should have engendered the sense of hopelessness and defeat that swept through her, for little of it was really news to her, and yet it did.

Focusing on her food with an effort, she tried to think of something to say to turn her own mind from her troubles. "You have been in this place long?"

Again he shrugged. She thought that he would leave it at that, but finally he spoke again. "I was sent to build it. I have been here since."

Nothing and nothing, Angeline realized, wondering if he was merely being cautious because he saw her as the enemy, or if he was just so accustomed to holding people at arm's length he could do nothing else.

She stared down at her plate. "Who were you before? By what name were you called?"

"There was no before. I am what I have always been," he said coldly.

Angeline frowned uneasily. "I have heard ... legends about the Summoners," she said hesitantly. "That each has a secret name, known only to a few."

He studied her with a look of grim amusement. "Only to one--the sorcerer who created him, his master. And if there was truth to these tales, why would you think that I would yield such power to you?"

She had not thought that he would. She had only been curious to know if it was

true, because if it was, then Shadowclaw was not merely loyal to his overlord because he had given his fealty and his honor demanded it. He was bound by the magic of the sorcerer who had created him and who held the power to destroy him.

The care he had given her, the seeming thoughtfulness for her comfort and well being, was not a tiny chink of softness she had discovered in his armor. It was nothing more than a part of his duty as he saw it.

He might use her as Darkraider had, he might torment her as he had before by forcing her body to feel both pleasure and pain at his touch, but her maidenhead would be intact when she was handed over to Ysuroth, his to take, and she would be no more bruised or battered than could be helped, given her absolute determination to escape.

He would not have her flogged. He would not toss her into a filthy dungeon cell. He would not break her bones or scar her flesh.

There was little comfort in those thoughts. He had not broken the skin and he had still caused her a good deal more than discomfort.

Her body gave the lie to that as her gaze settled on his mouth again.

He had not been the first to cause her pain, nor even the worst.

He had been the first to give her pleasure and she thought that was almost worse, because, despite what he had said, she remembered the pleasure far more vividly than she could recall the pain.

And it troubled her because she did not dread another such encounter nearly as much as she knew she should.

She was drawn to him, and she could not understand it beyond wondering if it was a death wish of some sort, the attraction of a moth to the flame. If he had been a mortal, not a Summoner, she thought she might have understood better. He was handsome. He was strong. He was beautifully built. He was fastidious in his habits, and, in a general way, he behaved far more gentlemanly of manner than otherwise.

Certainly, he displayed none of the disgusting habits of the 'gentlemen' she had known before. He did not scratch himself. He did not wolf his food and speak while he ate, spewing food and spit on whomever he chose to talk to. He did not discuss or display his bodily functions as if they were a source of entertainment.

She could not even say that he was cruel, for she had seen nothing to suggest it.

What he had done to her had not been pleasant, but it also had not been unexpected. Another man would have beaten her senseless for endangering his hide by trying to flee.

Darkraider had.

Shadowclaw had not, she reminded herself, because he had far more self-control than most men, not because somewhere inside of him there was some lingering humanity, some spark of gentleness that had not been thoroughly tortured and expunged from him long ago.

He was not cruel simply because he felt nothing. He did not torture for the amusement of it. He did not punish out of anger. Everything that he did was done purely because it must be done to keep order.

"Your thoughts are not pleasant, I see," Shadowclaw murmured, breaking the prolonged silence that had fallen between them.

Angeline glanced up at him, studying his face keenly. "I was wondering what sort of man you would be if you had not become a Summoner."

He looked taken aback and Angeline had the feeling that it was not something he had felt many times.

When she had finished eating, Shadowclaw rose, helped her from the bench and escorted her upstairs to his room. Up until he released his hold on her arm, she had thought that he meant to join her. She was not entirely certain of how she felt about that possibility, for tension had seized her as he led her up, but she was certain that she was disappointed when she realized he meant to leave her there.

She turned to face him as he stepped away, giving in to the impulse to ask him one last question. "Do you never feel pleasure?"

He halted abruptly, tilting his head to study her assessingly. Finally, he leaned toward her, bracing his palms on the wall on either side of her head. "Only when I impale a woman upon my sword and watch her squirm and scream with sweet agony," he murmured in a rumbling growl.

Angeline's eyes widened. Her heart stilled as the horrifying image he had conjured filled her mind. Abruptly, however, she thought she detected a glint of amusement in his eyes. That image vanished, replaced by one entirely different, of her lying upon the bed squirming beneath Shadowclaw's body as he explored her femininity with his hand, pressed his fingers inside of her, stroking her. Warmth surged into her cheeks, but not entirely from embarrassment. Her gaze, almost as if it had a will of its own, dropped speculatively to the bulge in his breeches and she realized abruptly that the ache he had stirred in her then was a yearning to feel his flesh inside of her.

She might know little about men and less about her own sensuality, but there was little room for doubt in that, for the moment she looked down, she recalled what his man root had looked like, felt like, and her throat closed and the muscles in her lower belly clenched, as if parched with thirst--wanting, needing his flesh to assuage her ache.

When she met Shadowclaw's gaze again, she saw that his color, too, was heightened, his eyes turbulent.

"Do not test it, little maiden. You will lose."

Chapter Eight

Angeline spent perhaps half of her night staring at the ceiling, or tossing and turning. The remainder, she dreamed. It was small wonder that she felt little rested in mind, body, or spirit when she woke.

The only bright spot of her morning was that her face did not hurt as badly as it had the day before. The ice had helped considerably. She suspected that it was still at least a little swollen, and probably bruised, but it felt better. She could not say the same for the rest of her body. Stiff and sore, she struggled out of the bed with an effort when Sara arrived to help her dress.

Sara sent her that hard stare Angeline had discovered was not a glare but an effort to focus her failing eyesight as she shuffled into the room with the gown she'd laundered.

"Men," she muttered disgustedly. "Ne'er a thought fer tha 'silly women's folderals', as they calls 'em. Dragged ye here with hardly a stitch ta cover yer nakedness. An' no thought atall ta me havin' ta give up my second best gown, neither."

"I am so sorry to be so much trouble to you," Angeline apologized. She was only a servant, of course, and noble women were not supposed to notice their existence, but she had never found it easy to ignore suffering. It was bad enough the poor old thing had to climb the stairs to attend her without having so much extra laundering to do, as well, besides having to give up one of her own gowns. She probably had no more than the two.

Sara sent her a startled glance. She was diverted, however, from whatever it was she'd been about to say. "What's happened ta yer lovely face, gel?"

Angeline blushed, lifting a hand to it self-consciously. "Is it awful?"

Apparently, Sara had recalled by that time the incident in the stables. She looked away uncomfortably. "Nay. Tis nae so bad. I expect ye'll look as good as new by the time they comes ta get you."

Angeline's stomach knotted at that. "They will come soon, you think?" she asked uneasily.

Sara shrugged. "I've nae a clue, gel. I'm thinkin' they will. Hope so. The old knees is gonna give out on them stairs if they do nae."

Angeline's hope that she would get the information she so badly needed from Sara dwindled. "How long does it usually take to go to Shroudskull and back?" she persisted.

Sara sent her a look of surprise. "There's nae a thing usual about this, gel!" She made a sound that might have been one of amusement. "Nae a soul comes here less they gets lost."

Resisting the urge to grab the old woman and shake her, Angeline thrust her head and arms into the gown Sara held up, waiting with what patience she could muster while the old woman tugged at the tie, adjusting the neck, and finally tied it.

"There ye are, my lady," the woman said at long last.

"Thank you, Sara," Angeline responded, taking the comb the woman had brought

the day before and doing her best to set her own thick, black hair to rights. There was little she could do with it without pins or even a mirror to see what she was doing. She almost regretted having removed the tiny braids that her maid had put in her hair when she had begun what was to have been an uneventful bridal journey. The braids had kept her hair in order far better than anyone had anticipated, and far longer, and under extreme circumstances to say the least.

She had had to remove the braids, however, to remove the debris embedded in her locks from her trials and she could not re-braid her hair herself.

Gathering it at her neck when she had combed the tangles from it, she looked around for something to use to tie it and finally tore a strip from the square of linen she had used as bathing cloth and compress.

Sara tsked disapprovingly, but Angeline ignored the weak protest. As the woman had pointed out herself, she had none of her own things with her and there were not even women around to loan her anything for her use.

She was almost sorry that she had tied her hair back when she reached the great hall. One man glanced in her direction and froze for a handful of seconds, making it abundantly clear that Sara's eyes were either far worse than she had realized, or she was adept at lying.

It did not matter, Angeline told herself, but she was glad when she had taken her seat that the damaged side of her face was away from Shadowclaw.

Not that that mattered either.

On the other hand, the look in his eyes when he had examined her face had made her both uncomfortable and uneasy.

He was angry. She was not certain whether it was with her, or the man who had bruised her face, but she strongly suspected both. He had blamed her for the attack as much as, or more than, the man. For once, she was obliged to admit it was true, too. Women, she knew from hard experience, were often blamed for many things that were not their fault, particularly the lust of men, and yet she could not deny that she had placed herself in harm's way.

Moreover, she was not particularly sorry that she had. She had needed to discover what she could about Bloodsbane. There had been no other way, for there were so few castle folk that she had any sort of contact with she could not have wheedled the information she needed from them.

In any case, she had not had time for anything more subtle.

The thought of the passing time twisted in her stomach, making it hard to eat the food, which was rather dry by now. Not surprising since, if she was not mistaken, it was the remains of the two meals she had eaten the day before.

"We are running low on supplies," Shadowclaw muttered, his voice a low, rumbling growl.

She glanced at him for the first time, for she had not actually met his gaze when she had seated herself.

He did not look as if he had passed the night any better than she had and she wondered where he had slept.

He was still alert enough to notice her lack of appetite, however, and she realized that very little escaped his notice.

"I will be sending a hunting party out tomorrow or the day after."

It was a provocative statement. Angeline considered asking him if he thought she would still be there to enjoy the fruits of their labor, but one look at his eyes was enough to assure her that he had a very good idea of what was running through her mind. Which meant that he would know exactly why she asked and would no doubt tell her nothing. At the very least, she would not be able to trust what he told her.

It occurred to her after a moment that he had not ‘accidentally’ allowed the comment to slip at all. He was either trying to bait her, or he was trying to make her think that she would be there when in fact he did not expect her to be.

That thought did nothing for her attempts to break her fast.

When she refused to rise to the lure, he returned his attention to his own food. “Did you sleep well?”

She glanced at him in surprise again. If it had been anyone other than Shadowclaw, she would have thought he was trying to make polite conversation. His talents did not seem to include a broad repertoire of polite conversational gambits, however.

After a moment, she decided to behave as if it was. “Yes, thank you.”

“Then I must suppose he punched you in both eyes,” Shadowclaw growled irritably.

Angeline reddened. “It is so very kind of you to point out that I am looking far from my best,” she said sweetly. “The next time that I am kidnapped and dragged across two realms, raped, starved, and beaten, I will be certain to remind my captors that I must have my rest ... and, of course, those inconsequential things ladies are notorious for packing. Like clothes.”

Her sarcasm did not go over his head. She saw when she glanced at him that his eyes had narrowed and his lips had tightened into a thin, hard line. “You are testy for someone who rested well,” he muttered after a long moment.

“If that is an explanation for ill temper, then I must suppose that you did not rest at all,” she said tartly.

“Very little, thank you,” he retorted, exquisitely polite. “I was ... otherwise occupied.”

It annoyed Angeline that the first thought that leapt to her mind was that he had been occupied with a woman. It irritated her more that the thought distressed her. The urge to ask if he had brought women in to ease the tension within the castle was nigh irresistible.

She bit her tongue, glancing a little furtively about the room to see if any were present. She did not see any women, but she was not at all certain they would have been in the hall so early if they had been occupied much of the night. She certainly could not tell from looking at the men present whether they bore any signs that they had spent their night occupied with something other than sleep. Most looked as weary and grumpy as Shadowclaw, but it was early in the day, barely daylight, and not the time of day many people particularly relished.

“Then, perhaps,” she said carefully, “you should consider not doing tonight whatever it was that you did last night?”

She thought she detected a glint of amusement in his eyes when she glanced at him again. Dropping an elbow to the table, he scrubbed a hand over his mouth and finally cupped his hand over his mouth and chin in feigned thoughtfulness.

The gesture enthralled her, not only because it drew her gaze to his lips and she could not look at his mouth without feeling a strange flutter stirring within her belly, but also because she thought she detected just the hint of a smile. He cleared his throat, dropping his hand after a moment. "Perhaps I will."

Consider it, she wondered? Or not do what he had done the night before?

Not that it was of any consequence to her at all. In fact, if it would appease the randy brutes about the place so that they would cease to watch her as if she was the last piece of meat and they starving, she thought it was a very good idea.

As irritated as she was by the entire conversation, she was sorry when the meal ended and she was escorted upstairs once more. She would have nothing to do with herself the live long day but dwell on her anxieties, nothing to do but look forward to the next meal when she would be allowed out of the room briefly before being caged again.

Every day until the day Darkraider returned to drag her to Hades.

She discovered when she was left alone again that it was not as great a problem as she had anticipated. She had not rested well the night before, nor, in truth for many nights--not since she had left home when this nightmare she was living had begun. After pacing the room for a few minutes, thinking of little besides the conversation that she had had with Shadowclaw, she had finally decided to simply lie down and rest her eyes and see if any great plans for escape emerged.

She did not rouse again until Sara shook her, and even then it was only enough to push the woman's hand away and mutter in a slurred voice that she was far more interested in sleeping than eating. She was vaguely surprised when the woman did not persist, but only for a few seconds. Even as the woman moved away she felt herself drifting toward oblivion again.

The second hand that caught her shoulder and shook her was far larger, and not gnarled with age. She pushed at it ineffectually.

"Angeline?"

"Mmm?" she murmured, struggling to open her eyes. They felt as if they had been glued shut, however, and she gave up the effort after a moment.

"Are you ill?"

She pondered that for a moment. "Tired," she responded finally.

The bed dipped as a heavy weight settled beside her. A few moments later a hand brushed her forehead, lightly skimmed her cheek and then settled there. "There is no fever."

She smiled faintly, or thought she did, at the 'almost' caress. She smiled inside of a certainty, placing her hand over the one that covered fully half of her face. It was Shadowclaw's hand, surprisingly gentle for such a powerful appendage. "Like your hands," she murmured sleepily.

There was a prolonged silence in which she began to drift lazily toward deep sleep again. "Do you?"

The question was tinged with amusement, she thought, she just was not certain what he was asking at first for she had lost the thread of the conversation. "Yes," she finally said, remembering she had told him she liked his hands. "Lips better," she added after a moment, having considered it carefully.

"You like my lips?"

"Mmmm."

He was silent for so long that she thought he would not question her further. “Who am I?”

There was not so much as a thread of amusement in his voice that time and she wondered if she had been mistaken before. “Doan know.”

The hand was slowly withdrawn. “You are certain you do not?”

She had roused far more fully than she wanted to by that time. She nodded, rolling onto her side. “Called Shadow,” she said on a heavy sigh. “Ss not who you are.”

She had already begun to float down into the pit of darkness again when the bed shifted as he rose, jerking her up toward awareness again. He did not move away at once. She sensed that he was standing over her, studying her, but she could not seem to lift her eyelids high enough to see and be certain. “She is not ill,” he said finally. “Exhausted, more like. Let her sleep.”

Grateful when he moved away, Angeline sought the cocoon of nothingness again.

The room was dim when she woke, rousing slowly, reluctantly to full awareness, stretching lazily to relieve her cramped muscles. She was disoriented when she finally opened her eyes and discovered how dim the room was.

Frowning, she lay still, trying to recall her last memories. She could not remember anything, she finally realized, after she had broken her fast and returned to the room. That had been morning, however, she thought in consternation.

Morning of what day, she wondered, abruptly wide awake?

Pushing herself slowly upright, she looked around the room, searching for some clue of the time of day beyond the gloom. A tray had been left on the table near the hearth. After staring at it for some moments, she tossed the fur aside, slipped from the bed and padded over to examine the food on it.

Meat, cheese, and bread, she discovered. The dietary staple of Bloodsbane, it told her nothing beyond the fact that she had slept through at least one meal. The presence of the tray did not necessarily mean that it had only been one.

She was not hungry, but that did not tell her anything either.

Realizing the pressure low in her belly was a full bladder, she used the chamber pot and then moved to the bucket of water on the hearth and washed her face and hands.

Morning or night, she wondered?

Had she lost an entire day? More?

Anxiety swamped her at the thought and she moved to the window. It had been set high in the wall and she could scarcely reach the lower ledge. After fumbling with the hide stretched over it for several moments, however, she pulled it back and peered out at the sky. There was no moon visible. No sun either. Dark clouds boiled above, churning as if a storm was brewing.

Pushing up on her tip toes, she peered down. She was not certain if she could have seen the ground if she had been able to reach the window better, though, because darkness hugged the landscape below her.

Giving up the quest for a clue outside after a moment, Angeline secured the hide again and returned to the bed to think.

The castle was quiet, but then she could hear very little of the activity below at any time. After some prodding, her mind produced the vague memory of Shadowclaw having come in at some point. She did not remember it very clearly, though, and she was not completely certain that she actually did remember it. It could have been a dream.

He had stroked her face.

It must have been a dream, she decided.

It grew darker in the room as she sat pondering her situation and she realized finally that she must have woken at dusk.

The question was, dusk of what day? Had she slept through only one day? Two? More?

She shrugged that off. She was frightening herself, and most likely for nothing. She had been exhausted, and she had slept. Darkraider had not returned for her or she would not have been allowed to sleep.

He had left to fetch another escort at least three days before, though, for it had been early when they had been attacked. They had not made camp. Darkraider had known that there were men after them and he had only allowed them to stop a few hours to rest after they had crossed the border into Morelock.

It had only taken two days hard ride to cross half of Avator. She did not think that Darkraider would dawdle along the road. He would have had time, she felt certain, no matter how far Shroudskull was from this place, to have reached it. Or to be nearing Lord Ysuroth's castle if he had not yet reached it.

He would return for her within a fortnight, she was sure. Within a se'night, she would be in Ysuroth's hands.

If she went now, though, if she could sneak out of the castle while everyone was asleep, then she would have until daybreak to put as much distance between herself and Bloodsbane as possible. With any luck at all, assuming she could elude any hunting parties that Shadowclaw sent out, she could be almost to Viridan before Darkraider returned for her.

The room was as black as the inside of a cave by the time she had settled her plans in her mind. Her nerves were stretched tighter than a keg binding by that time, however, and she had no sense of time at all. Her stomach stirred, reminding her of the food she had found on the tray. She felt certain she could not eat, however, without becoming ill, and she ignored it until it occurred to her that fate had smiled upon her for the first time since her nightmare had begun.

She had food to sustain her for her journey.

It was a good sign.

What to carry it in, though?

Uncertain that she could find a light, and unwilling in any case to risk searching for a candle and the wherewithal to light it, she searched her mind instead. Sara had taken her own gown to launder it. She might or might not have returned it. If she had, though, where might she have put it?

The question reminded her of the small trunk. She could not remember noticing that it had a lock on it. After a moment, she eased from the bed and felt her way carefully to the foot, feeling around until she found the trunk. Settling on her knees, she lifted the lid carefully and felt around with one hand, holding the lid with the other.

She found two more pairs of the soft leather breeches Shadowclaw wore. A deeper search revealed a large, misshapen length of wool. Deciding it must be a cloak, she set it aside to take with her. At the bottom of the chest she found a large leather pouch. Curious, she tried to lift it and discovered it was so heavy she could barely budge it. It clinked when she released it, however, and she knew at once that it must be filled to

the brim with gold coin.

More than a little disconcerted--stunned actually--she sat back on her heels. It took very little mental calculation to realize that Shadowclaw had enough coin there to make him a comfortably wealthy man, assuming it was all gold and she thought since she could not lift it that it must be.

It was difficult to wrap her mind around. She realized after a few moments, though, that there was little for anyone here to spend coin on. He lived simply, more simply than most of the priests she had known of. Very likely it was all that he had earned since he had entered Ysuroth's service.

She had not even considered before what his age might be. Thirty perhaps? There was a maturity in the harsh planes and angles of his face that suggested that he was past youth, and yet he did not seem old at all. When would he have entered Ysuroth's service, she wondered?

The tattooing was the rite of manhood for the Summoners, she remembered, or the last rites if they did not survive it. At least fifteen years, she decided, perhaps a few years more or less.

Seen in that light, it did not look to be such an enormous treasure, not for half his life spent as a soldier, and a childhood of unimaginable torture.

From no where, a hard knot of emotion rose in her throat along with an image of the child that he had been. It was nothing short of amazing that he was not a monster. She could not say that her own childhood had been particularly happy--she had been cuffed often enough for one thing or another, beaten more times than she liked to remember, but she had some happy memories, as well.

She did not think Shadowclaw would, unless, perhaps, happy to him had been any moments free of suffering and pain.

Was he saving for something, she wondered? Or had he merely tossed the coin into the chest because he had no need for it?

He had no more future than past, she realized after a moment, and she was certain he knew that as well as she did. Ysuroth would keep him as long as he was of use, or until he was killed. Or until Ysuroth decided that he was of no use, or that Shadowclaw had failed him in some way.

Men of power such as Ysuroth knew they were universally hated and feared. They knew no one was truly loyal to them and so they suspected everyone of plotting against them. Failure to succeed was generally viewed as an act of deliberate defiance.

The thought brought Darkraider to mind, but she thought it was too much to hope that Ysuroth would strike him dead for his failure to deliver her. Even if he did, Ysuroth would only send someone else.

She needed the pouch, she decided.

Opening it, she carefully removed the coins one handful at the time, setting them on the breeches in the trunk, wincing each time the coins clattered together and jingled. When she had emptied the pouch, she stared sightlessly at the pile of coins for many moments and finally, feeling horribly guilty, took one and put it back into the pouch. She would need something to live on if she succeeded in escaping.

Hopefully, Shadowclaw would not notice that one was missing, or would not begrudge it to her if he did.

She had knelt so long she was stiff when she finally closed the lid to the trunk

and rose. Remaining where she was until she had worked the kinks out of her muscles, she felt around until she got her bearings and moved carefully in the direction of the table again. Despite her care, she bumped it. The mug sloshed, rocked. She managed to grab it as it tipped over, but heard the contents splash on the floor. The aroma of ale wafted past her nostrils. Muttering under her breath, she set the mug carefully on the tray again and felt around until she found the bread, cheese, and meat, dropping each into the pouch and finally closing it.

Feeling her way back to the bed, she bent to retrieve the cloak she had left on the floor and then climbed up onto the mattress again to wait.

Boredom set in as she waited with what patience she could muster. She knew that she had to have patience. She had to wait until she was certain everyone had had time to seek their pallet and time to fall into a deep slumber, else she would have no chance of escaping at all.

It occurred to her as she sat waiting that she had devised no plan at all to get past the guard at the postern gate.

She was not particularly worried about the guards she might encounter before she reached it. The guards would be watching the way into the castle, not watching to see if anyone wished to sneak out of it. Besides, the clouds would be cover enough. She had Shadowclaw's cloak and it was dark. It would conceal the tell tale white of Sara's second best gown.

It was possible that the gate would not be guarded at all at night. During the day, it was not used much. At night, even if one knew where it was it would be hard to find, and it was no great distance from the back gate. Shadowclaw had indicated that he did not have enough men to man the castle properly.

Nothing came to mind no matter how she prodded her brain to produce a possibility and she finally decided that she would simply grab the first thing she came across that seemed a likely weapon and try to knock the guard out if she could not catch him away from his post long enough to slip out.

The latter was certainly preferred. It would be nerve wracking to have to wait, but she thought it likely that he would either doze at his post, or slip away for a few moments and she would not need much time to get through.

Trying to knock the guard out would be far more risky than merely waiting for an opening. In the first place, she did not like the possibility that she might have to hit someone hard enough to make them lose consciousness. In the second, she was not at all certain that she had the strength to do so. And in the third, it seemed unlikely that she could manage it without risking a great deal of noise.

She felt a little ill with nerves at the prospect, but she knew she could not expect to escape without encountering some problems.

She was not certain how much time had passed while she waited, thinking, trying to work out every possible problem in her mind, but she finally decided that she needed to at least test to see if the castle folk were asleep or she would lose her nerve altogether.

Pushing herself from the bed, she slipped the cloak around her shoulders, tied it at her throat and picked up the pouch.

Her hands were shaking by the time she reached the door. She paused there, holding her breath and placing her ear against the panel to listen. Try though she might, she could hear nothing above the pounding of her heart against her eardrum and after a

few moments indecision, she depressed the latch on the door and eased it open slowly.

She saw when she had eased the door open that the faint glow of torch light from the great hall below illuminated the upper corridor. Unfortunately, it was blinding after the darkness she had been sitting in for hours and it did not stop her from stumbling over the man lying in front of the door.

Chapter Nine

Two hands shot out as she pitched forward, one grasping her breast bruisingly, the other catching her waist. It broke her fall, kept her from crashing full tilt into the hard floor, but she still scraped her hands and knuckles as she flung them out instinctively to catch herself and banged her elbow as he flipped her onto her back. She was more stunned than hurt, though, too surprised to gather her wits before he could roll on top of her. His weight crushed the air from her lungs in an unladylike grunt.

Dizzy, she opened her eyes and stared up at Shadowclaw's stony face.

Fear had not even had time to filter into her disordered mind when he rolled off her again, dragging her to her feet and shoving her against the wall.

He stared at her for several moments, fuming, and finally his gaze dropped to the pouch she still held clutched in one hand.

Angeline followed the direction of his gaze, stared at the pouch for a moment as if she could not figure out how it had come to be there and then looked up at Shadowclaw again guiltily.

Wordlessly, he snatched it from her hand, untied it and emptied the contents on the floor. The bread, meat, and cheese hit the floor with dull thuds. The coin clanged so loudly in the deadly silence that Angeline winced as it bounced twice and then stood on end and rolled toward the edge of the corridor, and off. She heard it ping as it hit the stone floor far below.

Grabbing her by one arm, Shadowclaw dragged her back into the room and gave her a push that sent her staggering forward several steps before she caught her balance.

She heard the door close as she caught herself.

Relief flooded her, leaving her so weak she had to lock her knees to keep from crumpling to the floor.

It did not last. Despite the deafening pounding of her heart, she heard Shadowclaw move to the mantel above the hearth, heard the strike of flint. Light blossomed as he lit a candle, illuminating the room in a deceptively benign yellow glow and leaving her in no doubt that she was in the lion's den with the lion, not with the lion safely on the other side of the thick door panel.

Setting the candle down, he flung the now empty pouch to the floor between them like an accusation and stalked to his chest. Instead of watching him as he knelt to check his treasure, Angeline scanned the room for anything that might possibly be wielded as a weapon.

He was between her and the door or she would have bolted toward it, for she had retreated as soon as she realized he was still inside the room with her, putting as much distance between them as she could.

She saw when she looked at him again that he was watching her.

Swallowing against the hard knot of fear that had gripped her throat, she merely stared back at him in horrified fascination, her mind too chaotic even to present her with possible reprisals.

Dropping the trunk lid, he straightened abruptly, stalking toward her like a cat approaching its prey.

She sidled away until she encountered the bed. By the time she had glanced back to see what was blocking her retreat and looked toward him again, he had closed the distance between them.

“Dressed for travel I see,” he growled, fingering the edges of the cloak--his cloak.

There seemed little point in denying it. He was not slow witted--most unfortunately. Equally unfortunate, her fear inspired stupidity. “I was going for a stroll,” she murmured weakly, but loudly enough nevertheless that he heard.

His eyes narrowed. “To Avator, I make no doubt,” he said tightly.

Not hardly, but she doubted that any destination she might think to name would appease him, and, truth to tell, her mind went perfectly blank the moment her sharp tongue sliced her throat with the defiant bit of sarcasm.

“Take it off,” he growled when she said nothing more.

Angeline blinked at him stupidly but finally realized he was demanding the cloak back. She lifted her hands quickly when he tensed, certain he would rip it off of her, her fingers fumbling with the tie. Finally, she managed to figure out the intricacy of the simple bow, however, and released it, allowing the cloak to slip to the floor.

“The gown, as well.”

Angeline stared at him as if he had grown horns.

“Now.”

She set her chin, but it wobbled as she fumbled with that tie and finally managed to untie it. Gathering the skirt in clumsy fingers, she pulled the gown off over her head and held it out. He grabbed it, wadded it into a ball and tossed it in the general direction of the foot of the bed without once taking his eyes off of her.

Catching the rings in the tips of her breasts, he tugged until she stumbled toward him. “Do you need another lesson? Or do you just want one?”

She wished he hadn’t asked. The first lesson had completely disordered her mind. The moment he resurrected it, her insides seemed to turn to quivering jelly. Blood surged into her nipples making them painfully hard as her flesh pulled against the rings he still held. Heat pooled in her belly. A wave of cold and then heat flashed over her.

“No,” she croaked, unable to gather even enough moisture into her mouth to swallow let alone to moisten her parched mouth and lips.

He studied her in tight lipped silence for several painful heartbeats and slowly pulled his fingers from the rings. Angeline had just drawn a breath of relief when she felt his hand settle on her mound, his fingers parting her nether lips. She jerked away instinctively, only to discover that he had hooked his finger in the ring in the tiny bud there, tethering her. Wincing at the jolt of discomfort, she froze.

“I begin to understand why he tethered you to the saddle with this exquisite little bud.”

Releasing the ring after a moment, he gave her a push that sent her sprawling across the bed. She might have been tempted to try to scramble away except for the look in his eyes as he slowly raked her body with his gaze and the tension she sensed in his body, as if he were crouched to spring and it would take no more than a slight movement on her part to encourage him to do so.

She felt his gaze like a touch, heated, drawing heat from her body as it paused for

many moments on her breasts and then moved down her belly, lingering for so long on her mound and the glinting ring that she held her breath.

After what seemed an endless time, he swallowed audibly, lifting his gaze to meet hers. "The fates were not kind to you, little maiden. They have given you a body so cunningly formed that it tempts men to madness only to have a taste of it. Rest while you can, for Ysuroth will ride you once he has you in his clutches until you are nigh dead from being mounted," he murmured, his voice gravelly.

Bending, he scooped the cloak from the floor and moved away, collecting the gown he'd tossed aside, tossing both the gown and the cloak into the trunk and then lifted the trunk and moved to the door. Angeline watched him, hardly daring to breathe still, unable to move. He paused when he had opened the door, turning to stare at her for a long moment and then went out, closing the door behind him.

Releasing a pent up breath at last, Angeline pushed herself upright.

She began to shake after a moment. Clamping her teeth together to keep them from chattering, she scrambled beneath the fur, curling into a tight ball until the shaking began to ease off.

She was not certain what had shaken her more, Shadowclaw's anger, the hunger in his eyes as he had roamed her body with his gaze, or the reminder of the fate that awaited her.

She ached, though. With no more than his gaze and his voice, he had summoned a throbbing ache to her breasts and loins that even the threat of pain had not been able to subdue.

She wondered why he had not touched her.

Because the anger she had aroused in him had weakened his control? Had he thought that he could not 'lesson' her without losing control completely?

It seemed an absurd bit of conceit, and yet there had been such tension in him that she knew he was exerting a strenuous effort at control. And she had been in no doubt at all over the hunger she saw in his eyes. His words had confirmed it if nothing else.

She was fairly certain that she could not rest, regardless of his urging.

The reason behind the order had been sufficient in itself to make her lie awake for hours, quaking like a leaf, her mind scurrying in frantic circles for a way to cheat her fate.

Despite that, or perhaps it was mentally and emotionally exhausting, and despite the many hours she had slept already, oblivion claimed her again after a time.

A feeble light had begun to filter into the room when she was roused again by the sound of the door opening. Expecting Sara, Angeline pushed herself up right, shoving her hair out of her eyes. She froze mid motion when she saw that Shadowclaw had come to a halt at the foot of the bed.

He tossed her the gown he had taken from her the night before. She made no attempt to catch it, merely watching its flight as it sailed toward her and landed in her lap.

"Get dressed."

Still somewhat muddled with sleep, Angeline pushed the furs off and grasped the gown fumbling with it until she managed to find the hem opening and pulled it over her head. Shadowclaw, she saw when she had finally settled it around her, had stood watching the entire proceedings.

There were shadows beneath his eyes, as if he had slept little.

No doubt he had spent the night on guard, she thought with a mixture of anxiety

and irritation, pushing herself off the bed at last and straightening to allow the gown to drop.

“When you have finished here, come down to the hall to eat,” he said, turning to go when she had covered herself.

Wondering why he had come instead of Sara, she used the chamber pot when he had closed the door behind him and moved to the bucket to wash her face and teeth and rinse the stale taste of sleep from her mouth.

She had finished combing her hair and securing it with the scrap of cloth by the time Sara arrived. “Rested now, deary?” Sara asked, peering at her for a moment before she discovered Shadowclaw’s chest was missing. Looking puzzled, she shuffled to his chair after a moment and dropped Angeline’s laundered gown on the seat. “I see ye woke an’ eat,” she said cheerily when she discovered the tray on the table was bare. “Right good appetite, too, fer there’s nae a crumb left.”

Sighing, Angeline did not bother to enlighten the woman. Instead, she moved to the door and made her way down to the great hall.

She did not begin to feel either self-conscious or uneasy until she reached the foot of the stairs and looked up to discover Shadowclaw’s brooding gaze upon her. Both sensations crashed down upon her then with a vengeance, however, and it took an effort to cross the room with any appearance of grace with visions of the night before churning in her belly and turning her brain to mush.

She had no idea whether it was pure imagination or not, but she sensed from the stormy look in his eyes as she reached him and his tension that Shadowclaw was remembering it as vividly as she was.

She was more convinced when his gaze skimmed down her body.

She was trembling by the time she sat down and grateful she did not have to rely on her weak knees to hold her up. The moment the servant set her mug of ale on the table, she reached for it, knowing the brew would help to settle her nerves. She sent Shadowclaw a startled look when he intercepted her, catching her hand.

He was frowning, she saw. “You have scraped your hand,” he said gruffly, examining her knuckles and then reaching for her other hand and turning it over to examine the palm before he released it. She stared down at her hands where they lay lightly in his palms, wondering why it took no more than that light, impersonal touch to set her heart to quivering as if it had suddenly lost its rhythm, why she found the contrast between their hands breathtakingly exciting.

Lightly, so gently she might almost have imagined it, he stroked his thumb over her bruised knuckles and withdrew his hands from hers. Shaken to her core, uncertain of exactly what had been going through his mind, Angeline reached for the mug again, almost spilling it before she could bring it to her lips and nearly choking on the gulp she took. Fire coursed down her throat as she swallowed, lighting a fire in her belly that rivaled the heat curled in her woman’s place.

She set the mug down firmly, flicking a furtive glance around the room as it occurred to her to wonder if anyone had noticed Shadowclaw take her hands in his and, more importantly, if they had noticed her reaction.

No one appeared to be watching, but she could not shake the conviction that everyone was aware of the strain between the two of them--or at least her nervousness. She could not be altogether certain that the tension was not wholly on her side, she

chastised herself, for her thoughts were chaotic.

Imagination, she mentally chided herself. Shadowclaw had no reason to feel any apprehension, to be sure. And there was no reason for any of the men to believe that there was anything between the two of them, because there was nothing between them beyond the role of jailor and prisoner.

Unbidden, the memory of the incident the night before replayed in her mind, demolishing that comforting thought.

He had all but told her he wanted her and she found that both tantalizing and terrifying.

She was not terrified of him so much as she was frightened of herself, however. She knew that he was a Summoner. She knew that pleasure to him was pain, and pain pleasure. She could not begin to wrap her mind around that indisputable truth, which led her to the understanding that if she could not, then it seemed inarguable that he could not grasp that pain was pain to her and had nothing to do with pleasure.

Except that she had enjoyed what he had done to her, not in the sense that she had actually enjoyed the hurt, but more in the fact that it had seemed to intensify the pleasure that came after.

She was not even certain that she had altogether loathed the pain. In some dark and twisted part of her mind, she had almost wanted it. Perhaps it was like the aching tooth one could not resist pushing at with one's tongue, or like the sore, aching muscles that begged to be massaged, even though touching them inevitably gave more pain before the pain began to go away.

She felt a little better at those thoughts, less of a stranger to the self that she had thought she knew.

She emerged from her reverie when Shadowclaw reached for her trencher and carefully carved her food into smaller bites. She blushed at his thoughtfulness, realizing he had noticed the difficulty she had managing the larger pieces, for she had not been given a knife, needless to say, and could only tear the food with her fingers.

Uncertain of whether he had done it because her manners disgusted him or merely for the sake of courtesy, she smiled at him a little hesitantly when he pushed the plate back, feeling pleasure color her cheeks despite her doubts. "Thank you."

Something flickered in his eyes, but he merely nodded and returned his attention to his own food. Feeling somehow obligated to eat since he had taken such pains to make it easier for her to do so, she ate, nervously at first, but more thoughtfully when she began to relax.

Dismissing the dangerous fascination she had with Shadowclaw, it occurred to her after a time that she was fortunate she had come off so lightly the night before. He had no tolerance for rebellion. Of course, she thought it very likely that he had refrained because he had been sorely tempted to beat her senseless and feared that touching her at all would break his self-control.

That was beside the point, though. What intrigued her was that he seemed to have been saying that he was attracted to her. She had not considered before that there was any possibility of winning him over to her cause, but it occurred to her forcefully then to wonder if there might be.

If she seduced him.

Unfortunately, a very little more consideration convinced her that it was doubtful

that she could, for she had no idea of how to go about doing so. In the first place, she had no experience with men, not in that way. She had never had the opportunity or the need to seduce one before. She certainly had not had the opportunity or inducement to try to seduce a Summoner.

If he had been an ordinary man, she supposed she would not really have had to do anything beyond allowing him to think she was not against the notion of intimacy between them. A few shyly seductive looks and smiles would probably have been enough to convince most any man to try his luck with her, and, if he had been somewhat thickskulled, then perhaps a touch, a few words.

Shadowclaw was not thickskulled, in fact he was entirely too quick witted and observant for her peace of mind. He would be instantly suspicious of 'come hither' looks and provocative smiles, and more suspicious of anything less subtle like accidental touches.

Even if he was not, she could not be certain that a caress, 'accidental' or otherwise would stir him.

She could not see that she had anything to lose in trying, however.

The problem with that plan, she realized almost immediately, was that he was always very careful to keep a circumspect distance from her. She did not know whether it was calculated or not--a reluctance to allow anyone in his proximity simply because he did not like being touched, or if it was to prevent the castle folk from becoming suspicious that he might have any interest in her. But, whatever the reason, it presented a serious impediment to pulling off a convincing 'accident'.

Balked of that possibility, for the moment, anyway, she cast about in her mind for something else she might try and it dawned upon her that men, people in general, liked talking about themselves. That was also not true of Shadowclaw that she had seen, but she thought he might have been more reticent with her because of the situation. Perhaps he was not always so withdrawn? And, even if he was, it did not necessarily follow that he could not be coaxed to talk, or that he would not be pleased by her interest in him.

"Where did you live before you came here?" she asked after wracking her brain for something to launch a conversation.

He looked surprised, and then suspicious.

She smiled, sending him a frank look of interest.

He frowned. "Shroudskull."

Her smile faltered. "Oh? Is that" She stopped abruptly when she saw the speculative gleam in his eyes that told her he had instantly seen that she had yielded to the temptation to ask the distance from Shroudskull to Bloodsbane. "A very large castle?" she finished after a brief hesitation.

"You will see for yourself ... in time."

The remark knocked the wind out of her. Paling, she returned her attention to her food. She did not think, even for the sake of drawing him out, that she could feign an interest in Shroudskull when the very name was enough to make her bowels weak with terror. The food she had just taken into her mouth became as dust--dry, tasteless, unswallowable. With a shaking hand, she reached for her mug and took a draught to wash it down. "And ... before that?" she persevered after a moment. "Where did you live?"

"There was no before," he said, his voice harsh. "I was spawned in the bowels of

Shroudskull and did not see the light of day until I had withstood the rite of passage of all Summoners.”

Angeline sent him a startled glance as she reached to place her mug on the table again, feeling horror, revulsion, pity, and painful empathy settle in the pit of her stomach as she struggled with the images that welled in her mind of the darkness, pain, and suffering that was all he had ever known of life. No gentle touch of a loving nurse or mother, no laughter, no play, nothing but day upon day of agony designed to either break his spirit entirely or arouse the beast inside of him so that Ysuroth could harness it, meld it with his magic to create a beast of unimaginable power and destructiveness.

The distraction precipitated disaster, for she misjudged the distance in her abstraction. The bottom of the mug hit the edge of the table, jarring the vessel from her hand. The mug landed on the bench beside her, spilling the remainder of its contents all over the seat and the floor.

Avoiding the spill was instinctive. She jumped away, colliding with Shadowclaw.

It was neither intentional, nor the sultry, seductive touch that she had envisioned, but since Shadowclaw instinctively caught at her to steady her, it provided her with the opportunity she had been looking for.

And still there was no premeditation when she tipped her head back against his shoulder to look up at him, placing her hand over his at her waist, curling her fingers around his.

It could not have lasted more than a moment, but time seemed to hold its breath for a handful of heartbeats as their eyes met, long enough certainly for her to see something besides suspicion or anger in his eyes.

Long enough to see the savage hunger churning just beneath the surface calm.

Chapter Ten

Angeline might have congratulated herself except for two circumstances.

The first was that the incident had rattled her to her toes, and she was fairly certain that it had been far more effective on her than it had on him.

The second was that it had been purely accidental. It was not a plot that she had hatched and brought to fruition. It was not planned and carefully executed.

And it could not be repeated, not in any variation.

Shadowclaw had not suspected that it was an attempt to seduce him because it had not been intentional. If she tried anything at all similar again, he would know what she was about and he would steal himself against her.

It was an insane idea to start with, she realized, and doomed to failure.

From what she could see, it had been from the start. If she had been in any frame of mind to consider it when she had arrived, he still would have been suspicious, and it needed no more than that for him to arm himself against falling for it.

If she had weeks or months, she might batter at his self-control until she made a dent in it, might find a chink in his armor somewhere to reach through, but she did not have months, or weeks. It seemed doubtful that she even had days.

She did not have time for subtlety even if that would work, she realized. It was useless to try for it when she knew he would instantly see through it. She would have to steal herself and be blatantly direct. He would almost certainly see through that, she knew, but he wanted her. There was at least a chance that she could catch him off guard and arouse him enough to break his resistance before he had time to throw it up if she was fortunate enough to find the right opportunity and bold enough to approach him.

How much of a gamble was it when she had nothing at all to lose?

Shadowclaw left the castle around mid-morning and did not return until after the noon meal. Angeline had spent hours pacing, trying to nerve herself to offer to pleasure him if only she could get the opportunity to speak with him a few moments alone. The discovery, when Sara brought her a tray at noon and informed her that Shadowclaw had released the terrifying beast and flown away, not only unnerved her as much as it seemed to have frightened the old woman, but completely deflated her.

She was almost certain that the first time that he had summoned his familiar, he had done so with calculation, calling the beast forth in her presence to scare her silly, and probably to remind the men of what they had to contend with if they crossed him. They had been as stunned as she was, not just by the transformation, but because he had done so within the great hall when he apparently was not in the habit of doing so. She had heard several mutter that they had never known of him to do so, that he rarely called the beast at all, and when he did, it was when he had climbed the ramparts to leave the castle.

He had used his gift, she thought, to reconnoiter. He had not said so, but she knew that he had sent a messenger out when he returned.

She had to suppose that that was why he had gone, to see what progress Sangrey had made in the past few days toward gathering his army--if that was what he was

actually doing.

In was inconvenient and unnerving for all that. Every reminder of the direness of her situation undermined her resolve a little more, magnified her frustration and fear, and made it nigh impossible to think or behave rationally at all.

Moreover, she had spent hours practicing in her mind what she could say and do, and now she had no notion of when she might get the opportunity to implement the plan, if at all.

She would have to build up her courage again. She felt like weeping with frustration, however, as she paced the room that had become her cell. Days had passed since Darkraider had left. He must reach Shroudskull soon, she knew, if he had not already. She could not even count on having as many more days as she had already had, for she could not dismiss the possibility that men had been sent out to meet him when he did not return as expected.

She thought that scenario unlikely. No one could have had a very clear idea of how long it would take Darkraider to cross into Avator, capture her and return, not even Darkraider. They would only be able to guess. And Darkraider had not really been delayed. From the moment he had snatched her, they had ridden hell bent for leather, stopping only for brief, nightmarish for her, 'respites', when he had dragged her into the woods to 'relieve' herself and thrown her to the ground and rutted her while she had screamed herself hoarse against his filthy hand.

So, perhaps she had four days before they came for her, and perhaps not. And when they came, she might have four days more before they reached Shroudskull, and perhaps not. Mayhap Ysuroth would come himself because of the battle brewing, in which case there would be no opportunity for escape at all once she was taken from Bloodsbane.

She pushed such thoughts from her mind after a while, realizing that she was only building the hysteria inside of her, whipping herself into a useless bundle of nerves instead of trying to calm herself so that she could try to save herself.

She had made little headway in that direction, though, when Sara came to tell her that she was expected to take her evening meal downstairs as usual. She was not prepared, at all. The very moment she discovered that she would have to face Shadowclaw, sit through a meal with him, while the thoughts and plans she had made all day danced around her mind, she felt as if she might simply pass out with fear. It took a strenuous effort to brace herself even a little. She managed to merely nod jerkily and dismissively at Sara, after a moment, though, and cast her gaze around the room, trying to think of something, anything, that she could use to delay the inevitable at least long enough to behave with an appearance of innocence of any dark thoughts.

She had no toilet to linger over, nothing but the gown she stood in and the change that Sara had lent her to wear while the veils were laundered. There seemed little point in changing and in any case, that might arouse Shadowclaw's suspicions.

Spying the bucket of water on the hearth, she moved to it, kneeling and splashing the warm water on her face. Cold water would have been preferable at the moment, but at least it was something. When she had lingered as long as she dared, she rose and dried her face, removed the tie from her hair and combed it.

Sara, she discovered, was eyeing her curiously when she secured the tie again.

Ignoring the question in the woman's gaze, she strode past her and down the

corridor, struggling to tame her heart's wild pounding before she keeled over in a faint. She managed to calm herself by focusing on breathing slowly and evenly.

Shadowclaw's gaze flickered over her from across the room when she left the stairs, but the glance was distracted as if his mind was far away. The curiosity that arose at that realization helped to calm her more and she managed to take her seat without falling to the floor and blubbing like a condemned prisoner.

"How was your day?" Shadowclaw asked politely if absently when she had seated herself.

"Uneventful beyond the thoughts and fears that torture me," she said a little unsteadily.

The comment caught his attention. He frowned. He said nothing for some time, obviously wrestling with his own thoughts. "You are a woman," he said finally, his voice pitched low, "born to belong to a man. You have always known, surely, that one would claim you?"

She stared at the food on her plate. She had. She had also been 'prepared' once her future husband had been chosen, for there was no reason to keep her ignorant, and many reasons to make certain that she was well informed and prepared to please. The generalizations that she must yield, always, to her husband and allow him to ease himself upon her had certainly not prepared her for what she had faced thus far, however, and not what she expected she would have to face very soon. "I did know, that is true. But I had thought the chances good that I would be given to a man who would cherish me, who would use me gently and offer at least as many kisses and tender caresses as blows. I had not expected to be given to an evil man who was cold and cruel, and whose only pleasure was in torturing those unable to defend themselves."

His lips flattened. "You do not know him," he pointed out. "Perhaps you tease yourself for no good reason?"

He knew Ysuroth, though, and she knew that he did not expect her to be used any more gently than he had been. "I know you," she said quietly, too distressed to consider the inadvisability of provoking him. "And thus I know what he is capable of."

"You are more a child than I had thought to expect to be cherished," he said harshly. "Unless you mean in the sense of a useful possession?"

From out of no where the urge to weep assailed her. She swallowed against the knot of emotion with an effort. "Only those who have never been loved, or felt it for another would consider it foolish to yearn for and of no value," she said unsteadily.

His reaction to that was not at all what she had expected. Anger blazed in his eyes as she looked up at him. His face had hardened, grown cold and speculative. "But you have? It could not be Sangrey, certainly, unless you are a bigger fool than I had thought, for he is all that Ysuroth is, and more."

Effectively silenced, Angeline looked away, wondering what she had said that had enraged him. He had not liked anything that she had said.

Was it loyalty to Ysuroth, anger because she had maligned him?

She might have thought that he had considered her comments about Ysuroth double edged, stabbing at him as well as Ysuroth, but she was not at all certain that that had been it or that he would even care if he had seen it that way.

Perhaps he had taken exception to her reference to him, though? Pity would not sit well with a man like Shadowclaw, if that was how he had perceived the comments.

She did pity the child he had been. It hurt to think of the things they must have done to him to make him what he was.

She did not think that pity entered into her feelings for Shadowclaw, though. Empathy, yes, perhaps even the insane desire to soothe his wounded spirit, to offer him what he had never known, gentleness and caring.

It was as well she would not have the opportunity granted for such mad thoughts, however, for he would spurn such overtures at the very least. At the worst--she had no idea of what he was fully capable of, but she knew that she had no desire to test his limits and discover it for herself.

They finished their meal in strained silence, allowing Angeline plenty of time to regret being drawn into a conversation that could not help her cause. She was on the point of rising to leave when Shadowclaw summoned one of the men sitting at the table across from them.

It was the same man, she saw, who had escorted her to Bloodsbane after the battle.

"Organize two hunting parties for first light on the morrow. We have need of fresh meat, and plenty of it. And send a messenger to me."

Gamon nodded. "Will you be leading one of the parties?"

"Yes."

Angeline was dying to know what message he meant to send, but she did not have to look at Shadowclaw to know that he was well aware of her interest. To her surprise, however, he did not rise the moment Gamon left and send her away. Instead, he sat frowning at the liquid in his mug, as if his mind was far away.

"My lord?"

"I need you to carry a message to Shroudskull with all possible haste. Say to Ysuroth that Sangrey has mustered an army and they are on the move. They are coming here, intent upon using the pass to take Ysuroth by surprise."

The young man paled, nodding jerkily, and carefully repeated the message word for word.

Shadowclaw sent Angeline a narrow glance. "If they have not heard anything of Darkraider, say also that the woman Darkraider took is here and that she is well."

The young man looked startled. "You think that something may have happened to him?" he asked quickly.

Shadowclaw bent a look upon the young man that made him turn a pasty gray. Stammering, he repeated the second message and departed with the air of one who had the devil on his coattails.

Stunned, it took an effort for Angeline even to collect enough of her wits and strength to rise when Shadowclaw had risen and pulled the bench out for her. She met his gaze evenly, however, once she had gotten off the bench and straightened. "I was wrong about you," she whispered a little hoarsely. "You are cruel."

His hand closed bruisingly on her upper arm as she turned away. He made no attempt to pull her back, however. Instead, he walked with her to the stairs, detaining her long enough to summon a servant to prepare a bath before escorting her up.

Angeline felt too betrayed to think beyond the blow of hearing the message Shadowclaw had sent. It seemed that he either suspected that Darkraider had not made it to Shroudskull, or he simply was not willing to chance that Ysuroth might not have been

informed.

Either way, it had snatched what little hope she had held onto from beneath her feet, and the fall had been a hard one, knocking the breath from her and leaving chaos in its wake. When he had led her into the room and released her, she merely stood where she had stopped, staring blindly around the room and wishing, for once, that she was completely alone.

Time had dragged upon her hands for days, made worse by her worries, and she had had nothing to distract her mind even for a few moments. Now, when she desperately wanted to be left alone, Shadowclaw seemed determined to stay.

She felt like screaming at him to leave. Instead, she simply watched until he had built up the fire on the hearth and moved away from it, and then crossed to settle on the stool and stare into the flames, listening absently as the servants came in to prepare the bath.

She was tempted to ignore it when they had finished and left again, but she knew Shadowclaw would not allow that and she far preferred, at the moment, the luxury of pretending it was what she wanted to do. Rising, she undressed and climbed into the bath and bathed mechanically.

The water was hot, soothing. It eased some of the tension.

Some, not all. The little cocoon of distance she had wrapped around herself evaporated like the steam off the water, but that only allowed her to notice Shadowclaw for the first time since they had come up. And what she noticed about him did nothing to allay her uneasiness.

She met his stormy gaze briefly when she emerged from the tub and took the linen from him to dry off, but averted her dark eyes almost at once and moved toward the hearth again to dry her skin and hair while he made use of the tub.

The hiss of water on the hearth stones brought her head up as he stood up and sloughed the excess water from his body.

She had not dressed. She had allowed her mind to wander aimlessly while she scrubbed at her hair to remove the excess water and then dropped the linen to her lap and sat finger combing the tangles from her hair idly beside the fire. Rising, she held out the linen to Shadowclaw and tried to move past him. He took the linen, but caught her hand.

She looked down at the hand holding her and then up at the face of the Summoner, the creature she had convinced herself was more human than the tales she had heard of the Summoners suggested.

Maybe he was, at that, she decided.

Despite what she had told him about her girlish hopes that she might find a man who cared for her, she could not think of a single man that she knew who treated women as anything but a possession, a thing for them to play with, an object for them to take out their anger and frustrations on, but mostly as an object to slake their lust on. She had known a few who seemed to take pride in their possession and were careful of damaging it, but she supposed that was not really love. That was not caring.

"Show me," Shadowclaw said after a long moment.

She blinked at him. "What?" she asked curiously.

His face hardened. Uncertainty, uneasiness, anger, confusion, and desire all seemed to crowd into his eyes at once, making them stormy, tumultuous. Dark color crept slowly into his cheeks. He swallowed thickly. "Tenderness," he said, his voice

sounding raw, defensive, and demanding all at the same time.

Chapter Eleven

Angeline felt her face go slack with surprise. For many moments she could not even begin to imagine what he was talking about, but the uneasiness settled inside of her that he had noticed her dark fascination with him and meant to take advantage of it.

Almost on the thought, she recalled her determination earlier in the day to try to seduce him, to see if she could convince him to help her. Her cheeks brightened with guilty color and then paled as she realized that he had handed her the opportunity she had wracked her brain to invent.

Tenderness had not entered her mind, however, and it was more difficult to consider when she was hurt and angry about the message he had given the man to carry to Ysuroth.

He had done it with deliberation so that she was well aware of where he stood. She supposed she should have some appreciation for that harsh honesty if nothing else, and he had certainly not given her any reason to suppose that he empathized with her situation at all.

And it had still stunned her, evoked a nearly overwhelming sense of betrayal, mayhap because she felt more for him than she should and had had the unrealistic expectation that he would feel ... something in return.

Tenderness, then, would be a double edged sword and very likely cut her far worse than him. She cared already. He did not. That being the case, it seemed unlikely her tenderness would move him, and that it would only make things worse for her to allow an expression of emotions she should not be feeling at all.

In any case, she had thought she would only entice him to use her body in the hope that he would enjoy the use of it enough that she could persuade him to keep her for himself--at least until she was away from Bloodsbane.

Her hurt and anger won out over the side of reason. She could see that it had cost him to ask, that he had fought whatever had compelled him to want to know hard before he had yielded, but she told herself she did not care. She wanted to wound him, his pride if nothing else "I can not show you something I do not feel for you," she lied.

His dark brows drew together over the bridge of his nose, his eyes darkening with baffled anger. "You must feel it? You can not show it without?"

Emotion abruptly clogged her throat when she saw she had succeeded. She looked away, realizing that it was far worse than she thought if she could not wound him without feeling the hurt herself. "I can not. Tenderness is an expression of what someone feels in their heart for another. Gentleness, I could show you. It requires only a light touch, rather than brutish strength, but I can not imagine that you would find much use for it even if you could master it."

He dug his fingers into her hair, gripping it tightly at the base of her skull and pulling on the tendrils until he had tipped her head back and forced her to meet his gaze. "You are right," he growled. "I have no use for it and none for tender kisses or caresses."

A wall of dizziness seemed to engulf her as she saw the intent in his eyes,

watched the descent of his lips toward hers.

She had never kissed a man, or been kissed. She had seen others do it, but she had a feeling that there was more to it than she could see.

There was. The moment his hard mouth covered hers a shock wave of scorching heat enveloped her. Weakness followed in the aftermath of the dark, swirling, inferno that engulfed mind and body and swallowed her. She sucked in a desperate breath as he breached the barrier of her lips, inhaling the scent and taste of him into her mouth, her lungs as he thrust his tongue into her mouth, raking it along hers. Like strong ale, it burned through her, racing like fire along her veins, bringing a flush of keen sensation to every nerve ending, flooding her breasts and her woman's place with blood until they felt heavy, painfully swollen.

He shifted, dragging her closer, closing his free hand over one of her breasts and kneading it, pinching the distended nub at the tip in a way that made her knees go weak and her belly tauten.

She could not think, so enthralled by the fierce, demanding need of his mouth as he moved it over hers, as he explored the keenly perceptive inner recess of her mouth thoroughly with the restless caress of his tongue that she could not focus beyond the havoc he created inside her.

She made a sound of distress in her throat at the savagery of his assault upon her senses, the ravenous hunger of his lips and tongue as he possessed every tender surface of her mouth, lifting a hand to his arm to steady herself. Either the sound, or the touch, penetrated the madness that had seized him, for he withdrew abruptly. Breathing harshly, he stared down into her glazed eyes for several heartbeats and released her.

Still dizzy, weak, disoriented, she stumbled, catching her balance with an effort as he turned his back to her and leaned down to snatch his breeches from the floor.

For many moments, she could only stare at him blankly, too caught up in the need thundering in her body to think beyond that. As her world righted itself, however, her gaze focused fully on him at last and she dragged in a sharp breath of consternation.

The light from the hearth illuminated a network of thin, white scars that crisscrossed his back, his buttocks, the backs of his legs, leaving scarcely a square inch of flesh untouched. They were old to have turned so pale that they had begun to blend with the unmarred coloration of his skin.

Very old she realized after several moments of stunned disbelief, for he was a Summoner and she had seen for herself that he had the power to heal himself.

These were from before he had become a Summoner. These were what had made him a Summoner. Unbidden, tears welled into her eyes as she stared at the evidence of endurance.

It was one thing to think about tales that she had heard and try to imagine suffering she had never experienced. It was entirely different to see the results of years of torment, suffering, agonizing pain that no one should have to endure, let alone a child and it made her hurt to her soul.

Unable to stop herself, she reached out to touch him as he straightened from stepping into his breeches, adjusting them with angry, jerky movements. He froze at her touch, sucking in a harsh breath.

Blinking the tears from her eyes, she moved closer, tracing the network of thin scars lightly with her fingertips, wishing she could soothe the pain that had caused them,

erase the hurtful memories.

He seized her wrist, turning to face her. Fury blazed in his eyes as he stared down at her, but as his gaze raked over her face, an arrested expression took the place of his anger. Abruptly releasing his painful hold on her wrist, he lifted a hand to her face. Tracing the path of her tears with one fingertip, he studied the moisture he had gathered for a long moment and sent her an unfathomable look and then turned and left the room.

Angeline released a pent up breath as the door closed behind him. It escaped her as a sob of sound, and she sucked her lower lip into her mouth, clamping her teeth over it.

His taste lingered on her lips, sending a shadow of the sensation he had created before through her again. Shivering, she looked around absently and finally found her clean gown and pulled it over her head shakily.

She rested indifferently for all that she climbed into the bed feeling drained, for once far more tormented by thoughts of Shadowclaw than her anxieties for her future.

His kiss had roused something within her that she had never suspected was there, desire that was more powerful and debilitating than anything she had ever known before. For in those moments when she had felt his possession, she had wanted more, much more.

Guilt troubled her sleep, as well, that she had felt compelled to try to hurt him, and yielded to it when he had not really provoked it. She had been hurt and angry because of her own misconceptions, not because he had done or said anything to her to warrant them.

And she had succeeded. She had not realized it then, not fully, though she supposed she had sensed it, but she did realize after he had left that his anger was excessive for so little provocation and that the only thing that might have engendered that intense reaction was hurt.

There had been passion in his kiss, and hunger that had called forth fiery cravings within her, but desire had not inspired it, not entirely anyway. He had been wounded and sought to punish her for it, to hurt her in return.

Just as she had.

It was not until sometime after Sara woke her the following morning with a clatter of the tray she had set down that Angeline realized the grave mistake she had made by allowing her emotions to overcome her reason. She had spent much of the day before plotting Shadowclaw's downfall, searching for a way to break through the cold steel he had wrapped himself in against the world.

And in the end, he had simply handed her the instrument of his defeat and she had spurned it. Instead of seizing the moment when he had asked her to show him tenderness and using it to seduce him to her cause, she had thrown it in his teeth, angered him.

He would not give her such an opening again, she thought. It had cost him dearly to yield that once, to show her that chink in his armor.

She cursed herself for her stupidity, paced the room, cursing fate, all men, the world. She had not realized she was so poorly equipped for the task she had taken upon herself. She had been gently bred, carefully guarded and not allowed even to look at any man with interest until such time as a husband was chosen for her, but she felt that she should have known instinctively how to seduce him. He had told her plainly enough that he desired her, given her that much without her even having to work for it.

Why had she allowed her emotions to overrule her head? She had always been

accounted practical, level headed for a female. Now, when she needed it most, why had those qualities simply deserted her?

She found she did not want to examine why, and as the day wore on with no sign of the returning hunting parties she realized that it was a useless waste of time to berate herself. She could not undo what she had done. She could not unsay what she had said.

She could not plan what she would do either, she realized after a while. She could do nothing at all but hope that she would have another opportunity and that she would have enough sense of self-preservation to use it to her advantage if she did get another chance.

Hearing the faint sounds of a commotion in the great hall below shortly after she had eaten her mid-day meal from yet another tray, Angeline moved to the door, listened for a moment and finally crept out to peer down at the men who had come in. There was no sign of Shadowclaw among them, however, and she realized after a moment that it must be men from one of the patrols Shadowclaw had sent out. Disappointed, she went back into the room to wrestle her demons a while longer.

She had already heard the servants setting up the trestle tables below for the evening meal when she again heard an arrival. This time when she went out to look, she saw that it was Shadowclaw's hunting party that had returned.

Instantly, her heart surged painfully against her chest wall and then began to race. She hesitated breathlessly until she saw him cross the hall toward the stairs and then darted back into the room and glanced around a little wildly for something to do to at least try not to appear as if she had been awaiting his return.

There was nothing, of course. She had no needlework to occupy her mind or her hands, no window that she could stare out. She had just dropped onto the stool to stir the fire to life when she heard the door open.

He looked weary almost past bearing. A pang went through her. It was followed by a nearly overwhelming urge to offer comfort, and she transferred her gaze to the fire again. He would not welcome her concern, she knew, would not want such a display.

Worse, he would be suspicious of it.

She cleared her throat as he sat in his chair heavily. "Was your hunt successful?" she asked tentatively.

He scrubbed his hands over his face. "Fair. Two stags and as many boars. If the others have done as well, we will not lack for fresh meat for a little while. Unfortunately, there will be none tonight for it is too late to prepare anything for the pots."

She searched her mind for something else to say when he fell silent. "You will feel better once you have bathed the dirt from your efforts and eaten."

He shook his head, pushing himself from his chair and moving to the bucket of water beside her, he dipped his hands into the pail and scrubbed them over his face and neck and then washed his hands. "I will bathe after I have eaten," he said tiredly. "I have not eaten since I broke my fast this morn."

Taking that to mean he meant to go down to the hall at once, she rose and handed him a length of linen to dry his face and hands. His gaze flickered over her face briefly as he took it, but he merely used it and tossed it aside, following her as she headed toward the door.

They had reached the second landing when a fresh explosion of activity announced the return of the second hunting party. It took no more than a matter of

seconds, however, to realize that the men were greatly agitated and that it had nothing at all to do with a successful hunt.

Shadowclaw had hesitated on the stairs as she had when the men burst through the entrance, but as their excited babble rose upward, he strode quickly down the stairs.

“What is it?”

The sound of his voice quieted the men below as instantly as if the voice of a god had broken over them. They whirled guilty to stare at him as he descended the last of the stairs and strode toward them.

“We found a body in the wood,” Gamon said finally.

Shadowclaw stopped abruptly. “Darkraider?” he asked, his voice grim.

Gamon swallowed a little sickly. “We could nae tell fer sure. Ya should look fer yerself, my lord.”

Angeline wilted weakly onto the stair behind her as she heard the comment. Shadowclaw glanced at her, then followed the men from the great hall. After staring at them for several moments, Angeline pushed herself to her feet again and hurried after them.

She heard their voices as she reached the door and pushed it open wide enough to see what was going on. The men, she saw, were clustered around something on the ground. Their backs blocked her view and although she was not at all certain she actually wanted to see the body, she had to know if it truly was Darkraider.

Seeing that everyone’s attention was fully focused on the body, she slipped through the door and moved a little closer.

Shadowclaw was standing with his legs braced apart, his hands propped on his hips as he studied the body dispassionately.

“He was savaged by some animal,” someone in the crowd muttered. “An’ nae somethin’ I’ve seen afore.”

Angeline’s heart seemed to stand still in her chest as Shadowclaw lifted his head slowly and scanned the faces of the men around him.

Gamon, who was standing across from Shadowclaw, glanced at his lord uneasily.

“What do ya think, my lord?”

Shadowclaw slid a narrow eyed glance at his captain. “I believe he is dead,” he said coldly.

A jolt of shock seemed to ripple through the crowd.

“I am curious to know what he was doing on the southern eastern slopes,” Shadowclaw murmured after a moment. “You did say, did you not, that that was where you were going?”

Gamon paled. “We had nae luck there, my lord and decided ta try tha area ta tha west. We came upon his horse on tha road and began ta search for him. Found him in a narrow ravine ta tha west. He did nae get far upon his travels once he left here.”

Shadowclaw’s lips tightened. “And while you were searching for this man, who is very obviously dead and in no immediate need of aid, did you happen to fulfill the task that took you out to begin with?”

Gamon blinked at him in confusion. “We took a stag,” he said a little weakly. “We did nae know tha man was dead an’ figured we should halt tha hunt ta search.”

“A stag? One?”

Gamon shifted uneasily. “Aye.”

“Then you will go out tomorrow to hunt for more. We have an army gathering to cross the pass. The men will need food to fight, and we are not likely to have many more opportunities to hunt before we go to battle.”

After gaping at him for several moments, Gamon nodded jerkily and then saluted.

“Aye, my lord. At first light.”

Straightening, Shadowclaw stepped over the body and headed back toward the castle.

“My lord?”

Pausing, his gaze on Angeline, he merely waited.

“What should we do with tha body?”

“I never particularly liked Darkraider,” he responded musingly. “You found the carcass. Do as you please.”

Considering the look in his eyes, Angeline was of more than half a mind to dart back inside before he reached her, but she had to know for certain that it was Darkraider. She stood her ground, therefore, waiting until Shadowclaw had reached her. “You are certain it is him?”

Something flickered in his eyes. “The ring on his finger bore his crest. Aye, reasonably certain.”

“But ... it might not be?”

Shadowclaw’s gaze moved over her face speculatively. “With so little left, it is difficult to say positively that it is him, but I think you can thank whatever gods you worship. They bought you a few more days as a maiden than you would otherwise have had.”

The comments gave her no relief. In fact, the effect was just the opposite, for it was clear now that they were not as great a distance from Shroudskull as she had hoped, in truth believed they must be. Shadowclaw had been expecting Darkraider’s return before now, she realized, feeling suddenly ill. That was why he had specifically told the messenger to relate the news about her.

Too disordered by those thoughts to gather her wits about her, Angeline merely followed numbly as Shadowclaw caught her arm and led her back inside, looking around a little dazedly when she discovered that he had seated her at the high table.

She was not the only one in a state of bewilderment. Both servants and men-at-arms milled about the great hall as if they were not entirely certain why they were there. As Shadowclaw took his seat, however, the servants collected themselves and began to scurry to bring out the food and drink. The soldiers, still looking thoroughly unsettled, took their places, as well.

For a time, there was an eerie quiet about the hall, however, unusual enough that it pierced Angeline’s abstraction. As if everyone else had noticed at much the same moment, the men began to struggle to hide their uneasiness by talking in more normal tones.

Bits and pieces of conversations drifted to Angeline, however, and her own uneasiness increased.

Speculation was rife about the beast that had attacked Darkraider. The men who had been there claimed they could not absolutely identify the few tracks they had discovered in the vicinity, but it became clear as the meal progressed that pretty much everyone present had a very good idea of what had attacked Darkraider.

It was a cat, and, by the size of its prints, the viciousness of its attack, the dearth of a trail leading to and from the body, and the fact that the body had so obviously been dropped into the ravine, far larger than anything any of them had ever seen.

And strangely intelligent for a beast since it had not only concealed the body from easy discovery, but covered its tracks very well.

Struggling with her food already, Angeline found it all the more difficult to swallow anything that she put in her mouth when she began to notice the speculative glances that were increasingly directed at the high table--most particularly at Shadowclaw, though she was also an object of intense interest.

Chapter Twelve

It took no great intellect to assemble the pieces of conversation that Angeline heard into a solid picture. To a man, the soldiers feared Shadowclaw more even than the demons of the underworld, possibly more than Lord Ysuroth himself since it was not Ysuroth that they had to deal with on a daily basis. And because they feared they hated, and because they hated they distrusted.

Shadowclaw had summoned his familiar several times since her arrival and left Bloodsbane for hours. Everyone reminded each other of that, citing the timing of the first such incident only the day after Darkraider had been denied hospitality and sent upon his way.

None but her seemed to realize that Shadowclaw had no reason to kill Darkraider.

And the reason they did not was because they thought she was why Darkraider had fallen afoul of some terrible creature and met a horrible, bloody death, eaten alive, dismembered and his remains dragged away and disposed of in a ravine. But not just any nightmare creature--Shadowclaw.

For his part, Shadowclaw seemed completely oblivious to the rumors being developed and polished right before their eyes. She could not believe he could not hear them as well as she could. The only conclusion she could draw from it was that he simply did not care.

It angered her because it made her afraid for him and he had not made any attempt to still the wagging tongues. In fact, it almost seemed to her that he had gone out of his way to encourage them to be suspicious of him.

She supposed it was too much to ask of him to behave as if he mourned the man's death or was particularly distressed about it if he had not liked Darkraider to begin with. But she thought he might at least have behaved with some respect for a fallen soldier instead of merely staring at his broken body so dispassionately and informing them to dispose of the carcass however they pleased.

Even she had been horrified, and she had hated the pig.

Beyond that, the way he had reacted to the discovery made him appear guilty of having a hand in it. Not only had he not appeared the least surprised, but he had demanded to know what the men were doing in that area when they were supposed to be hunting elsewhere.

Was he just so certain of his power over the men that he thought it of no importance to allay their fears and suspicions? Or was he that certain that Ysuroth would never question his loyalty and so would not believe evil spoken of him?

She did not know. She did not even know why it distressed her so much. She told herself that Shadowclaw must know what he was doing for he was a clever devil, unnervingly so, and he was far more capable of protecting himself than she was in any case.

She had worries enough of her own--concerns that Shadowclaw had only made worse when she had heard enough of his conversation to realize her time was running out

and that someone would come for her soon even if Darkraider was dead.

She was almost glad when Shadowclaw escorted her upstairs once more.

She would have been far happier if she had not felt the eyes of the men boring into her back as she mounted the stairs with Shadowclaw.

She was tempted to tell him he should not go up with her for his own sake, that it was only adding fuel to their imagination, but he had ordered a bath, and she knew that he had no intention of deviating from his habits only for the sake of pacifying the men.

She found it difficult to hide her agitation until the servants had set up the tub, filled it, and retreated. As soon as they had closed the door behind them, she turned to Shadowclaw. "Are you not concerned at all that they think you did that horrible thing?" she demanded.

Shadowclaw sent her a look tinged with surprise, but after a moment he merely moved to his chair and sprawled in it, watching her until she realized that he was waiting for her to bathe and finally undressed and climbed into the tub. "You think I did not?" he asked almost thoughtfully.

Angeline sent him a startled look. "Do not speak like that!" she hissed. "The servants may overhear and all will think that it is an admission of guilt."

He tilted his head, studying her curiously. "And this concerns you?"

Angeline gaped at him, feeling a blush flood her cheeks. She could not tell from the tone how to take the question, whether he was asking if she was concerned about him, or if he was merely pointing out that it was none of her business.

She dropped her gaze to her knees after a moment, staring at the soapy cloth in her hands and finally swallowed her hurt at the rebuke and focused on bathing. He was right. It was not her concern. She would be gone soon anyway, either of her own will or dragged off by Ysuroth's men.

Either way, it was his problem to resolve, and he did not need her help.

Acutely conscious of the fact that he watched her, and aware, as well, that he was tired and soiled from spending much of the day in the saddle hunting, she finished her bath quickly and yielded the use of the tub to him.

He did not seem in any great hurry to be done. Ordinarily, when he settled in the tub he went about the task with mechanical thoroughness and got out. He did not rush, but neither did he linger beyond the time it took to bathe himself. This time he merely sat soaking, his expression unreadable, his gaze thoughtful, for so long that Angeline finished drying herself, spread the linen over the back of his chair to dry, and dressed herself.

She stood uncertainly for a few moments once she was dressed, but despite the fact that he seemed in no hurry to leave, he did not seem to want to socialize. He would not welcome any attempts on her part to attempt conversation.

That being the case, she finally simply climbed onto the bed and covered herself with the furs, staring at the wall while she allowed her mind to drift. Contrary to her hopes, it did not wander aimlessly and finally settle. Instead, the longer she lay upon the bed, the sharper her mind focused.

From what she had overheard of the conversation in the courtyard it seemed to her that Bloodsbane very likely had two armies bearing down upon it at that very moment, Sangrey's and Ysuroth's. Armies moved slowly, far more slowly than a man might on horseback if he were not encumbered, as slow, very often, as a household, because the

army would include a great many foot soldiers besides the wagons bearing the rations and accoutrements of war. The speed would depend mostly on the weather, the terrain, and the anxiousness of the leaders to move the army into position.

She supposed it was too much to hope that Ysuroth, having achieved his aim and provoked a war, would have forgotten all about the pawn he had used to do so, but she could not help but think the possibility would have been greater if Shadowclaw had refrained from sending a reminder.

The messenger would travel as fast as he possibly could to reach Shroudskull. She still had no clear idea of how long that would take, but she doubted that it would be days.

He might even meet the army already on their way.

She had one day more, possibly two, she decided. After that--Ysuroth would almost certainly collect her. Bloodsbane would be close enough to the battle he could command his army from here.

He might be focused enough on the war, however, to pay little heed to her, though.

Perhaps it would be an advantage, she thought. Men were prone to focus their energies on bloodletting and ignore women in times of war--at least until the killing was done and they found they had survived. That was the worst of times for women to be available.

That thought sent a rush of fear through her, and she turned her head slightly to look for Shadowclaw.

He had left the bath while her mind wandered, but she had not been so deeply in thought that she discovered him gone. The linen had disappeared from the back of his chair. He was seated in the chair now, the linen about his waist, gazing absently into the fire.

This might be her last chance to try to seduce him to her cause. He had not seemed very receptive, to say the least, but then he had pretty much held her at arm's length since she had arrived. She was not going to get a better opportunity.

The thought of approaching him, the contemplation of touching him were enough alone to send a weakening rush of anxiety through her, but she firmly ignored it, slipping from the bed and crossing the room toward him. He tensed when he heard her movements, but he did not turn to look at her.

She hesitated, struggled for a moment to try to keep from losing her nerve and finally moved around to face him, kneeling at his feet and looking up at him as she untied her gown, pulled it off, and dropped it to the floor. She caught his attention then. His gaze dropped to her, settled on her face for a moment and then flickered over her body.

There was no welcome in his expression and she thought for several moments that she would not be able to unglue her tongue from the roof of her mouth even to speak. "I can give you pleasure," she said in a hoarse whisper, trying to sound seductive and alluring rather than pleading.

"The question is, could you survive it?" he said, his voice as cold and unwelcoming as his expression. "And what do you hope to achieve with the offer?"

Angeline felt the blood drain from her face so rapidly it left a wave of dizziness in its wake. "Only to give you ease," she managed after a moment, "to assuage your needs."

His eyes narrowed, but the look was more speculative than angry. "You can no more fathom my needs, than I can understand your craving for gentle caresses and tender kisses," he murmured dismissively.

A less desperate person would have accepted the hopelessness of pursuing the matter. It had taken far too much out of her to dredge up her courage for one attempt, however, and Angeline felt her resolve harden rather than disintegrating. With an effort, she smiled. "Then you must tell me if I do not do it right."

He studied her for a very long moment and finally almost seemed to shrug.

A challenge had been issued, Angeline realized, feeling a spark of anger.

As she had known he would, he had instantly realized her motivation for offering. He would not have allowed her even to try if he had not thought that she was not clever enough to pierce his will power. He had steeled himself to remain aloof and immune to her overtures, perhaps only to teach her a lesson in humility.

It was as well he had infuriated her with his easy dismissal. The anger boosted her resolve and quieted the pang it gave her conscience to even consider using him in such a dangerous game. Beyond that, though, it goaded her to want to hurt him.

She had already tamped the urge to claw his eyes out when it abruptly dawned on her that the reason he thought she was incapable of pleasing him was because he thought she was too gentle.

Pleasure causes them pain.

She leaned toward him, catching the edges of the linen he had wrapped loosely around his waist and pushing it aside. He stiffened slightly when she rose and placed a knee on either side of his thighs and settled in his lap, shifting forward until she was nudging his sex in the cleft of her own. Leaning forward at the waist until the tips of her breasts just brushed his chest, she turned her head and grazed the column of his neck with her lips, inhaling deeply.

The freshly clean scent of his flesh along with the faint scent that was his alone filled her nostrils and her lungs and warmth blossomed in her belly. Dragging in a shaky breath, she tilted her head, tracing his neck upwards until she reached his ear and caught his earlobe between her teeth.

A faint tremor of reaction went through him and she smiled, knowing that she had discovered the path to conquest. "I can give you pleasure," she whispered, slipping her palms down his arms as she lightly nipped the column of his throat to his shoulder.

When she had reached the bend in his arm, she brought her hands upward again, this time dragging the backs of her fingers so that her nails lightly raked his skin. As she did so, she lowered her mouth to his shoulder and bit him, just hard enough to make him drag in a sharp breath, intensely enough that his man root stirred to life.

It stirred something to life within her, too. Her heart commenced to beating a little more rapidly, her lungs to labor a little harder.

There was a touch of wariness in his eyes when she lifted her head to look at him, and heat.

She raked her nails upward until she reached his face, across his shoulders and along the sides of his neck. Cupping the sides of his head between her palms, she traced the line of his jaw and chin with her mouth, scoring his skin gently with her teeth and then, for herself, brushed her face against his, delighting as his scent filled her.

The urge to explore his mouth swept through her. Reluctantly, she dismissed it,

returning to his ear again and nibbling on it before she began a downward trek of discovery, slipping back along his thighs as she familiarized herself with his body, alternately stroking her palms and fingertips over his chest, and then scoring his flesh with her nails, digging them in just enough to raise red welts along his flesh without breaking the skin.

The slight tremors she had evoked in him became more and more pronounced as she made her way downward, raking him with her nails and at the same time placing nibbling bites across his chest, sucking small patches of flesh, and then licking them. He shifted restlessly and stilled. His breath began to hitch in his chest each time she nipped at him.

His reaction, the heat that radiated from his body, found an echo within her. The warmth became heat, the breathlessness more pronounced as anticipation began to coil inside of her.

His nipples, she discovered, had pebbled like her own. She teased them with her nails and finally leaned lower, gnawing gently at first one and then the other as she backed carefully from the chair and placed her feet on the floor. Catching his knees, she pushed his thighs apart and moved between them, settling slowly to her knees on the floor as she transferred her attention from his breasts to the horizontal ridges of flesh beneath them and then moved lower still to explore his taut belly, scraping her fingernails along his thighs as she did so.

When she lifted her head at last to look up at him, his face was taut, his eyes gleaming with desire, turbulent with his needs. Holding his gaze, she curled her fingers around the base of his man root, leaning down to open her mouth over the tip. He shifted as she sucked it, his hands, resting on the arms of the chair still, curling until his nails were digging into the chair arms.

Pulling the head of his cock out of her mouth, she studied it a moment and finally leaned closer and scraped at it lightly with the edge of her teeth. A hoarse grunt almost of agony emerged from his throat and she looked up quickly. He had squeezed his eyes closed, tipping his head back. The tendons on either side of his neck stood out.

A rush of heat surged through her. Warmth and moisture pooled low in her belly.

After studying him for a long moment, she nipped at the tender flesh again and then took the rounded knob into her mouth, sucking on it. Releasing a harsh breath, he caught her shoulders in his hands, digging his fingers into her. Ignoring the warning, she stroked her hand up his turgid shaft and then down again. Following the path of her hand with her mouth until she could take no more of his flesh, she closed her mouth around him, sucking hard. He dragged in a sharp breath, lifting his hands from her shoulders and catching her head between her palms, and she sank her teeth into him warningly.

His hands stilled as she lifted her head slowly, raking her teeth lightly over his cock as she did. He shifted restlessly, as if he could no longer be still as she slowly repeated the caress and Angeline felt a rush of both power and excitement wash through her. A sense of urgency burgeoned inside of her, the need to drive him beyond his iron control.

She tamped it, focusing on tormenting him slowly and torturously until he was gasping for breath, shudders rippling through him in waves, moving feverishly beneath her hands and mouth. As if he was torn between the need to stop her and the craving for her touch, his hands moved restlessly over her, clutching at her shoulders and then her

head, and as if becoming aware that his restraint was slipping through his fingers, he would grip the arms of the chair again in white knuckled fists.

She knew the moment he reached his crisis, could feel his body tense all over as he struggled against release, felt his cock jerk in her mouth.

She lifted her head to look up at him, stroking his cock with her hand. "I can give pleasure. Do not give me to Ysuroth. Take me away from this place," she murmured shakily.

He released a harsh breath, lifting his head. "I can not," he said hoarsely.

She dipped her head to nip at the head of his cock, sucked it. His member jerked in her hand. She lifted her head again. "You could."

He dragged in a deep, shuddering breath. "I will not," he said harshly. "He comes even now. It would mean your death--and mine."

She studied him for a long moment, feeling a coldness wash through her to extinguish her own fire, feeling the urge, suddenly, to leave him as he was only for spite.

It was impulse more than anything else, spawned by her sudden fear and anger, but she yielded to it, releasing him and surging to her feet.

"He would not be coming now if you had not sent for him," she said angrily, "only to show me that my suffering meant less than nothing to you."

She had more than half expected retaliation, or a demand to finish what she had begun. Instead, he merely glared back at her, struggling to regain control of his raging need and after a moment she turned away and stalked to the bed, climbing in and pulling the furs under her chin.

He got to his feet as she left him, sending a spurt of fear through her, though she was at pains to hide it.

She watched him with a mixture of fear, guilt, and anger as he dressed himself.

"I sent for Ysuroth to claim you because I do not want you here when Sangrey's army breaches the border, for without Ysuroth's army they will overrun us, and you would not like to discover what they would do to you when they took this place," he said harshly.

"If you had taken me away from here, then I would not be here for them to take," she said angrily, her voice thick with unshed tears.

He studied her for a long moment. "I could not take you far enough or fast enough to escape Ysuroth's wrath, for he is determined to have you and even I am powerless before him. He need only summon my familiar and Shadowclaw would consume the man you see before you and then he would turn upon you and there would be nothing, and no one, to stop the beast from tearing you to pieces."

A shiver skated down Angeline's spine as she stared at him and the certainty settled inside of her that what he spoke was nothing but the truth.

He turned away after a moment and moved to the door. He hesitated there, however. There was a touch of wry amusement in his gaze when he turned to look at her again. "I was wrong about you," he murmured. "You are very good."

Chapter Thirteen

The urge to throw something at his head as he went out was so strong that Angeline looked around for something heavy enough to pulverize him. There was nothing, of course, and he was gone before she could have seized anything in any case.

An urge to weep, or scream curses at him tightened in her chest, but she tamped those impulses with the knowledge that she had behaved shamefully enough as it was.

She knew very well that he had not been complimenting her on her skill in pleasuring him, but rather her skill in tormenting him and the spite that had inspired her to abandon him after she had teased him unmercifully, purposefully abandoned him when she knew how close he was to fulfillment.

Darkraider would have beat her senseless if she had even thought to do such a thing to him, and then would have raped her while she was still too stunned even to struggle.

It had been wrong of her, she knew, so disgusted with herself she felt ill. Whatever he had done to her did not make it right. No matter how hard she tried to convince herself that she had been justified in doing it, she still felt horribly guilty.

She had no joy of her spite, that much was certain, for she had aroused herself as much as him, and her body still ached with her own disappointment.

It was almost more infuriating that he had not been angry about it, as if he expected no less of anyone than cruelty.

She was not cruel. It had been anger and disappointment and fear that had inspired her to behave so unlike herself.

When her upset had subsided somewhat, she fell to contemplating what he said to her before and realized that there had never been any hope of winning him to her cause. He would not risk bringing Ysuroth's wrath down upon himself.

She could not say that she blamed him, but if Ysuroth was so powerful that even a Summoner like Shadowclaw would not test him, then he was terrifying indeed. She could not, and would not simply await her fate like a lamb to the slaughter.

How was she to escape, though, imprisoned as she was, with Shadowclaw guarding her door at night?

After a few moments, her gaze moved to the narrow window and she studied it speculatively for several moments. It was narrow, but she was certain that she could fit through it.

Rising as quietly as she could, she retrieved her gown and put it on and then took the stool from the hearth and carried it to the window. Climbing atop it carefully, she unfastened the hide that covered the window opening and peered out.

The moon had not risen, or it had set already. She pondered that for several moments, trying to decide whether it was the time of the dark of the moon and finally concluded that it very likely was.

No moon to aid the guards in spotting her.

No moon to aid her either, she reminded herself.

Shrugging that thought off, she leaned over the window sill and looked down. The stars offered very little light, however, and she could tell little about what lay below the window. Climbing down after a moment, she settled on the stool to cull her memory of the layout of the castle and keep. The window did not face the keep, she knew, for she would have been able to hear arrivals before she could hear them below.

The outer walls met at the sides of the castle, she thought.

Because it was perched on the very edge of a cliff and there was no need for a wall on this side?

Or was it simply because there had not been room enough to build the wall all the way around and still allow enough room to build the castle?

She was not far from the postern gate, she decided. Not above it, certainly, but close enough that she thought the possibility strong that she would not climb down the castle wall only to discover that the mountain dropped away beneath her feet.

The castle was quiet and she realized that it had been quite some time since she had heard anything at all.

She had nothing to lose in trying save her life. Terrifying as that thought was, though, a swift death would be preferable to what she might have to endure otherwise, what she very much feared she would have to bear if even a portion of the tales she had heard of Ysuroth were true.

She was good at climbing, she reminded herself. As a child, she had climbed everything.

That had been many years ago now, though.

She shook that thought off. She was certainly as strong as she had been then, and as agile.

Perhaps not quite as nimble.

Thrusting her doubts aside, she climbed onto the stool again and leaned out, running her hands over the stones and testing the joints with her fingers. The crevices between the stones were wide enough, she decided, for her fingers and toes to find purchase. She realized almost immediately, however, that the stool did not bring her high enough to help her climb out.

Climbing down again, she picked up the stool and returned it to the hearth.

Shadowclaw's chair was heavier than she had thought it would be, but she did not dare to drag it. He would almost certainly hear it and come in to investigate.

She was warm to the point of perspiring by the time she managed to move the chair beneath the window. After pausing for a few moments to catch her breath, she climbed onto the seat and then the back and stepped into the window embrasure.

It was a snug fit, but still easy enough to manage to turn and get down on her knees, and then her belly. Doubt assailed her when she had lowered herself out of the window and found a hold for her toes. Images of the castle flickered in her mind, teasing her with the chasm below her.

Resolutely, she banished the images, focusing her mind entirely on finding the holds for her fingers and toes. It was both easier and harder once she had left the window, for she felt committed then, unable to turn back, and she had nothing to focus her mind upon then except her struggle. She found after a very little while, however, that it was a great deal harder than anything that she had ever tried to scale as a child.

Or she was a good deal less agile, and far weaker, for the strain began to take a

toll on her before she had been climbing for many minutes.

She did not look up or down. It was far too dark to see much even if she had tried, and she knew she could not allow herself to become frightened and unsure of herself. She paused to rest each time she found a crevice large enough to support her without too much of a strain.

When she decided that she had descended far enough that she was below the defensive outer walls of the castle, she began to move to one side and then down, angling toward the area where she thought the cart trail leading from the rear gate was. The strain on her fingers and toes, indeed every muscle in her body went from discomfort to pain and finally fiery agony. Gritting her teeth, she continued her slow, steady descent until, abruptly, she lowered one foot and encountered something solid beneath it. A jolt went through her. Her fingers slipped and she let out a sharp gasp as she fell backwards.

The jolt when she landed was so unexpected that she was too stunned even to feel any pain for several moments. She discovered when she looked around, however, that she was sitting at the edge of a precipice. Coldness that was so harsh swept through her at the discovery of how narrowly she had missed pitching over the brink that her skin tightened, prickling all over as if stinging insects had covered her.

Shaken, she could not find the strength for many moments to do more than crawl away from the drop off on her hands and knees. She relaxed fractionally when she had glanced around again and found that she had scrambled onto the narrow track that led from the rear of the castle.

She was not far from the base. Realizing that the pale gown she wore would be noticeable even in the dark, she pushed herself up into a crouch and moved as quickly and quietly as possible until the track curved away from the castle, offering concealment from watching eyes.

A sense of triumphant slowly filtered into her as she sat down to catch her breath. She was out of the castle! She had escaped!

She tamped her rising excitement, reminding herself that she had only escaped from the castle itself. Sara would discover when she came in at dawn to help her dress that she was gone and she would certainly alert the castle folk in short order. Without a moon to guide her she had no idea of how many hours she might have, and very little light to guide her.

Pushing herself to her feet, she began to trot along the track near the edge, peering down from time to time in search of a good place to begin climbing down so that she could switch directions. She would not be hard to find if she was still upon the road when they began to search for her. In any case, she knew her best hope was to head for Viridan, which was in the opposite direction.

The track, she discovered, descended at a fairly sharp degree and switched back after a time. She did not find that particularly welcome since it meant that it would carry her pursuers in the same direction that she was heading. She followed it anyway since she had no choice, expecting that it would switch back again after a time and intending to continue onward once it did.

She had been alternately walking and trotting for a little more than an hour by her best guestimate when she heard a rhythmic pounding somewhere above her. Her heart seemed to stop dead in its tracks, for she knew instantly what the sound was.

A rider was headed down the track and, from the tempo, riding fast. Panic

instantly seized her and she simply stopped, glancing wildly around.

If she moved close to the cliff, he could not see her from above, but she would be trapped with no where to go. If she moved to the edge, he would see her and she might or might not find a place where she could climb down.

She did not decide which way to go so much as she was guided by her fear of being trapped. Rushing to the edge of the road, she began to run, searching the terrain below her for a place where she could climb down, glancing behind her from time to time as the sound of hoof beats grew louder and louder.

She spied the rider before she saw the place she had been looking for. Fear gave her feet wings, for even in the dimness she knew Shadowclaw. Pelting down the track at breakneck speed to reach the rocks before he could catch up with her, Angeline stumbled and very nearly pitched head first over the side before she could catch herself.

Fire went through her palms and knees as she skidded along the debris of dirt and pebbles at the edge of the road. Uttering a soft cry, she ignored the pain and kept going, scrambling over the rocks with more haste than caution.

Her palms were clammy with fear and exertion, or slippery with blood. She wasn't certain which but she slipped and nearly fell over and over as she clambered down the side of the mountain.

Above her, the horse skidded to an abrupt halt, sending small pebbles and larger ones, and dirt showering over her. She did not look up. She did not dare. It took every ounce of concentration she could muster to continue to cling to the rocks.

She lost her one advantage, however, when a low, rumbling growl echoed around her, so close by that the hairs all over her body stood erect at the threat. On the heels of the roar, the snap and rustle of air caught beneath great wings assailed her, pelted her with the currents of wind they generated. She screamed then with a mixture of sheer terror and fury that she had come so far, tried so hard, and now her attempt would come to naught. Throwing caution to the winds, she scrambled down the rocks at break neck speed, screaming again, this time in pure fear as her haste cost her and she lost her balance, pitching backward.

She'd scarcely become airborne when she slammed into a great furry body and the beast's legs closed around her. Mindlessly, she fought to free herself, screaming and clawing and biting at the creature as she felt herself ascending rapidly into the sky. He released her almost as abruptly as he had caught her and she screamed again as she felt herself falling.

Her feet touched solid ground a split second after she dropped, her knees buckled and she sprawled out. She was too frantic to be greatly affected by the fall, or the relief of discovering she did not continue to fall. The moment she touched down, she began scrambling to regain her feet. She had only just managed to get them under her when something grabbed at her arm, missed catching a grip and then snagged in her hair, nearly snapping her neck as she was jerked to an abrupt halt.

Screaming again, ignoring the painful tug on her scalp, she whirled to fight the creature that held her, her fingers curled into claws, her arms raking the air so rapidly they were little more than a blur.

The tug on her hair eased. Before she had even realized that he had released his grip, he had captured both arms. She fought on blindly, jerking at the hands that held her in an iron grip until she had exhausted herself with trying to pummel and claw at him.

Shadowclaw was breathing heavily when she finally sagged weakly in his hold, but she thought it was more from absolute fury than exertion, for his eyes were ablaze with it as he studied her, his face like stone.

Without a word, he turned and led her to the horse he had abandoned on the road when he had shifted to come after her on the rocky slope below the road. The horse shied at his approach and then stilled as he caught its reins, snorting and pawing at the gravelly road as Shadowclaw grasped her around the waist and tossed her up onto the front of his saddle.

Angeline caught the pommel as she landed, struggling to balance as he swung himself up behind her and leaned over her to grab the other rein. The ride back to the castle took no more than a few minutes, not even long enough for Angeline to emerge from the trancelike state that had enveloped her when she had used the last of her strength to fight for her freedom and failed.

Either it was nearing dawn, or the entire castle had been roused when it was discovered that she had escaped, for there were men milling about the keep as they passed beneath the portcullis and into the courtyard.

Dismounting, Shadowclaw dragged her from the horse, caught her arm and marched her up the stairs and into the great hall. She saw when they reached it that the servants were about, as well, setting up the trestle tables.

Crossing the great room with Angeline in tow, Shadowclaw paused with one foot on the stairs. His hand tightened around Angeline's arm as he turned and surveyed the great hall, finally zeroing in on one hapless servant who hadn't managed to flee. "Lady Angeline would like a bath," he snarled.

Without waiting for a response, Shadowclaw resumed his climb, dragging Angeline behind him. She was too weary with fighting him to gather the strength to fight more, too hoarse from screaming to attempt to reason with him.

But it occurred to her forcefully to wonder if he had ordered the bath for the purpose of drowning her so that he could present his overlord with her corpse when he came, a victim of 'accidental' drowning.

The servants, more frightened than usual since Shadowclaw rarely displayed temper, began dragging the tub up the stairs before she and Shadowclaw reached the first landing. She glanced back at the servants uneasily as Shadowclaw marched her toward the second flight of stairs.

She lost sight of them as they reached the second flight and began to ascend, but she could hear the shuffle of feet behind them and the clanging of the heavy metal tub. When she caught sight of the servants again, she saw they had been joined by others, who, like a trail of laboring ants, were toiling up the stairs with sloshing buckets.

Shadowclaw released her when they reached the center of his room, giving her a push toward his bed. Light though it was, it sent her reeling backward. Her rump hit the edge of the mattress. She would have pushed away again, but the look Shadowclaw bent upon her gave her pause.

She settled uneasily, trying to think of something she could say that might save her the punishment she knew was coming. Nothing came to mind. No matter how she wracked her brain as she watched the servants enter the room and prepare the bath Shadowclaw had ordered, she could not think of a single extenuating circumstance.

She had been well beyond the castle when he had caught up to her. She had

sneaked out, climbing down the outer wall of the castle.

She could not claim a stroll for amusement. She could not say that she had lost her way.

The only thing that she could think of at all was to apologize and she could not believe that that would hold any sway with Shadowclaw, not after all that she had done.

“Bathe,” he growled, interrupting her frightened ramblings.

She stared at him wide eyed, wondering if it would make things even worse if she bolted from the room.

She thought he might have read her intent in her expression, for he moved to the door and dropped a heavy wooden brace across the panel, settling it in the brackets imbedded into the wall on either side of the door.

She had not noticed before that the door had a brace.

Seeing that there was no hope for it, she untied the tie at the neck of her gown and loosened it, eyeing Shadowclaw distrustfully as he moved from the door to his chair and sprawled in it, studying the fire on the hearth thoughtfully.

Shimmying out of the shredded gown, she dropped it to the floor and climbed into the tub. Shadowclaw did not even glance her way and after a moment, she set about scrubbing herself. She was in no mood to dawdle, nor in any great hurry to leave the bath.

She dawdled over rinsing and finally decided to wash her hair. Lathering it, she scrubbed her scalp and ducked beneath the surface to rinse it. When she emerged, Shadowclaw was standing over her. Blinking the water from her eyes, she managed to focus on him as he leaned down, grabbed her arms and hauled her from the tub.

Alarm went through her, but he released her almost at once and began to strip his own clothes off. Surprised, confused, unnerved, Angeline sidled toward the stool by the hearth and sat down.

He tossed a length of linen at her as she did so. Catching it, she turned her back to him and tried her best to ignore the image of his body that seemed to be pressed into her mind, the firelight dancing over every hard plain and bulging muscle, the sleeping beast nestled low on his belly. It looked long and thick even now and she knew when he became aroused that it would be fully twice the size it was now.

Something stirred in her belly, tightened and sent a frisson through her and set her heart to racing a little faster. Anxiety, she told herself, knowing that was not all that it was, or at least that it was not all anticipation of punishment and pain.

She surged to her feet when she heard him get out of the tub, keeping her eyes averted as she held out the length of linen. He took it from her hand, rubbing the damp cloth haphazardly over his body to soak up the excess water, his gaze on her the entire time.

When he’d finished, he dropped the length of cloth and grabbed her wrist.

“What are you going to do?” she gasped a little breathlessly.

Wordlessly, he led her to his chair, caught her shoulders, and turned her so that her back was to him. Surprised, uncertain of what he intended, Angeline stood docilely, her confusion deepening as she heard the rending of fabric. She was still trying to figure out what he had in mind when he caught first one wrist and then the other, dragging them behind her back and then securing them with some sort of binding.

Her belly clenched. She made a belated attempt to jerk her hands free and

discovered it was too late, for he'd already looped the length of fabric around both wrists. Her throat closed choking off her air as she felt the binding tighten, the tugging as he knotted it.

She looked at him wide eyed when he turned her to face him again. Still as naked as she was, he sprawled in his seat, staring up at her speculatively.

She moistened her lips. "I am sorry," she managed faintly.

His eyes narrowed. He tilted his head slightly as he leaned forward to grasp her waist, tugging her closer. "You regret that you were caught," he said succinctly. "Before we are done, you will regret that you disobeyed me."

Angeline swallowed with an effort, wishing she had made a run for it earlier, wishing she had not been caught. He was right. She was not sorry that she had tried. She was sorry that she had failed.

His hand tightened at her waist as he slipped the other down her buttocks, down her thigh and finally grasped the back of her leg just above the knee. She shifted, forced to focus on keeping her balance as he pulled until she had perforce to yield to the pressure. Lifting her leg up and to one side, he draped it over the nearest arm of the chair. Before she could even think to try to drag her leg off of it, he switched hands, catching her other leg, lifting it from under her as he had the first. She wobbled as her buttocks landed on his knees, the fear of falling uppermost in her mind as he draped that leg over the opposite chair arm. Catching her buttocks then, he dragged her closer. The movement, with her legs hooked over the arms of the chairs, forced her thighs wider and wider until she could feel her nether lips parting under the pressure, and then the heat of his sex was nestled along her cleft.

The beast nestled in his belly hair stirred to life, the fleshy globes beneath it tightening as blood engorged his member and brought it stiffly erect.

Swallowing hard, Angeline stared down at the thick, swollen bludgeon that his man root had become before finally, slowly, lifting her gaze to Shadowclaw's.

"You forgot the last lesson. This one, I think, you will remember."

Angeline blinked at him. She had most definitely not forgotten. She had not been able to think of much else since, and it had certainly preyed heavily upon her mind as she had crept from the castle, intent upon escape. It was why she had fought him so hard, even knowing it was useless to try.

To say so at this point seemed unwise and to no avail besides, but the memory instantly stirred everything in her from before and her heart rate hitched a notch higher as the realization sank in upon her that that was to be her punishment.

Except, perhaps, worse.

She jumped when he lifted his hands and began to stroke her breasts, almost in a milking motion, starting at the upper slope and pulling downward until he was plucking at her nipples. Warmth filled her, but puzzlement, as well, until she felt her breasts begin to tighten, felt the blood flowing with the direction of his movements. Her nipples came erect, hardened as the blood engorged them and then began to tighten more and more with each pulse of her heart and each stroke of his hands until they had tightened to painful, exquisitely sensitive, little knots of flesh.

She knew his intent then, and a mixture of anxiety and anticipation curled inside of her.

"You do not have to do this. I will not disobey you again," she stammered.

He lifted his gaze from her breasts to her face, studied her for a pregnant moment, and allowed his hands to drop to her thighs. “Give me your breast.”

Chapter Fourteen

A jolt went through Angeline at the command. Chaos erupted in her mind. Her breath caught in throat, sending a dizzying wave of darkness through her. “What?”

He lifted a dark brow.

Angeline’s belly clenched as it finally sank in that he was demanding that she show him she would not defy him again. She was still confused, wondering how she was supposed to offer it to him when her hands were bound behind her back and her legs splayed to either side of her making it difficult if not impossible for her to lift herself upward to obey. A hard knot formed in her belly when she realized that he was waiting impatiently for her to comply. With an effort, she used her thighs to push herself upward until she was suspended above his lap and her breast was just beneath his chin. Dragging in a shuddering breath, balancing herself with an effort, she arched her back, lifting her breast until her nipple was even with his mouth.

In horrified fascination, she watched as his lips parted, and then his teeth as he opened his jaws ... and waited.

She stared at him blankly when he did no more than that. Finally, biting her lip, she leaned toward him, placing her nipple into his mouth.

The pain that knifed through her when she felt the pinch of his teeth on her swollen breast took her breath. She flinched all over, instinctively trying to jerk away. His jaws tightened warningly. She subsided, panting for breath, her head dropping forward on her neck as she struggled with the sharp needles lancing through her from his hold.

Scarcely aware of anything beyond that, she did not notice the touch of his hands on her buttocks until she felt him spreading the cheeks wide. A moment later something hard and rounded pressed against her rectum. She jerked again, but she discovered immediately that she could not move away from the insistent pressure. His jaws tightened on her breast as he breached the opening, diverting her momentarily, but pain ricocheted through her from two directions regardless, one superseding the other for a moment, and then vice versa.

Her thighs had already begun to quiver from effort by the time he released the hold on her breast. She ground her teeth at the dull throbbing that grew harder for a moment before it began to subside, but the majority of her focus was on the thick shaft he had impaled her on.

She panted, squeezing her eyes tightly as she struggled to remain perfectly still, to maintain her precarious balance. She lost the battle, gasping, panting for breath as she felt the weight of her own body bearing her down slowly but surely until she could sink no further, drive him no more deeply inside of her. Thankfully, after only a few moments that pain, too, began to subside. Her body began to adjust minutely, easing the pressure inside of her.

“Give me your other breast.”

Angeline simply stared at him for several moments in dismay, struggling with the

instinct to avoid pain at all cost, knowing there was no alternative, knowing this time it would worse because the pressure had built inside her engorged breasts until it ached with no touch at all. Biting her lip, she levered herself upward again, trying to brace herself as she thrust her painfully swollen nipple into his mouth.

There was no bracing for it, she discovered, no way to close her mind to it. Her mind, her entire body seemed focused on that one point of most exquisite sensation and the moment his teeth dug into her a blinding wall of pain rolled over her, making her belly clench sickeningly. She gasped, struggled to keep from crying out, but lost the battle for control as he raked the sharp edge of his teeth from aureole to tip, again and again, applying just enough pressure to send wave after excruciating wave through her until she nearly sobbed with relief when he released it at last and the sensation began to dull.

The relief was short lived. The moment he released her her legs gave out, refusing to hold her and her weight drove her down over his engorged member again, sending another sharp wave of harsh sensation through her lower body.

She heard his teeth grinding, as if he, too, was in pain, but she could not credit it.

“Is this what you wanted? Is this why you defied me? Or were you just so anxious to flee to Sangrey that no other consideration entered your mind?”

Angeline lifted her head with an effort, staring at him dully, trying to grasp the question. The only thing that stood out in her mind was ‘flee to Sangrey’. She shook her head, but it seemed doubtful he understood since he had already commanded her to offer her breast to him again.

Or perhaps he did not care what the answer was?

She realized it probably would not have mattered what she had said or done.

Gathering herself, she struggled upward once more, tensing even as she arched her back and lifted her breast for more punishment. Her skin pebbled as she felt his teeth digging into her again, raking along the sensitive bud, a rash of burning sensation erupting all over her body. Her throat closed.

And yet she realized the pain was oddly pleasurable, giving her a momentary respite from the aching pressure of the blood pulsing into the sensitive area.

A shudder went through her when he released her again and she sank once more upon his cock. The sensation of his flesh parting hers, delving deeply into her body ceased to torment and began to enthrall her. A restlessness crept over her, an insane desire to lift up and bear down on him again, to feel him thrusting his cock inside of her with the same savagery she had found so painful and frightening when Darkraider had done it to her.

She did not want that, could not want it.

She swallowed with an effort. “Fleeing Ysuroth,” she managed to whisper.

“To Sangrey,” he said harshly.

She shook her head, lifted it to look at him. “No.”

He studied her for a long moment. “But you will not disobey me again.”

She uttered a sound that was half groan, half sob. “No.”

His face was contorted as if he, too, were in pain. “Give me your breast,” he growled.

She stared at him with a mixture of dismay and defeat. Dragging in a shuddering breath, she obediently rose again, lifted her breast to his mouth. Her belly clenched

spasmodically as his teeth bore down on the throbbing flesh, sending a hard shaft of strangely pleasurable pain through her. A wash of moist heat flooded the passage to her womb. The muscles along her channel cinched a little tighter with each rake of his teeth until she was gasping, moaning incessantly, her head spinning dizzily with the drugging chemicals swirling through it.

He paused. Easing the pressure of his teeth, he began to suck the abused tip.

A shudder went through her, a fresh rash of sensation erupting on her skin as a blinding, powerful wave of pleasure rocked through her.

He caught her hips as he released her nipple. Holding her, holding her gaze, he slipped one hand between them and cupped her mound, pushing a thick finger inside of her quaking flesh. Instantly, the walls of her passage closed around the digit, clinging to it moistly.

His eyes slid half closed. After pushing his finger in and out several times, he slipped another finger inside of her, curling the two together and dragging the tips along the front wall of her passage as he pushed them slowly inside and then slowly withdrew them again.

She uttered a choked cry as he stroked along one spot that sent hard quakes of sensation through her, feeling her body grow tauter, feeling a rise of need a sense of anticipation.

He curled toward her, holding her hips to steady her as he sucked first one nipple and then the other into his mouth, teasing her with the stroking, caressing lathe of his tongue and then sucking until her mind reeled with the intoxicating sensations rocking her.

"Shadow," she whispered a little desperately as he bore down on her, driving her down onto his fingers and his shaft, lifting her slightly and bearing down again.

Yielding to the urge, the need to feel him penetrating her body, she began to move with him, urging him on, struggling to drive him into her body faster and deeper as the sense of anticipation grew to feverish desperation.

Her body seized abruptly, dragging a deep throated groan from her, and then began to convulse rapturously, blindingly. "Shadow," she gasped out dropping her forehead to his shoulder weakly, her voice filled with both wonder and confusion. "Shadow."

He uttered a strangled groan as her body began to clench around his fingers, shuddering as his own body convulsed with ecstasy. Driving deeply inside of her, he held her still, gasping hoarsely, clinging to her bruisingly as his cock jerked and spilled his seed into her.

Neither of them moved for many moments, focused inwardly on the aftershocks that continued for a seemingly endless time before they began to die away. Finally, he seemed to become aware once more. Slowly, he dragged his fingers from her sex, eased his hold on her with his other hand and reached behind her. After fumbling for a moment with the rag he'd used to bind her, he freed her hands.

Instantly, pinpricks of sensation began to stab into her hands. Uttering a moan, Angeline burrowed her face more tightly against his neck, lifting her arms and looping them around his neck and shoulder.

His hands drifted upward from her hips to her arms, closing over them for a moment as if he would drag them loose. Instead, after hesitating for a long moment, he

finally moved his hands downward again, stroking her back and then skimming lower and grasping her buttocks. Abruptly, he rose, lifting her against his belly as his member slipped from her body.

Her arms tightened instinctively. With an effort, she lifted her legs and wrapped them around his waist as he turned and carried her to the bed. When he had crawled onto the mattress, he lowered her slowly to the surface and released her. She opened her eyes to look up at him dazedly as he disentangled himself from her.

His expression was harsh, almost angry, his eyes stormy with emotions she could not begin to guess at as he stared down at her. For a moment, she thought she detected a flicker of confusion in his eyes, but in the next moment he shuttered them. Moving away from her and dropping to the bed beside her, he rolled onto his back, staring up at the ceiling.

His withdrawal pierced the euphoria that had enveloped her from the moment rapture consumed her body.

Her throat closed as hurt washed over her. She rolled onto her side, putting her back to him. "Why did you that?" she asked, wondering even as she asked it if he would understand the question when she wasn't certain herself what she had been asking.

She thought that she was far more hurt that he had given her pleasure but withheld himself, pierced the armor pain had erected in her defense and then coolly shielded himself from the same vulnerability.

He was silent for so long that she thought he would not answer at all. "Because I wanted you to know that I could give you pleasure as easily as pain. Reward and punishment," he said harshly.

Her chin wobbled. He had understood after all, and he had made her feel something she had not wanted to feel. "And what did you take for yourself?"

She heard him swallow.

"The same as I gave," he said after a time. "Pleasure and pain."

The betrayal of her body was almost too much to bear after all that had gone before it. How, she wondered, could he have wrung pleasure from her body after all that he had done to her?

Drained of everything, even emotion, Angeline fell into a deep, seemingly bottomless pit of blackness without any attempt at all to catch herself.

When the sound of the door opening roused her later, Angeline's first instinct was to search the bed for Shadowclaw. She was not certain whether she was relieved or not when she found that he had gone.

Groggy and disoriented from the little sleep she had had, Angeline pushed herself upright and discovered it was Sara who had come into the room. Grunting at the painful complaint of her muscles as she collapsed on the bed once more, Angeline dragged the fur over her head. "Go away. I am not hungry."

"You will go down regardless."

That voice brought her wide awake and Angeline slowly dragged the cover from her head. Shadowclaw was standing just inside the doorway, his arms crossed over his chest. Catching Sara's eye, he jerked his head ever so slightly and Sara scrambled from the room.

Angeline moistened her lips. "I am tired," she complained a little weakly.

His lips tightened into a hard line. "I do not doubt that considering your late night

stroll. Nevertheless, you will dress yourself and come down ... unless you would prefer another lesson?"

The look in his eyes told her he would be all too delighted to give her one at the slightest provocation. Uttering an irritated huff, she threw the furs off and clambered out of the bed. She felt his gaze on her as she moved stiffly to the bucket of water on the hearth and quickly washed her face and hands before surreptitiously bathing the stickiness from between her thighs.

"You disappoint me," he said pensively, coming to stand behind her when she straightened again. Leaning down until his lips were near her ear, he reached around her, cupping one of her breasts in his hand as he skated his other hand down her belly and parted her nether lips with his fingers, teasing the ring in her woman's bud and stirring a flood of heated sensation. "You have defied me at every turn, forcing me to punish you in the only manner I could devise that would not cause you permanent damage. And now that you have whetted my appetite to feel the moist heat of your body clutching at mine, to hear your soft moans and cries, you no longer wish to play the game."

Angeline's throat closed as his soft, almost purring voice tickled her ear, the words themselves seeming almost to reach inside of her and stroke her, stoking the heat his hands had already evoked. A shiver skated through her. "I loathed every moment of it," she said shakily.

He covered her ear with his mouth, sucking it gently and then dipped his head and bit her neck, sucking on the bite of flesh he'd taken into his mouth. And as he did so, he slipped the finger that he had been teasing her bud with along her cleft and pushed it inside of her. "Shall I make a liar of you?" he murmured at her ear again, slowly stroking his finger along her passage. "Your flesh weeps for my possession, clutches at my finger. I can feel it. It tempts me to sheath myself with your body and drive into you until you are screaming my name and spill my seed into your womb."

Struggling against the seductive lure of his voice and his touch, Angeline sucked in a shaky breath to try to calm the wild flutter of her heart. She did not try to deny the desire he had so easily aroused in her, knowing it was useless, that he could feel her heated need. "Ysuroth would not be pleased to find that you had been before him," she whispered hoarsely.

If she had expected to disconcert him, she was disappointed. "Ysuroth would not find that I had been before him," he said in a low, rumbling growl. "What is mine, I keep."

Startled, Angeline turned her head to stare at him in surprise, more than half expecting to see him transform from man to beast, for his voice was that of both. For a heartbeat, she thought she saw the shadow of the beast in his eyes. In the next moment, it had vanished and, slowly, Shadowclaw released her and stepped away.

Shaky with both relief and the craving he had evoked in her, Angeline wavered for a moment and finally moved away to collect the gown Sara had brought for her, dragging it on jerkily and securing the ties.

Shadowclaw, she saw, had waited to escort her down and she wondered if this was to be the new order of things since her attempt to flee the night before. Had he decided that she had not been contrite enough? Not subdued enough by the punishment?

If so, he would soon grow weary of guarding her every move if Ysuroth, or his henchmen, did not arrive soon to relieve him of his burden.

There was an inconsistency in his behavior she realized abruptly as he walked her down the corridor and they began to descend the stairs to the great hall.

He had told her the night before, when she had been trying to persuade him to help her that he could not, that Ysuroth would use his secret name to summon his beast, and he would lose control of it and kill her. Words to that effect, in any case, which supported the tales that she had heard about the Summoners and which she had, therefore, not really questioned. She could not tell that he feared Ysuroth--He did not seem to fear anything, but he had certainly implied that, afraid or not, he was not willing to face certain destruction for her.

Actually, she thought, sliding a glance at him as they reached the second landing and began to descend the last flight of stairs, he had implied that he would not for her welfare. She had dismissed that, and certainly nothing he had done since had indicated concern for her unless the sheer rage that had been seething in him from the moment he had caught her was because she had nearly fallen to her death trying to evade him.

She supposed that was possible, and still not an indication of any particular concern for her personally, but rather indirectly since her death might present him with problems with his overlord.

She thought she could even understand the way he had behaved only moments before, for he had eased himself with her the night before--early morning--which she thought he might consider 'whetting his appetite' and could explain both why he wanted more and why he thought she would allow it without protest.

None of that explained his last comments, however.

It might be flattering to think that she had pleased him so much that she had completely sundered his self control, and demolished his good sense and now he could think of nothing beyond rutting her, but she was not fool enough to think so.

Why, if it was so very important that she be presented to Ysuroth as a virgin, did Shadowclaw no longer seem to care whether she was or not?

And why was it that Shadowclaw not only no longer behaved as if his master's wish was his command, but as if he was entirely willing, and able, to challenge his overlord?

The memory of what she had seen in his eyes and heard in his voice assailed her abruptly, and she wondered if it was an inconsistency in Shadowclaw's behavior so much as it was a glimpse of his familiar that she had not had before. And, if it was, did that mean the creature within the man was beginning to control the man, rather than the other way around? And, if so, why?

Chapter Fifteen

Angeline discovered when they reached the great hall that there was an air of excitement that had overshadowed the angry suspicions of the day before. It did not take long to figure out why.

Shadowclaw's patrols had spotted the two armies converging on Bloodbane.

Angeline's attention was fairly caught the moment she overheard the conversations among the men. Which army would reach the border fortress first seemed to be under heavy debate, for Sangrey's army was closer.

That news did not particularly comfort Angeline. Beyond the anxiety that Shadowclaw had so thoughtfully placed in her mind that Bloodbane might be overrun and she would find herself a part of the spoils of war, she was no more anxious to fall into Sangrey's hands than Ysuroth's.

There was not a hair's worth of difference between the two that she had been able to discern. To her certain knowledge, Sangrey had taken no less than four young brides over the years and none had survived long enough to present him with an heir. She was to have been the fifth, and she did not think her chances any better than the four who had preceded her.

She had not heard that Ysuroth's 'luck' with his wives was as unfortunate. She had no idea whether he had ever taken a wife at all, but it was enough to know that he was the creator of the Summoners.

She might have doubted before that the tales were entirely true, and not exaggerated well beyond the facts, but she did not suffer any doubts any longer, not since she had met Shadowclaw. Not since she had seen with her own eyes what he was capable of, and what Ysuroth had done to make him what he was.

In truth, it was his Summoners that made Ysuroth the most feared of all the sorcerers of the three kingdoms, not necessarily Ysuroth himself, but the creatures of his making, the nightmare beasts he controlled.

For herself, she was more afraid of Ysuroth. She did not expect that she would have to deal with any of his Summoners, not once he collected her from Shadowclaw, but Shadowclaw's body was a testament to how well Ysuroth had perfected his penchant for torturing his victims and she was under no illusion that he would cherish her. He wanted her only to use her to taunt his enemy and she shuddered to think what lengths he might go to to do so.

Despair settled heavily upon her as she listened. After her attempt to flee the night before, she was certain that Shadowclaw would not give her another opportunity to try and she now saw the moment of truth was virtually upon her. Within a day, no more than two at the most, it seemed that one or the other army would be battering at Bloodbane's doors.

"You are pale," Shadowclaw observed as he helped her from the bench when they had finished eating.

Her lips tightened. She supposed he was concerned now that she would not look

her best when Ysuroth arrived. "That is hardly surprising, surely, when I have been imprisoned so long without even being allowed a walk in the fresh air," she said tartly.

She was almost immediately sorry that she had chosen that particular comment to point out her ill treatment. Without surprise, she glanced up and discovered that Shadowclaw was looking at her with a mixture of anger and amusement.

She reddened, certain he meant to comment on her 'stroll' in the fresh air the night before.

He showed admirable restraint, however, contenting himself with the look.

To her surprise, instead of escorting her back to his room, Shadowclaw caught her arm and directed her across the great hall and out the entrance. He did not pause there, however, but headed directly across the courtyard to the wooden stairs that led up to the battlements. They mounted them, climbing to top of the wall.

He surprised her again once they had gained the heavy timber walkway that ran the circumference of the curtain, releasing his hold on her arm and allowing her to walk beside him. Below them, in the courtyard, she could see the method to the bustling activity that had surrounded them as they crossed the open ground. The preparations for war had reached fever pitch now that the armies had been spotted, but it was evident despite the way everyone now rushed about that this was no eleventh hour effort to make ready.

Already completed weapons were piled in great stacks outside the smithy's shop and young men were lined up on benches steadily turning out bolt after bolt for the archers' bows. Soldiers and servants alike were steadily drawing water from the main well in the center of the courtyard, lugging the heavy wooden pails from one wooden structure to the next and pouring the water slowly over the wood to thoroughly saturate it and minimize the burning hazard.

It struck Angeline as she watched them that many of them would be meeting their death in a few days time and yet she saw nothing on their faces to indicate fear, far from it. Their faces were grim, but there was an air almost of excitement in the spring of their steps.

Men, she thought derisively! Offer them the opportunity to hack and slash and pulverize one another and they behaved as if they were going to a fair!

Shadowclaw caught her attention, placing one large hand in the center of her back and guiding her toward the crenellated wall. He lifted an arm, pointing, and she strained to focus her eyes into the distance to see what it was that he was pointing out to her in the valley below the mountains.

A dark, misshapen mass was moving across the plain, she saw at last, so distant yet that the only real indication she had of movement was the dust kicked up in their wake.

"Your beloved husband comes to free his fair maiden, as you see," he murmured near her ear, his heated breath caressing the sensitive shell and sending a flock of goose flesh scurrying along her neck and arm.

Angeline's throat closed. "Sangrey?" she whispered hoarsely.

"You were promised to another?"

Angeline turned to look at him. He did not move away at the gesture and for a handful of heartbeats they stood gazing at one another, their faces so close that Angeline's senses expanded until she could almost feel his touch in his breath as it

caressed her lips and cheeks and reached inside of her.

She dropped her gaze, looking toward the distant army again. "How far away are they?"

Shadowclaw almost seemed to shrug. "They will reach the pass tonight. Unless I am mistaken, they will be knocking at our gates before sunset tomorrow."

Fear settled over Angeline like an icy blanket. Shivering, she dropped her gaze from the malignant threat moving toward them to the rocky ravine below the castle walls, staring blindly at the abyss while her mind grappled with the idea of finding herself in the middle of a war.

Shadowclaw's hand closed around her waist, resting just above her rounded hip. "Your penchant for self-destruction baffles me," he murmured. "Are you so eager to face death that you can not wait until it comes for you?"

Angeline sent him a startled look as he caught her wrist and lifted it to examine the raw, scraped skin of her fingertips and palms from her desperate flight. Embarrassment and irritation flickered through her at the reminder. Whatever he seemed to think, it had been self-preservation that had driven her, not self-destruction.

His comments resurrected a long forgotten memory, however, and she smiled faintly as she looked away again.

"My mother was used to say that to me when I was a little girl," she said musingly. "For I climbed anything and everything, she said, almost before I could walk without leading strings." She closed her eyes, her smile widening as she opened her mind to the memories, seeking. She could almost picture her mother's face in her mind--almost. The image was vague and wavering and always disappointed her. "I used to imagine that I could fly if only I tried hard enough and I would climb to the highest tree so that I could see for miles into the distance and imagine myself soaring above the treetops, free to go where ever I wished, when ever the whim struck me."

She thought about what he had asked her as he tugged her away from the precipice and walked her back along the battlements toward the stairs. "Some things are worse than death," she said musingly. "But I think I would always choose life over death so long as I knew there was hope for a better tomorrow. If I knew there was no hope, then I suppose, yes, I would race to embrace it rather than wait for it to come to me." She frowned. "But one never knows, really, what one would do until the moment is upon them."

Shadowclaw frowned as they retraced their steps toward the castle, but thoughtfully. "You have had far too much time to dwell upon your situation. There are tasks a plenty for every hand, now. If you would prefer something to occupy your time and will give me your word that you will not abuse my trust, I will allow you to help with the preparations," he said as they entered the great hall again.

Angeline could have wept with joy at the offer. She tamped her enthusiasm, however, certain that he would misinterpret it as some scheme she had instantly hatched to escape. "I am so heartily sick of my own company, I am more than willing to do whatever you think I can do."

He studied her keenly for several moments but finally nodded and directed her to the door that let into the kitchen. The majority of the kitchen servants were busily cleaning up from the noon meal and already beginning preparations for the evening meal, but a number of servants, including Sara, were lined up on benches in an alcove to one

side.

Everyone in the room froze for a handful of seconds as she entered with Shadowclaw, but they sprang into action again after that brief hesitation when Shadowclaw merely nodded at them and led her across to the alcove. She saw as they neared it that it was likely the area where they usually placed the trays of food as they were prepared, for there were two very long, heavy trestle tables there that took up most of the alcove.

The servants seated on the benches along one side were occupied with tearing strips from lengths of linen, carefully folding them and then stacking them in piles on the tops of the trestle tables. They shifted down the benches as Shadowclaw led her to one end, making room for her to sit.

They were preparing bandages and bindings and poultices for the wounded, she realized feeling her belly tighten.

"Sara can explain what we need," Shadowclaw said as she settled and looked over the piles that had already been prepared.

She swallowed a little sickly. "I know what to do," she said quietly. "This will not be the first time that I have been caught up in a siege."

He looked a question at her. She wrestled with herself for a moment and finally swallowed against the knot of emotion that welled in her throat. "Our castle was overrun when I was a child," she murmured, lifting her gaze to his. "So I know first hand what men do to women when the blood lust is upon them."

It was impossible after that to divert her mind for many moments from that other time, a time she had worked hard to forget, preferring to remember what she could of the happy, carefree times that she had spent with her mother in the days before the harsh reality of the real world had intruded. Thankfully, she could not remember those last few moments with any clarity. The one thing that had plagued her since was the look of sheer terror in her mother's eyes when the men had grabbed her and carried her kicking and screaming to the floor.

She could remember her mother's screams of rage and terror most clearly of all, could remember racing to her mother to try to help and the back handed blow from one of the soldiers that had sent her flying across the room to smack into the wall so hard that darkness had descended. And she could remember the darkness, the utter silence, the blood that had seemed to be everywhere when she woke. The castle had seemed awash with it, as if some great red tide had risen above their castle and washed over it, leaving puddles and thin rivers in its wake.

By the time Shadowclaw returned to collect her, Angeline's back was aching from the hours that she had spent perched on the bench, carefully tearing one strip after another from the length of linen they gave her and folding each and stacking it into a growing pile until someone collected the stack, handed her another length of linen and she began all over again. And still, she looked up to discover him in surprise, offering his hand to help her from the bench and guiding her out of the kitchen to take her place at the high table.

Weary as she was, she was surprised to discover she had any appetite at all, particularly since she had been smelling the odors of cooking food throughout the long afternoon. There was plenty of fresh game, however, from the hunts Shadowclaw and his men had taken over the past week to do what they could to fill the larder before they were

besieged and the meat was tender and succulent, instantly arousing her appetite as Shadowclaw cut it up for her into small, manageable pieces.

"You look tired," he observed as he slid her trencher in front of her.

She decided not to take exception to his comment on her appearance. "I have grown too accustomed to being idle, I expect. Before ... all of this, I was used to managing my father's household."

He tilted his head questioningly. "And you have done this many years?" he said, a touch of amusement in voice.

She shrugged, refusing to rise to the bait. "Several, in any case, since I was accounted old enough."

"Your father has a large household?" he asked after a moment.

Angeline lifted her head to look around the great hall. "Twice or perhaps thrice this one. Far more servants and dependents, to be sure."

"And yet that was not enough to appease his ambitions?" he said musingly.

Angeline colored. "I try to be charitable. He is not the man he once was. Since my mother's ... death, he has grown hard, cold and, yes, ambitious. As if taking more and more will fill the chasm created in his soul when my mother died." She glanced at him. "You would not understand. He loved her ... more than anything in this life, or even the hope of an afterlife. Now he can only seem to hate."

Shadowclaw's lips tightened. "Nay, I've no acquaintance with this tender emotion you harp upon. And yet I find it puzzles me that he could cherish your mother above all else and spare none of those tender feelings for her daughter."

Angeline frowned, feeling a surge of anger. She had scarcely 'harped' upon it. She could not recall that she had ever so much as mentioned it beyond the once when she had told him she had hoped that she would be given to a man who would cherish her. And as angry and hurt as she was by her father's callous disregard for her own happiness, she was still not immune to the pain and suffering that had changed him. She, too, had cherished her mother and it was difficult to hate the man who had loved her, loved her memory still, even when he did nothing to earn her own love.

She looked down at her food. "In truth, I think he hates me," she said finally. "I think he can not bear to look upon me because I am the image of her, a constant reminder of what he has lost. I think he sent me to Sangrey as much to punish me for living when she died as to further his ambitions."

Shadowclaw's gaze flickered over her assessingly. "And yet you do not despise him for what he has done to you?"

Angeline glanced at him sharply and then studied it over for several moments. "I do hate him for what he has done to me," she said slowly. "And yet I still love the father he once was."

Shadowclaw looked genuinely puzzled. "You love him and you hate him?"

Amusement touched her as she looked at his face. "It can be two sides of the same coin, unfortunately. Great love is far too powerful to simply crush in the blink of an eye. Betrayal can flip the coin to hatred as strong and enduring and passionate as the love that existed before, and still it often does not crush it entirely. Indifference or mistreatment can slowly extinguish the fire, drain it away until there is nothing left, and yet love begs forgiveness.

"I do not want to hate him. In spite of everything he has done, there is a spark of

love for him still inside of me that yearns for him to reach out to me and ask for forgiveness so that I can give it to him. And I think I would, even now. If he would only come to me and tell me that he loved me, and that he regretted the things his sorrow had driven him to, I would be so grateful to have his love again that I would accept even a paltry excuse.”

“You have a forgiving heart,” he said dryly. “I would cut him down, and then I might forgive him.”

The comment caught Angeline so completely off guard that it surprised a chuckle out of her. She clapped a hand over her mouth as the sound emerged, obscene in the light of their dire circumstances. When she glanced up at Shadowclaw she surprised an intent look upon his face, a strange combination of pleasure, anguish, and desire in his eyes. “I am not so forgiving as that--nor so vindictive either. I could never love him as I did once. It is hard to overcome betrayal and begin to trust again, which is not a bad thing at all. For one who would betray you once, would very likely do so again. I only mean that I would want to love him again, and that I would try to forgive him and build new memories so that the painful ones would not be so painful anymore.”

“If he wanted your forgiveness?”

Angeline sighed, grimacing. “You are probably right. Most likely he does not. I am only ... wishing that things were different. I adored him once, as I did my mother. I grieve that he took that from me and yearn for what I had once. Perhaps, if I live long enough, the time will come when I feel neither love, nor hate, nor even grief. I think that I would like it better if I was more like you and could feel nothing at all. Strong emotions are rather a lot like torture. They are inside where no one can see the wounds and scars the hurt makes, but the pain is still there and I do not think they ever truly mend.”

Chapter Sixteen

Even with the entire castle laboring to make ready for the upcoming battle, Shadowclaw apparently saw no reason to deviate from his customs and before they had even risen to leave the great hall, Angeline saw that the servants were already struggling up the stairs with heated water for their bath. Giving in to the inevitable, they had ceased to drag the heavy tub down the stairs again after each use a few days before and had found a corner to tuck it into, merely scooping the water out after its use and tossing it out of the nearest window.

It would have been too much to say that Angeline had grown accustomed to being watched while she bathed, for Shadowclaw did watch her, unabashedly, as often as he sat staring at the fire while she bathed as if completely unaware of her. It would have been more accurate to say that she had come to accept the inevitability of it as the servants had accepted the inevitability that they would toil up the stairs nightly with the water required.

She was still tense as she undressed and climbed into the tub, her mind filling at once with the things that Shadowclaw had done to her the night before the moment they were alone in the room and the intimacy of the small space seemed to close in around them. Almost as if it had been someone else and she a mere spectator watching the two of them together by the fire, the images teased at her mind, stirring her blood far more than it stirred anxiety.

Warmed by her thoughts as much as the water, Angeline finished her bath quickly and stepped out, gathering the drying cloth to her nervously and moving toward the fire. With the best will in the world, she could not forebear sneaking surreptitious glances at him as he undressed and climbed into the tub. The light from the fire, gleaming off his damp skin was almost as mesmerizing as the play of muscles from his movements.

Whatever else he was, Angeline could not deny that he was a beautiful creature, that everything about him was a source of unending fascination. His cold aloofness probably enthralled her most of all, for it teased her constantly to find a way to break through it, to search for some small chink that she could use to explore and understand the unknown and forbidden that he held so closely.

She had aroused his curiosity, as well. She knew that, but she was not certain whether he found her intriguing or merely an oddity.

He had not found her irresistible, she thought wryly, for up until she had teased him and left him aching and unfulfilled, he had not seemed to have any difficulty at all resisting the urge to use her to ease himself as Darkraider had.

It had been as different as daylight from darkness, she realized abruptly. When he had joined his body with hers and pressed deeply inside of her, she had wanted it--pain or no, she had felt only relief and a yearning for more.

She did not realize that she had ceased to gaze at the fire and turned to study Shadowclaw until her gaze slowly focused and she saw that he had stilled, the cloth forgotten in his hands as he stared back at her. Almost as if he had been holding his

breath, he released a harsh breath and moved toward her as she rose from the stool.

He caught a fistful of her hair as he reached her, tipping her head back so that she was forced up look up at him, her heart pounding heavily in her chest as his taut features filled her vision. For many long moments he merely stared at her, as if he was struggling with his inner demons. Almost as abruptly as he had seized her, he released her. "Go to bed, little maiden," he said gruffly. "Before I am tempted to do something I might regret."

Confused, feeling oddly deflated, Angeline merely stared at him for several moments before she turned and crossed the room to the bed, climbing naked beneath the furs before it dawned on her that she had not even dressed for bed. She was reluctant to climb out again to do so, embarrassed to allow him to know that he had so scattered her wits that she had forgotten. Instead, she turned her back to him as he twisted the linen about his hips and sat heavily in his chair.

The tension in her was slow to dissipate, particularly when she knew he remained across the room.

He had decided that it was not safe to guard her from the other side of the door after her midnight stroll the night before, she realized, feeling anger replace her embarrassment with that realization, and the reflection that he had not actually contemplated kissing her at all.

Fool that she was, she had been certain he meant to when he tipped her head back, had felt her body go warm and tingly with the expectation that arose in her.

No doubt he had been searching her face for signs of rebellion, some sign of the latest plot she had hatched to flee.

It embarrassed her all over again to think he might have seen the hope and expectation in her eyes, the breathless anticipation that had welled inside of her to feel his hard mouth on hers.

She was twice a fool, for when he had kissed her before there had been more punishment in it than sweet passion and it had still thrilled her to her toes and left her wanting desperately to be kissed by him again.

After a time her thoughts and her body ceased to plague her with complaints and she began to relax and drift toward sleep, encouraged by the weariness from so little sleep the night before. She felt the bed dip just as she began to slip over the edge into darkness, felt Shadowclaw's naked belly and chest brush her back as he eased closer and dropped one arm across her waist. Smiling inwardly as he followed after a moment by draping one leg over her hips, she snuggled back against him and allowed herself to drop off the edge of consciousness. She suffered no doubts of his motive, which she was certain was to bind her so that he might find his own rest, but she was perfectly content, for the moment, with the illusion of being held close by her lover.

Dawn had broken when Angeline surfaced toward awareness again, prodded by the sudden loss of warmth beside her in the bed as Shadowclaw rolled away from her and eased from the bed. Still drowsing lazily, more inclined to close her eyes again and drift away than to rise and face the day, Angeline watched Shadowclaw through narrowed eyes as he knelt beside the pail on the hearth and scooped water into his hand, sluicing it over his face to chase the dregs of sleep. He glanced toward the bed as he rose and turned, studying her for a long moment before he reached for the linen he had discarded on his chair the night before and dried his face and hands.

He was frowning thoughtfully as he scooped his breeches up and stepped into them. "It pleases you to watch me?" he asked in a voice still husky with sleep as he tucked his genitals into the front opening and carefully adjusted the bulge before he tightened the lacings.

Angeline bit her lip to contain a smile, tugging the fur up to cover her face. She had not realized he knew she was watching him, but she was not particularly perturbed that he had noticed.

She had only just assimilated the fact that the tread she heard was coming toward the bed, not moving away from it, when the cover was snatched from her head. Her eyes widened, but she chuckled huskily at the expression on his face. "I only peeked," she lied, lifting her arms and stretching to remove the kinks from sleep.

The breath left her in a rush when he leaned down, bracing his arms on either side of her on the bed as he covered one of her breasts with his mouth, sucking and nibbling at the tip hungrily until moist heat flooded her lower belly, dragging a throaty groan from her. He lifted his head then, his eyes gleaming as he met her gaze. "And I only stole a quick taste," he murmured as he straightened and headed toward the door.

He paused when he had opened it, turning to study her for a long moment. "You may roam as you please ... so long as it pleases you to remain inside the castle walls," he said, his voice growing hard at the warning.

Angeline lay back when he had closed the door behind him, struggling to stem the tide of warmth he had coaxed from her body, wondering what had possessed her to tease and flirt with a man such as Shadowclaw. The illusion she had allowed herself the night before had gone to her head, she thought derisively. He was not her lover and she would do well to remember that. He was no courtly swain who knew the well bred manners of aristocratic gentlemen and ladies. Likely he was not gently bred at all, and most certainly he was as much beast as man, or more beast than man.

She might just as well play with fire.

Irritated with herself, she rolled onto her side, absently massaging her breast, which still throbbed uncomfortably from his touch.

His mouth, she thought, feeling her nipple harden beneath her palm and her belly tighten.

She could not help but wonder why he had not availed himself of her while he had lain curled against her throughout the night. He had restrained himself before, she supposed, because he had not wanted to poach upon his overlord's 'preserves' but that hardly seemed to matter now. He had breeched her, driven his hard man root into her until she had thought he would split her in two, had spilled his seed into her.

He had done so once. What difference did it make if it was thrice or a dozen times?

He had not expected that his needs would overwhelm his self-control, she realized. He had thought that he could use his body to punish her and remain aloof, and above all else he needed to remain aloof and in control.

Because he feared a loss of control would instantly be noticed by his overlord, she wondered?

Or was there another reason why he was determined to keep his head and keep her at arm's length?

Perhaps he simply saw no advantage, and a great deal of disadvantage, in the

possibility of growing accustomed to having the use of her body when he knew that Ysuroth would come for her soon?

Thrusting her thoughts aside as she pushed the fur off, Angeline got out of the bed and used the chamber pot. She was bathing off in the pail of water when Sara came in with a clean gown. Sara looked her over somewhat disapprovingly when she saw that she was naked, glancing toward the bed speculatively.

Angeline gave the woman a cold stare when she glanced at her again and Sara reddened, dropping her gaze to the gown as she adjusted it and held it up. Slipping her arms into the sleeves, Angeline moved away from the servant. "I do not need you, Sara," she said coolly, grabbing up the brush from the table and moving to the stool to sit while she raked the tangles from her hair.

Sara shifted uncomfortably. "Will you be helping us with the medicinal stores today, my lady?" she asked hesitantly.

Angeline glanced at her. "Yes," she replied promptly. "As soon as I have broken my fast."

Shadowclaw was not seated at the high table when Angeline descended the stairs. Disconcerted, she merely stared at the vacant space for several moments before she collected herself and crossed the room, resisting the urge to retreat up the stairs again and summon Sara to bring her a tray.

A servant hurried out to set a trencher and mug before her when she had seated herself, but even as the urge smote her to question him, he darted away again. It was just as well she had not had the opportunity to give in to the impulse, she told herself uncomfortably. Things were apt to be difficult enough for her without feeding the men's suspicions that Shadowclaw had taken his overlord's woman as his own.

As her discomfort eased, however, she noticed the hall was not nearly as noisy as she had grown accustomed to and she glanced up from her food and swept the room curiously with her gaze. Nearly a third of the men usually gathered in the hall to break their fast were absent and her heart seemed to shrink in her chest.

Very likely they were either on the walls preparing for the assault or in the courtyard, she told herself, but she did not believe it and what little appetite she had risen with vanished.

After toying with her food for a while, she finally rose from the table and made her way into the kitchen. As they had been the day before, servants were clustered around the two long trestle tables preparing poultices and bandages. She joined them, squeezing in between Sara and another stout woman that she thought must be the scullery maid from her reddened, cracked hands.

She hardly dared to hope that the servants would relax sufficiently in her presence to talk, but she did not want to have to ask where Shadowclaw was so she waited with what patience she could muster, focusing on the work.

"Do ya think they've reached tha pass yet?" someone down the table muttered after a little while.

"His lordship?" someone at the opposite end of the table responded. "Are ya daft? They've nae been gone that long. 'is lordship may can fly, but them others can nae and where's tha good of 'im bein' there without tha men?"

Angeline felt the blood drain from her face, felt a wall of cold fear and suffocating pain move over her. Shadowclaw had gone into battle and he had not even told her

goodbye.

The urge to burst into tears was nearly overwhelming as her mind replayed their last moments together and she realized those moments could be the last memories she had of him. There had been nothing in his face or manner to alert her to his intentions, no uneasiness about the battle he was going into, no lingering glances of regret for her.

Stupid! She chided herself.

If she had known would she have rushed to hold him to her? Kissed him? Clung to him like a bereaved wife watching her love go off to war?

She thought she might well have done just that and Shadowclaw would have thought she had lost her mind.

She had lost her mind!

Where had these insane thoughts come from, she asked herself?

But she knew the answer--from her heart, which felt as if it was breaking, crushing the breath from her.

Dragging in a shuddering breath, she focused on struggling to gather her wits and beat her emotions into abeyance.

She was being a fool, she told herself, even if she did care for him--which she should not have. He was a Summoner, virtually invincible, immortal.

It was the 'virtually' part that made her want to weep. Regardless of the magic at his command, he was still human. He could still take a mortal blow that even his magic could not save him from.

Calming herself with an effort, she glanced surreptitiously around the table after a time to see if anyone had noticed how distressed she was. She need not have concerned herself, she realized, for none of them seemed to be in a much better state of mind than she was. They were certainly far more interested at the moment with their own concerns.

She cleared her throat after a few moments, snagging the attention of everyone seated at the table. "Where will the injured be settled?"

Everyone was staring at her blankly when she looked around at their faces questioningly.

"The hall?" Sara suggested after a prolonged silence.

Angeline gave her a look. "Convenient for us, I make no doubt," she retorted tartly, "but hardly conducive to digestion for the whole, do you not think?"

The servants blinked several times, exchanged uneasy glances and looked at her blankly.

"Die gestion?" Sara asked hesitantly.

Angeline sought patience. "Lord Shadowclaw would not have told you to make the preparations here if he was not concerned about the men's morale. It will not help their feelings to be stepping over their fallen brethren and trying to sit down to eat. To say nothing of the fact that it could not help the wounded to have men stumbling over them and dropping dung and dirt from their boots all over their wounds. We must find a better place for them," she said decisively, rising from the bench. "For they are bound to return before long and we must expect that some will be injured."

Sara glanced at the others at the table and finally rose and followed Angeline from the kitchen. "The dungeon?" she suggested hesitantly when she caught up to Angeline, who had tilted her head back to look up at the towering structure.

Angeline glanced at the woman sharply, repressing a shudder at the thought of

carrying wounded men into a dark, dank hole and expecting them to recover. She had not even thought that Bloodsbane had a dungeon, though she supposed she should have realized it must have. A cool dark place was needed to keep stores, and there were often prisoners.

Shivering harder at that thought, she shook her head decisively. "I think if we want them to recover we should not consider placing them in a dark hole," she said dryly.

Sara glanced around the great hall as if she thought another possibility would magically appear. "There's the courtyard," she said after a moment. "Plenty of light there. A bit cold at night, though."

"I would sooner lay them in the corridor above," Angeline said tartly.

Sara shrugged. "They's liable ta roll off an' be a lot tha worse fer it."

Angeline frowned. "I can not fathom why Shadowclaw would have designed the keep in such a way."

Sara leaned toward her confidentially. "He's a flyin' beasty's why. Wanted room ta fly if he needed ta," she whispered.

She could not imagine why he would think he would have such a need--unless the place was overrun. Dismissing that unpleasant thought, she crossed the great room and went out to examine the courtyard. It would not do at all, of course, but when she had examined the store buildings along the outer curtain wall, she decided the laundry shed would work well enough for temporary use and told Sara to bring servants to clean it out and make pallets for the wounded.

Perhaps a dozen men, she thought, could sleep there if they were wounded enough to need a good deal of attention and looked as if it might take them a while to recover. Anyone not sorely wounded would have to sleep where they generally did, but even that, she doubted, would be enough if they were caught up in a prolonged siege. Very likely they would end up having to make use of the great hall, but she hoped they would not have to, at least not for a while.

She was already half way back across the courtyard when she remembered what Shadowclaw had said about the pass. Turning about, she headed toward the stairs that led up to the battlements, knowing she should not and yet completely unable to resist the sudden need that began to drum through her to see if she could see anything of Shadowclaw from the top of the wall.

Shadowclaw's captain met her at the top of the stairs, barring her way. "Ye've nae business here, my lady," he said politely but firmly.

Angeline lifted her chin at him. "Shadowclaw gave me leave to move as I pleased within the fortress," she said levelly. He had said the castle, and she knew he had meant the keep, but she did not think that he would have taken the time to discuss the matter with his captain. "I only wanted to see if ... to see what was happening."

He studied her in tightlipped silence for a moment and finally moved aside. When she had stepped up onto the timbered walkway, he guided her to the far end of the wall and pointed as Shadowclaw had into the distance. The dark mass that she had seen before on the plain had vanished. At first, she could see nothing at all in the direction he pointed. She had been standing tensely, straining to make her eyes see what was beyond their ability to focus on when she was nearly blinded by a sudden spark of light among the trees.

"There," Gamon said grimly. "Tha flash of a sword."

Angeline glanced at him in horror. "They're fighting?"

He looked taken aback. "Aye! Do ya nae hear that pounding noise? It's tha sound of swords. They've been fighting for nigh two hours. They've fallen back a bit, but I'd nae thought his lordship would manage ta hold them at tha pass even half tha time he has."

He left her after a time when he saw that she had no intention of leaving. She could not bring herself to go even with the thought that she should be busy, that she should be trying to ready a place for the men who were wounded. There were bound to be far more than she had anticipated if they were fighting a pitched battle at the pass.

She could not bring herself to consider the possibility that no one would return.

And neither could she bring herself to leave her watch, as if somehow, by watching and waiting that would insure that Shadowclaw would come back, unscathed. It was irrational, she knew. The soldiers who had stormed her home had slain her mother right before her eyes. She had been there and she had not been able to stop them.

She had no idea how long she stood watching fearfully, unable to see anything at so great a distance even if it were not for the tears in her eyes, but after a time a shout went up. When she turned, she saw riders heading back along the narrow road, their horses racing full tilt, lathered from the run.

The men on the wall began to bellow for the drawbridge to be lowered and the gates to be opened and the portcullis raised. More men rushed past her, buffeting her as they raced to cover the men retreating toward them. Stunned, her heart in her throat, Angeline remained frozen to the spot, straining to identify the riders streaming toward the gates of Bloodsbane.

A man fell from his horse as she watched. The riders around him skidded to a halt. Grabbing the fallen man, they hefted him onto the saddle of another rider and leapt into their saddles again.

It was not Shadowclaw and she looked away again as soon as she was certain of it.

A riderless horse charged the rear.

Angeline stared at it blankly for many moments before recognition dawned.

It was Shadowclaw's horse.

Chapter Seventeen

Angeline thought for several moments that she would faint. Her heart seemed to simply cease beating in her chest. Darkness swarmed over her like stinging insects. Sounds became nothing more than an indistinguishable rush of noise.

And then she heard it--the roar of a lion echoing from mountain top to mountain top. Her heart surged into frantic effort, as if to make up for the lack of moments before. The darkness fled.

In the distance, she saw the great Chimera burst through the cover of trees and spread his wings.

Half blinded by the tears of relief that sprang to her eyes, she remained rooted to the spot for many moments, watching as the great winged beast circled once and then turned and headed directly towards Bloodsbane.

That thought galvanized her as nothing else. Collecting herself, she whirled away from the parapet walls and dashed toward the stairs, nearly stumbling in her haste to reach the courtyard before Shadowclaw reached the castle.

The courtyard was filled with men and horses and running servants when she reached it. Steadying herself with an effort, she moved among them, directing the soldiers to carry the most badly wounded to the shed she had had prepared for them and sending the lightly wounded into the castle with the servants.

She had already turned to hurry to the shed when Shadowclaw alit in the courtyard. She stopped dead in her tracks when she saw that he was covered in blood. Clutching her heart, she rushed toward him even as he began to shift once more from beast to man. "You are hurt?" she gasped a little breathlessly when she reached him, scanning his face for signs of pain and then his body for injury.

"It is not my blood," he said grimly.

"You are certain?" Angeline demanded.

Frowning, he lifted his arms and examined himself, frowning when he discovered a great long gash across his torso. Angeline discovered it at the same moment and reached to examine it. He caught her hand. "Where were you going?"

Angeline tugged at her wrist. "To see to the wounded. This should be bandaged."

Instead of answering, he released her wrist and stalked to the well, grabbing up a bucket that stood waiting and upending it over his head so that the water sluiced downward over his body, carrying much of the blood with it. Angeline had followed him. "Let me bind your wound, my lord," she said urgently.

He slid a narrow glance at her. "Mine will heal without your tender touch," he growled. "Go and do what you can for the others."

Feeling very much as if she had been slapped, Angeline took a step back. She saw, however, that he was right. The blood had ceased to flow down his belly and the wound had already begun to close.

Hurt but infinitely relieved, she turned and hurried to the shed. It was crowded to

overflowing already, she saw. Moving quickly from man to man, she examined their wounds, sorting them and directing the servants to move some outside and tend them the best they could until she could get to them. Sara, she discovered, was busily bandaging whatever she came to. "Did you clean the wound?" Angeline demanded sharply.

Sara turned to gape at her. "He's bleedin' like a stuck pig. The blood's washed it well enough."

Angeline's lips tightened. "Do not dare bind another man until I have checked it!" she snapped. "If there is aught lodged in the wound it will fester. Bring me water and cloths so that I can check them and then you can work behind me binding the wounds."

Angeline thought for several moments after she had peeled away the bright red bindings that Sara had been wrapping the man in that she would faint. A sword slash had lain his belly open so deeply that she could see his organs. She put a hand to her mouth. "Have you needles and thread?"

Sara stared at her as if she had grown two heads. "Mendin' needles, ya mean?"

"Any needles. Get them and bring them and do it quickly, else he will bleed to death."

"Ye mean ta sew him?"

"He can not grow flesh to bridge this great gap!" Angeline snapped, pulling the edges his stomach together and holding them. "Hurry!"

Shadowclaw knelt on the other side of the man when Sara left, pushing Angeline's hands away and holding the man's stomach together himself. "He will die."

"Do not say that!" Angeline said crossly.

He held her gaze for a long moment. "Help the others who have a chance to live. This man does not."

Angeline bit her lip, glancing down at the man. She saw then that Shadowclaw was right. Already his complexion had turned the shade of death. Nodding finally, Angeline pushed herself to her feet and moved to the next man as Shadowclaw gestured to two soldiers to carry the dying man out.

Trying to ignore him as he moved from one man to the next and examined them, Angeline focused on cleaning the gash in the next man's arm. When she was as certain as she could be that she had picked every bit of trash from it, she rinsed the wound again, placed a poultice over it and bound the injury snugly enough to hold it together, testing it once she was done to make certain she had not tied it too tightly to allow the blood to flow to his fingers.

When she looked up again, she saw that Shadowclaw had had three more men carried from the shed. Three of the men who had been sent to wait outside were brought in to take their place. Her back was aching as if she had a knife in it from bending over the wounded men and tugging at their leather armor to remove it so that she could attend their wounds before she had seen to half of them. Ignoring it the best she could, she rubbed her back and moved to the next.

"You have done enough. Come inside."

Angeline glanced up, surprised to discover Shadowclaw was still with her, or he had left and returned, she was not certain which. "When I have seen to the rest of them," she said.

"You have been here hours already."

She stared at him tiredly for several moments. "They have been waiting for hours for someone to bandage their hurts."

His lips tightened into a thin line, but he did not argue with her further. Instead, he moved from man to man as she did, lifting and turning them so that she could cleanse and bind them.

It was far easier after that and went much more quickly, but Angeline was still exhausted by the time she finished bandaging the last man. Leaving a serving man to watch them for signs of fever and to make certain they had water when they needed it, she allowed Shadowclaw to lead her out of the shed.

"It is dark," she said in surprise.

Shadowclaw grunted an assent. "And you have not eaten."

"I think I am too tired to eat. Besides, I can not sit down to eat as I am."

He led her to the well and drew water for her. "Bathe off. When you have eaten you can have your bath."

Too tired to argue with him, too tired even to arouse a spark of anger at his bullying, Angeline washed her face and hands and, discovering her gown too soiled to dry with, simply sloughed off as much of the water as she could and allowed him to drag her inside and lead her to the high table in all her filth. It was difficult to ignore the soiled gown and eat, but Shadowclaw ignored her weak protests and she discovered after she had eaten a little that she felt less lethargic than she had before.

She was still immensely relieved when they had eaten and Shadowclaw allowed her to trudge up the stairs. It took all she could do to manage to climb as far as the second floor. As she glanced up glumly at the second flight, however, Shadowclaw bent and scooped her into his arms.

Instinctively, she looped her arms around his neck to catch herself. "I am not a child," she protested, dropping her head wearily to his shoulder. "I can walk."

"I would as soon carry you as drag you," he said dryly.

"Well, do not blame me if your heart fails you before you reach the next floor," Angeline said tartly.

"If my heart fails me I can not imagine that I would be able to blame anyone."

She subsided. "Your wound is not troubling you?" she asked belatedly as they reached the third floor without incident and he crossed the corridor to the room.

He said nothing and finally she lifted her head to look at him questioningly. He slid a frowning glance at her as he entered the room and set her on her feet. "I am a Summoner, Angeline. Why do you think of me as if I am a man?" he asked quietly.

Angeline stared at him in dismay. "You are a man," she said in a voice little above a whisper.

His face hardened. "You have seen what I am," he said harshly. "And it is neither man nor beast, but both."

Angeline found that she could not sustain his gaze. She looked away, her gaze settling on the tub of water that awaited. No doubt it was cold by now, but she found she did not care. All she wanted was to bathe the stench of battle from herself, the smell of blood and pain and fear from her nostrils.

Loosening the ties of her gown, she discarded it and climbed into the tub. The water, as she had suspected, was not hot, but it was still warm enough to soothe her. "I know what you are," she said finally when she saw that he still watched her. "You are

the Summoner who holds me for his overlord, Ysuroth.”

He moved away then, sprawling in his chair almost angrily and staring at the fire on the hearth.

Angeline found, after all, that she had little strength left for bathing. She made short work of it, scrubbing more haphazardly than thoroughly, and then climbing out again and drying off almost as carelessly. Dropping the linen to the floor, she moved to the bed and crawled upon the mattress without bothering to look to see if Sara had had the forethought between tending the wounded and helping roll bandages beforehand to launder her gown.

She was half asleep almost by the time her head settled upon the pillows, but still wakeful enough that she knew when Shadowclaw moved into the bed beside her and draped one arm across her waist. Once he had settled, she wiggled more snugly against him, grasped his hand and dragged it up to cradle against her chest as she drifted off.

An explosion of sound followed by a tremor of movement brought Angeline wide awake. It was still dark in the room and she lay perfectly still for several moments, wondering if the noise and vibration had been a part of some dream. She had almost begun to relax when it she heard it again. This time she pushed herself up and looked around for Shadowclaw. He paused at the door having heard the rustle of sound she had made when she sat up. “They have begun.”

Angeline lay down again when Shadowclaw had left, trying to decide whether to get up at once, or to try to go back to sleep. She was tired enough, though, that the question was moot. The moment she began to relax again, she drifted off.

The darkness had lifted slightly when the next concussion woke her. Groaning, Angeline got out of bed, dressed and went downstairs. Conversation in the great hall was more subdued even than usual for that time of day, but there was nothing sluggish about anyone’s movements. Everyone in the hall was bright-eyed alert and shoveling their food into their mouths and gulping it down as if they expected to have it snatched from their grasp before they could eat it.

Shadowclaw was finishing his meal when Angeline arrived at the high table. “Stay inside today,” he said curtly, helping her to seat herself and then striding quickly across the great hall. With a great deal of scraping of benches along the stone floor and slamming of mugs on the wooden trestle tops, the room emptied behind him.

Frowning, Angeline caught the sleeve of the serving man who brought her food and drink before he could escape to the kitchens again. “What is happening?”

The man bobbed his head respectfully. “Tha army gathered outside our gates last eventide, my lady. They’s sayin’ in tha kitchen that they’re tryin’ ta figure out tha distance ta everything, lobbin’ a stone here an’ there ta see where it lands.”

As sluggish as her mind was with sleep still, Angeline’s thoughts leapt instantly to the wounded men in the shed. “Do you think we need to move the wounded men inside?” she asked sharply.

The man stared at her in surprise for asking his advice, but fell to pondering it. “I’m fair sure there’ll nae be any place safe ‘for long, my lady. Now, I’m thinkin’ it’s as safe as anything. Tha shed’s against tha wall. Don’t seem likely them stones will hit it, less them sons-of-whores starts aimin’ at tha wall ... uh ... beggin’ pardon, my lady.”

Angeline waved his slip away. Bobbing another quick nod, the man took himself off to the kitchens in a great hurry. When she had finished eating, Angeline crossed the

hall to the entrance and pulled the door open, peering outside.

Shadowclaw, she saw, stood atop the defensive walls, his attention focused on the army on the other side of the ravine. The men lining the walls around him seemed to be intent on what was going on beyond the walls, as well, though not quite with the same bored indifference Shadowclaw displayed, for she could hear the soldiers hurling insults and catcalls from time to time. Girding herself, she inched a little further from the building and peered around the courtyard. Almost a half a dozen stones, most of them little more than a foot across, lay in the courtyard. At least two appeared to have struck the keep itself. The others had apparently sailed over the outer wall, but fallen short of the keep.

Angeline frowned, glancing toward the shed where the wounded men lay. The army's first objective, she thought, would be to punch through the outer wall so that, once they had figured out a way to cross the ravine, they could swarm inside the walls. Deciding the men were relatively safe, for the moment at least, she closed the door and went to the kitchen. Most of them, she saw, were doing little beyond listening for the next crash. Rousting them, she sent all but a handful into the hall to make ready for the wounded.

She had them clear out the rear section of the hall on either side of the hearth and high table, since it was furthest from the bombardment, and then clean it thoroughly. She found herself listening as she worked as the others did, however, for the sound of the stones battering at Bloodsbane's walls. It was nearing mid-morning when they had the area ready at last for the removal of the wounded and she had only just ordered the servants out to the shed to help with moving the men when the bombardment commenced in earnest.

A barrage of stones struck the keep in quick succession, bringing down a shower of mortar and sand from the building above them. Uttering sharp cries of fear, the servants whirled enmasse and fled toward the kitchens. Angeline gaped at their retreating backs for several seconds and then chased after them. Grabbing a broom when she reached the kitchen, she laid about her without prejudice, cracking heads, backs and shoulders. "Go! Get out to the shed you sniveling cowards and help me move those men!"

She was not certain whether they fled the broom, or if she had managed to pound some modicum of shame into them, but the servants turned and headed toward the courtyard again, this time almost at a dead run.

She followed them, knowing if she didn't that the very next bombardment would herd them back, emptied handed, into the keep again. There was no order, regardless, no careful moving of the poor men. Those who were able to move on their own steam, struggled to their feet and began to hobble toward the safety of the keep. The servants grabbed the others as they came to them, half carrying and half dragging them. Angeline had rushed to help one man who was trying to make it on his own when she heard a roar from above her that sent a shock wave through her.

"Get inside! Now!"

She threw Shadowclaw a startled glance, but tamped the urge to respond as she put her shoulder under the wounded soldier's arm and an arm around his waist to help support him. His leg gave out about halfway across the courtyard and both of them went down in a tangled heap. Scrambling up as soon as she could shove the man off of her,

Angeline grabbed his arm and tried to pull him up. After teetering on the brink of disaster for several moments, she finally managed to bolster the man and they struggled toward the entrance to the keep.

They were no more than a few yards from safety when two boulders flew over their heads in quick succession, smashing into the entrance to the hall. One struck the lintel, sending sharp fragments of rock in every direction. The other hit the half open timber door, splintering it as it slammed the door against the inner wall. Inside, she heard startled yells and cries of pain. Hard on the heels of the first two stones, a boulder nearly as large as a young sheep slammed into the wall directly beside the door and set off a rain of stones as half the entrance collapsed.

Stunned to see the place she had thought of as 'safe' collapsing before her eyes, Angeline froze, no longer certain of which direction to run. All around her, it seemed, death fell from the sky as huge stones. Servants and men lay around her, or ran in mad circles, as confused and frightened as she was.

As the dust began to settle in the now gaping mouth of the keep, Angeline forced her feet to move, helping the man until they reached the rubble and then leaving him to crawl over the debris. When she whirled around to see who else needed help, she saw that panic still reigned as stones fell like deadly hail around the men and women racing around the courtyard.

With no clear idea of what she meant to accomplish, she raced across the courtyard and up the stairs to the battlements. She slammed into Shadowclaw at the top so hard she would have bounced back and fallen if he had not caught her. "They have to stop! You have to make them stop!" she babbled. "They will kill everyone!"

"Get inside!" Shadowclaw growled, pushing her toward the stairs again.

She broke free, dashing around him and leaning out over one of the crenellations. "Stop! Please, you must stop!" she screamed.

Shadowclaw looped an arm around her waist, snatching her back from the wall.

"He will trade me for the lives of the others!" she yelled, ignoring him.

Shadowclaw clamped a hand over her mouth that covered her entire face, cutting off her air and her view. Instinctively, she grabbed at his hand with both of hers, trying to pull it from her face.

"I have the Lady Angeline Delgado!" Shadowclaw bellowed furiously. "And I will not yield her!"

"Then she is better off dead!" a voice roared back at almost the same moment Angeline managed to pry Shadowclaw's thumb from her eyes.

She knew the voice and her gaze instantly followed the path of sound. Stunned, she simply watched blankly as her father lowered the bow he held in his hands. Shadowclaw snatched his hand from her face, swatting at the missile as it shot toward her. It pierced his palm, digging into her breast just above her heart. Too stunned to feel anything at all, she looked down at the tip as Shadowclaw let out a roar and shoved her aside.

Angeline scarcely felt the impact as she slammed against the timbers. Pushing herself up with an effort, she dabbed at the blood flowing down her breast and stared at the bright, sticky substance on her fingers blankly. When she looked up at Shadowclaw, she saw that he had changed. It was a beast that stood braced against the wall now, roaring threats at the men below. He whirled on her abruptly, pinning her with the

golden glow in his eyes and she held her hand out. "My father tried to kill me," she whispered disbelievingly.

The beast shifted into man again, but his gaze was no less frightening. "Go inside, woman! Now! Do as you are told or by the gods I will strangle you myself!" he growled, snatching her from the floor and giving her a shove toward the stairs.

Abruptly feeling as if her entire world had caved in as an avalanche of emotions poured through the barrier shock had erected, Angeline uttered a sob and ran. Blinded by the tears that filled her eyes and flowed down her cheeks, she stumbled, almost pitching head first down the stairs.

"Archers!" Shadowclaw roared, "aim for the men manning the catapults!"

Angeline was not certain of how she managed to cross the courtyard, for rational thought did not guide her. She had no clear idea even of where she was headed. The only thing pounding harder than her heart and the painful gouge on her breast from her father's arrow was her thoughts. Her father had tried to kill her, and Shadowclaw had looked upon her with such rage for her interference that she did not doubt that he hated her, as well.

Sobbing almost uncontrollably now, she paused when she reached the entrance to the keep, turning to look back at Shadowclaw.

Almost as if he felt her gaze, he turned, stared at her hard for a long moment and rushed toward the stairs.

Angeline's heart stilled abruptly and then leapt into a frantic race as she realized he was coming for her. Whirling, she scrambled over the debris littering the entrance and fled.

Chapter Eighteen

Escape was uppermost in Angeline's mind as she raced across the hall and began to climb the stairs. She had no idea, though, whether she was running from the pain and grief of being forsaken by her father, the look of condemnation on Shadowclaw's face, or her fear of reprisal for not only ignoring Shadowclaw's orders but defying him in front of his men. All that her mind could grasp at the moment was the need to avoid more pain at all costs and she was hardly aware of anything else she was doing. Again and again, she stumbled as she raced at a breakneck pace up the stairs, bumping her shins, coming down painfully on her knees, scraping her hands and then surging to her feet and running again. She had almost reached the stairs leading up from the second floor landing when Shadowclaw appeared in the hall below her, skidding to a halt as he saw her racing along the upper corridor.

"Angeline!"

The roar only galvanized her to move faster. Sobbing for breath by now, she ran, fell, scrambled to her feet and ran again, bumping into the wall one moment and swerving wildly toward the edge the next. Dizziness assailed her before she was half way up the second flight of stairs as she pushed her heart and lungs beyond their capacity to keep up with her struggles. Staggering almost drunkenly, she pushed onward, mindless in her quest now, fighting the darkness that was beginning to cloud her vision, making her feel heavy and awkward.

"Stop!" Shadowclaw roared as she staggered up the last step, swaying as she swiveled around to see how closely behind her he was. It was a mistake. Even as she turned she felt herself pitching sideways, falling. She came down on one hip on the lip of the walk, grabbed at thin air as she sought to catch herself, and toppled over the edge, too breathless even to scream as she felt herself plummeting toward the great hall far below.

Shadowclaw shifted from man to beast as she fell past him, bellowing a great roar as he leapt toward her. Her breath left her in a grunt as he slammed into her, curled his forelegs tightly around her. Blackness crashed in on her then, blinding her, dulling her senses, but not depriving her of them entirely. Semi-conscious, she felt almost as if she was floating upward and then the hard timbers beneath her back as she dropped to the floor.

Driven more by instinct than cognitive thought, she rolled onto her belly when he released her, trying to crawl away. It was arms that locked around her waist and jerked her to her feet. Still struggling to catch her breath, Angeline let out a sob as Shadowclaw lifted her feet clear of the floor and stalked toward the room.

She grabbed at the doorframe as he strode through it, but she doubted he even noticed the slight tug it took to break her hold as he carried her inside.

Instead of releasing her when he had entered the room, slamming the door behind him, he strode to the bed and tossed her toward it. Angeline gasped as she felt herself flying through the air, grunting as the air left her lungs when she landed with a bounce on her side on the bed. Stunned, she looked up at Shadowclaw and burst into fresh tears

when she saw there was no pity in his gaze, nothing but fury. "He hates me! He tried to kill me!"

"And so you tried to kill yourself!" Shadowclaw growled furiously.

The accusation cut her off mid sob. "I did not! I was not trying to!" she wailed, realizing abruptly that she had nearly killed herself in her crazed rush to outrun Shadowclaw.

"You very nearly succeeded, nevertheless!" he snarled obviously struggling to regain control of his temper. He lost. Surging toward her, he placed a knee on the bed and shoved her onto her belly. Angeline scarcely noticed, burrowing her face into the bed linens and weeping out her heartbreak. Cool air caressed her back, however, as he tossed her skirts over her head, catching her attention a split second before he brought the flat of his hand down on her bare bottom with a ringing slap that seemed to drive the breath from her lungs. Gasping as fiery pain shot through her, Angeline arched upward, trying to scramble away from him, but that only seemed to goad him.

He caught her hips, dragging her back and draping her hips across his lap as she clawed at the linens trying to elude him. The second ringing slap brought tears of pain to her eyes to mingle with her tears of grief. She cried out, clawing at the bed linens, arching her back, kicking uselessly with her legs as he brought his hand down across her bare buttocks over and over, on and on until Angeline was screaming and writhing beneath him, her buttocks feeling as if they were on fire.

She thought after a few moments that she almost welcomed the pounding blows, the pain. She needed to be punished, she realized, for being such a complete and utter fool.

She had refused to believe her father truly hated her even when she had said she believed he did. She had been certain that, deep down, he still loved her as she did him and now she had been deprived even of the lies she had told herself to give her comfort.

It was far worse to know how little she mattered to the man she had come to care so deeply for, for Shadowclaw had left her no illusions to cling to. "Hate me!" she cried as the pain from his blows began to yield to numbness, the same numbness that had begun to steal inside of her. "I do not care anymore! I want to hate you, too. It is far better than" She broke off when she realized what she had been about to say.

Shadowclaw stopped abruptly, breathing almost as raggedly as she was. His hand hovered over her throbbing buttocks for a long moment. Finally, he smoothed a hand over the hot, stinging flesh, stroking it lightly, almost soothingly and Angeline felt the urge to weep close over her again at the pretense of tenderness.

It was all he ever gave her, an illusion of gentleness and caring to feed her fantasy that he would come to truly care, that he punished her because he cared for her.

She thought he meant to thrust her away when he lifted her hips. Instead, she felt the brush of his lips over her stinging flesh, the faint rake of his teeth. Her breath caught in her throat as his first, almost tentative exploration escalated rapidly into a raw, demanding hunger that forced the stinging heat of her throbbing cheeks downward, into her belly.

A shiver skated through her as he placed feverish open mouthed kisses over her buttocks, sucking at the flesh, lathing it with his tongue, scraping it with the edges of his teeth. Gooseflesh broke across her back, crawled over her shoulders and tightened the flesh of her breasts as she felt the heated caress of his mouth, heard his hoarse, labored

breath.

He shifted, pushing her knees up onto the bed and licking at her cleft. She gasped in a sharp breath as she felt the tip of his tongue flutter across the tiny, beringed bud at the apex of her cleft, sending echoing flutters into her belly, making it tighten, grow heated and moist with need. Abruptly, he rolled her onto her back, pushed her thighs wide and covered the bud with his hot mouth, alternately sucking it and then stroking it with his tongue. Her breath seized in her chest, her whole body seized, her back arching up off the bed, her head digging into the mattress at the hard jolt of pleasure that slammed into her. Feeling as if she could not bear the exquisite torture a moment longer, she clutched blindly at his head.

He caught her hands as her fingers tangled in his hair, pushing them to her sides and manacled them to the mattress. She struggled to gasp in sobbing breaths of air, bucked at the keenly exquisite sensations rocking her, trying to escape it and at the same time desperate to feel it. "Shadow!" she gasped frantically.

Ignoring the sharp edge of distress in her voice, apparently caught up in a need to devour her, he sucked and nipped at the bud a moment more and surged upward along her body, gnawing and nipping and sucking at her flesh as if he meant to consume her, needed to fill himself with the taste and texture of her flesh.

Her fingers curled into the linens beneath her, clenching so tightly the muscles began to tremble with effort. Intoxicated, delirious with his assault, she writhed feverishly beneath his touch, unable to be still.

Dropping to one elbow beside her, he cupped one breast in his hand and caught the other in his mouth, stripping the edge of his teeth from aureole to tip until she lost her breath. Until her mind was a morass of heated, dizzying sensations and she was moaning mindlessly, her hands stroking over his body almost as if they had a will of their own.

She raked her nails along his back as he released the nipple he had been tormenting and moved to her other breast, massaging the first breast for a moment and then slipping his hand downward over her belly and cupping her mound. His breath seemed to catch in his chest. He groaned, sucking at her nipple greedily as he parted her nether lips, exploring her cleft with his finger.

She gasped, spreading her thighs wide, arching up to meet him as he pushed his finger inside of her, raking her nails more frantically along his back and sides. "Shadow!" she gasped, begging him with her body to probe her more deeply, aching to feel his flesh filling her.

He covered her mouth as he withdrew his finger from her passage, plunging his tongue into her mouth ravenously as he shifted over her, settling his hips against hers.

A heated swirling darkness seemed to close over her as he kissed her mouth with the same savage hunger that he had explored her body, demanding, leaving no part of her unexplored, untouched, unaffected by the glorious sensations drumming through her to the rhythm of her frantically racing heart.

Eager to feel his touch as he slipped his hand between them once more and she felt his fingers tangle in the curling hair on her mound, she spread her legs wider for him, groaning into his mouth as she felt the stroking exploration of her cleft, arching up to meet him. Again, he withdrew the pleasure of his hand and then she felt the heated hardness of his man root against her belly, felt the rounded head stroke downward, over her bud, along her cleft as he guided it to the mouth of her sex. She gasped when she felt

him pressing the hard flesh into her woman's passage. Her throat closed with want, with the ache to feel him stretching her, filling her.

But he could not claim that part of her, no matter how badly she wanted him to. She tore her mouth from his. "No!" she gasped out shakily.

He caught her hair, tilting her head back as he pressed deeper and deeper inside of her, biting the side of her neck as he slowly withdrew and then pushed his flesh into her again.

Tremors ran through his body as he struggled to move slowly in and out of her until her body began to adjust to the girth of his man root and the heated moisture of her desire had coated his flesh so that he moved more easily.

"You should not," she gasped trying to wiggle away from him as she felt him pressing harder and harder against her maidenhead.

"I should," he ground out, withdrawing slightly and then thrusting again, harder this time until she uttered a whimper of pain at the burning sensation of the splitting flesh.

He was shaking all over as he withdrew again. Uttering a hoarse groan, he bit down on her neck and drove into her forcefully, piercing her maidenhead and burying himself to the hilt inside of her.

He went still then except for the tremors rocking him and the movement of his mouth along her neck, the light brushes of his lips and tongue to sooth the bite.

Tears filled Angeline's eyes and ran down into her hair, but it was not pain that brought them to her eyes. It was fierce gladness to feel his flesh embedded so deeply inside of her, the knowledge that he had claimed as no other ever could, and fear for him, terrible fear for him. "You should not have done this," she wept. "He will slay you!"

He silenced her with his lips. Moving his mouth hungrily over hers, he scooped her tightly into his arms, tipped his hips to withdraw his flesh along her passage and then thrust into her forcefully again. Withdrew and drove inside of her again, until he was plunging into her in powerful, pounding thrusts, almost as if he could not keep himself from driving as deeply inside of her as he could get.

He broke the kiss, gasping hoarsely as he nipped at her neck, her ear, and then covered her mouth and plunged his tongue in and out of the sensitive cavern in an echo of the driving plunge of his hips.

Driven by her own frantic need, she lifted to meet him, digging her nails into his shoulders, raking them along his back and finally digging them into his buttocks to pull him more tightly against her as she felt the molten core of rapture that had built inside of her erupt explosively. Dragging her lips from his, she uttered sharp cries of ecstasy as the waves of rapture rolled over her, clinging to him tightly as he sought his own release in swift, pounding strokes and finally tensed all over and began to shudder as his body pumped his seed into her womb.

He sagged heavily against her as the tension left him, gasping hoarsely, shuddering from time to time as the aftershocks of his own release faded slowly away. Sighing gustily, he nuzzled his face against her neck and sought her ear, covering it with his mouth and sending a shiver through her. "You are mine," he murmured, his deep, ragged voice almost a purr of sound.

Drifting lazily, Angeline found that it was too much effort to open her eyes when he shifted to look down at her, framing her face with his arms. "Yes," she sighed.

He bent to nip at her lips. "Say it."

"I am yours," she murmured.

"Cain."

She opened her eyes then, staring at him in confusion.

"I am yours, Cain," he prompted her, kissing her deeply, but briefly when she dutifully repeated it. "Do not forget the gift I have given you, Angeline," he murmured when he lifted his head.

Puzzled, she frowned.

He nipped at the tip of her nose. "I am Cain, beloved of Angeline, and there may come a time soon when that is all that stands between you and Shadowclaw."

He dropped a light kiss on her lips and withdrew from her, slipping from the bed.

Instantly feeling bereft, Angeline lifted her head, staring at him blankly when she saw that he was still wearing his breeches. When he had thrust his genitals back into the opening and adjusted himself, he tightened the lacings and turned away, striding toward the door and Angeline looked down at herself, realizing she was still clothed as well. He had merely thrust her gown up around her neck.

Feeling diminished somehow at the frantic, almost animalistic rutting, she sat up slowly and pushed her gown down as he quit the room without a backward glance.

What had just happened, she asked herself blankly, too stunned to fully grasp the situation.

The blissful glow of happiness that had filled her only moments before burst, leaving her cold in the wake of its warmth.

She collected herself with an effort, chided herself. They were at war, in the midst of a siege. He had no time for pretty speeches, lingering caresses, soothing embraces.

And yet he had taken the time to chase her down, to throw her down upon the bed, toss her skirts over her head and pluck her maidenhead, her conscience reminded her.

He had said that he was Cain, beloved of Angeline.

He had not said that she was his beloved, she realized belatedly, feeling an urge to cry assail her abruptly.

She tamped it. Moving to the edge of the bed, she stared down at herself when she felt stickiness between her thighs and saw that her blood and his seed had mingled, was streaked along her inner thighs. She got off the bed abruptly and hurried to the bucket of water to wash herself. When she had removed the evidence of her lost maidenhead, she returned to the bed and searched the linens carefully. Thankfully, she had not bled like a stuck pig, as she had heard that some maidens did when their maidenhead was taken. There were only a few faint streaks of blood and she scrubbed at them until she was certain she had removed all trace.

That would only help insofar as gossip mongers, she realized when she had finished, for Ysuroth could certainly not be fooled.

She froze at that thought, straightening.

Ysuroth was not battering at their doors. Sangrey was.

She bit her lip, struggling to keep the thought from her mind that teased at the edges of her consciousness. It crept insidiously inside, regardless, bringing with it pain.

Had he taken her maidenhead for no other reason than to be certain that Sangrey

would not have it?

Fool! She chided herself. He had used her feelings for him and her desire to turn her into a blithering moron. She had given herself to him without any thought for herself at all or what price she might pay for yielding to him!

Her only thought had been her fear for him, and it seemed obvious to her now that he welcomed the challenge.

It dawned upon her before she had succeeded in whipping herself into a complete frenzy of hysteria that he had given her his name, his secret name.

I am Cain. Remember the gift I have given you for there may come a time when it is all that stands between you and Shadowclaw.

She felt like crying all over again when she remembered that.

He did care. He must, at least a little.

Unless he felt that, in using her to challenge his master, he was honor bound to give her something in return that might protect her?

She frowned at that, rubbing her head, wondering then if he had taken her to taunt Sangrey, or because he thought Ysuroth would rather that he ravish her rather than his enemy. But he was not certain, and thought he might be accused of treachery?

She could not think straight. She did not know what to think at all anymore. There were so many reasons Shadowclaw might have done what he had, but only one that would give her comfort and he had not said that he cared for her. He had only told her he knew she cared for him!

The snake, she thought in sudden anger! And she a fool to have fallen under the wicked spell of such an evil creature! Her trials had deranged her mind!

She looked down at the dried blood on the upper slope of her breast, lightly tracing the ravaged skin on either side of the wound. Shadowclaw had taken the arrow in his hand to keep her father from taking her life.

As reluctant as Angeline was to return to the hall after all that had transpired between her and Shadowclaw, she could not bring herself to simply ignore the needs of the people below. Girding herself, she left the room when she had collected herself the best she could and went downstairs again. She had done her best to tidy her appearance, as well, but her gown was tattered and filthy and spattered with blood, her own and the blood of those she'd tried to help and she had no change of clothing.

The hall, she saw when she looked down into it, was crowded now with everyone who could be spared from manning the walls. Most of the servants were like Sara, old and worn for the tasks they were trying to do, and frightened and confused now with all that had happened.

They looked at her with a mixture of hopefulness, discomfort, and pity when she finally reached the hall, leaving her in no doubt that every one present knew about the incident even if they had not been fortunate enough to witness it. And she did not doubt that speculation was rife as to what had transpired after Shadowclaw had shut himself into his room with her. Embarrassment flooded her cheeks with color, but she resolutely ignored the knowing glances and gave the servants tasks to keep them busy since it appeared that most of those who had been injured had already been attended or were being ministered to when she arrived.

Realizing it must be noonish or possibly later and that no food had appeared, she went out into the kitchen to see what the cooks and their helpers had put together. It was

as well she had for little had been done to put a meal together. Admonishing them for cowering when they should have been preparing food for the hungry men, she harassed them until she saw that they were moving more quickly and efficiently and went out again.

The men were not likely to be thrilled with what they were to be served, for the spit boy had abandoned his post and much of the meat intended for the noon meal was charred on one side and raw on the other, but at least they would have something to fill their bellies.

The bombardment had stopped. Remembering that Shadowclaw had ordered the archers to aim for the men manning the catapults, she thought that might explain the cessation, but she still wondered at it, for even if the archers had taken down some, others would have taken their place.

She was not about to go out to see what she could discover, however. She had flagrantly ignored Shadowclaw's order to go back inside and aroused him to far more wrath than she had ever seen before in him. She was not sorry, although she was afraid she soon would be, that his anger had turned to passion of a different sort, but she thought she preferred not to test his temper again anytime soon.

In any case, she discovered soon enough that she had no real need to go out to the battlements to discover what was going on. The soldiers able to fight, left when they had been fed and took the place of those manning the wall so that they could eat and it was not long before she discovered that Ysuroth had arrived and the army laying siege to Bloodsbane had had to turn its focus from the castle to defending its rear.

Chapter Nineteen

“She has made herself useful I see. Quite the lady of the castle. One almost has the sense that she is perceived as such.”

The voice was unfamiliar, but there was a quality about it that made Angeline tense all over and sent a cold shiver along her spine as if a specter had run one dead finger along her backbone. Feeling the short hairs on the back of her neck prickle with an instinctive sense of danger, Angeline slowly rose from the soldier that she had been attending and turned to see the newcomers who were pouring into the hall.

She had heard the arrival, of course. She had simply not realized that there was any significance to the increased activity, for the castle’s defenders had been coming and going in a steady stream since the siege had begun, or more accurately, since the bombardment had begun the day before.

Her gaze went first to Shadowclaw. She had not seen him for more than a handful of moments since their passionate, if ill advised, encounter the day before.

She had not really thought that she would see anything in his eyes, or his expression that would allay the anxieties that had tormented her since, but she was disappointed when she did not and averted her gaze almost at once.

She knew the moment her gaze shifted to the man beside him that Ysuroth had arrived at last and still her mind refused to accept it, scrambling to reveal to her the how of it. He was a sorcerer, accounted the most powerful of the three sorcerers who ruled the three kingdoms of Byzania, but she could not imagine that he had used sorcery to magically transport his army inside the walls of Bloodsbane.

He wore the gleaming, elaborately ornate armor of a knight who was accustomed to sitting astride his steed far from the conflict and directing his men to fight and die. Even as a vague sense of contempt settled in her, though, she realized the symbols etched into the gleaming metal were not mere decoration, but magical runes that formed a shield of protection far more effective than the metal the armor was made from.

Soulless, yellow eyes like those of a predator gleamed at her from beneath the hooded cape he wore that cast the rest of his face in shadow.

As she was snared in that malevolent gaze, he reached up to flip the hood back.

A shockwave rolled over her that caused the blood to drain from her face and the strength to abandon her body. The shock of blood red hair that covered his cadaverous skull was unmistakable.

She could not help but think the massive suit of armor was more a ploy to make him appear powerful than anything else, and wondered that he could move about freely in it, for it was not only his face that was emaciated to the point that he appeared to be little more than a walking skeleton. The neck that protruded above his chest plate was a spindly column and his hands, revealed when he removed his heavy gauntlets, were like claws.

She had seen more flesh upon starved corpses, and healthier color if it came to that, for his skin was the color of death, gray and sallow without a touch of the healthy

pink to be expected in the living.

Collecting herself with an effort, Angeline sank into a deep curtsey. "My lord," she said in a voice that quavered distressingly.

"And you are Lady Angeline Delgado I am told, though I find it hard to credit. Comely enough, but I am not certain that I would agree with 'beautiful beyond compare'. Perhaps it's the disgraceful thing you are wearing, however?"

Angeline could not help but blush, though she was not distressed in the least to discover he did not find her to his taste. "I regret you find my attire so distasteful, my lord. Unfortunately, my wardrobe was not captured with me."

His eyes were narrowed when Angeline lifted her head and she could see that he did not like her tone. And still she could not help but add a rider. "And I can not be held accountable for the fraudulent reports of others regarding my appearance. I have never been accounted beautiful beyond compare. In any case, beauty is in the eye of the beholder."

His thin lips all but disappeared, but a moment later a look of cunning flickered over his features. "You are suggesting, then, that Shadowclaw lied?"

With the best will in the world Angeline could neither keep her gaze from darting to Shadowclaw's stony face, nor the faint blush that tinged her cheeks. Belatedly, she realized that a trap had been set and she had fallen in to it. He had been probing his suspicions, no more, and she very much feared that she had done nothing to allay them. "I had not known that Lord Shadowclaw was given to pretty speeches," she said stiffly. "In any case, as I said, it is a matter of perception."

Ysuroth laughed, but it was not a pleasant sound. "You have come to know him well, then. And perhaps the fault is my perception? He did not say that you were beautiful beyond compare. I simply interpreted it that way because I am so unaccustomed to finding Shadowclaw so bereft of words that he can only stammer and stutter."

That time Angeline managed to refrain from glancing at Shadowclaw, but she saw in her peripheral vision that his skin had darkened, whether with anger or embarrassment it was impossible to tell for his expression was as stony as before, or more so.

Her own calm was crumbling around her. The longer she was made to endure his baleful, unnervingly perceptive gaze, the harder it became to control the shivering that had begun inside of her as a deep cold and seemed to be working its way outward, freezing her blood and flesh. It was like looking into the cold eyes of a serpent, knowing that the reptile was only watching for the perfect opportunity to strike.

She searched her mind desperately for a means of escape, at least for a moments respite, only a few moments to collect her wits, but he had already commented on her behaving as if she was mistress of the keep and she did not dare do or say anything a hostess normally would when confronted with a guest.

"The servants will be serving the evening meal soon, my lord," Shadowclaw said after an uncomfortable moment. "If you would care to bathe the dust of your travels before we sit down, I will send for someone to prepare a bath."

Angeline could have kissed his feet.

Ysuroth slid a speculative glance at him. "You have learned more courtly manners since last I saw you. I believe I must consider the unfortunate circumstance which brought Lady Delgado here to have been ... beneficial for you. I can not help but

wonder how constructive the lessons. I believe I will accept your generous offer of hospitality, Shadowclaw.

“But I am afraid I must insist that Lady Delgado be attended first,” he added, turning to pin her again with his gaze when she had just begun to think that she might slip quietly away. “I do not believe that I can stomach sitting down to table with ... that,” he added, gesturing distastefully at her gown. “Happily, I have anticipated this meeting and brought with me clothing suitable to a lady of her station.” He surveyed her from head to toe. “Hopefully, they will fit well enough. I had been anticipating a plumper dove.”

Angeline was happy to disappoint him, but she held out no hope that her lack of appeal would be of particular benefit to her. More likely it only meant that he would be less inclined to favor her with any gentleness--if he possessed any.

He lifted a hand, flicking it imperiously and Angeline turned at the commotion behind him, nearer the door, discovering that he had brought more than ‘clothing suitable to her station’. Two lady’s maids appeared behind the two men that brought a large traveling trunk from near the entrance to the keep where they had been waiting.

Sudden fear churned in Angeline’s belly as she watched the procession, for it dawned on her forcefully that discovery was imminent if Ysuroth was aware of which room she had been staying in, and more importantly, which room Shadowclaw had been occupying.

And even if he had no knowledge of either, or discovered it at once, then the maids would no doubt report the tell tale bruising on her body. She knew there were bruises. She might explain away many of them, but Shadowclaw was no gentle lover. The bruising from his ‘love’ bites on her breasts and belly, and she suspected her buttocks, as well, would not be easily explained away.

She would have been more than willing to blame them on Darkraider, but he had had no opportunity to inflict bruises upon her for more than a week, and she did not think she could count on the women being stupid enough to believe the bruises were as old as that.

She was afraid to look at either man when she dragged her gaze from the procession. Instead, she turned to look a little fearfully for Sara, wondering if there was any way that she might avert disaster a little longer by hinting at the woman.

Shadowclaw, she saw with a budding of relief, had already summoned the woman. “Send word that a bath is to be prepared for Lord Ysuroth in my room, and another for Lady Delgado in her room. And then you can show his servants the way.”

Sara nodded and shuffled away surprisingly briskly, collaring a man servant on the way to the stairs and still managing to outstrip Ysuroth’s servants and precede them up the stairs.

Angeline managed a curtsy though she was more than half afraid that her knees would give out altogether under the strain. “If you will excuse me, my lord, I will try to make myself more presentable.”

He studied her for a moment and finally waved her away rather as if he was shooing a pesky insect.

Tremendously relieved, Angeline escaped at last, trying to refrain from appearing as if she was fleeing. She felt ill as she mounted the stairs, certain that it could not be long before Ysuroth knew that his ‘virgin’ was maiden no longer.

She knew suddenly and with absolute certainty that Shadowclaw had not ‘lost his

head'--perhaps he had been driven at that moment by the heat of his passions, but he had shown no anxiety afterward about Ysuroth discovering his 'treachery' and he had to have known that Ysuroth would. He had fully intended to claim her, she felt certain, from the beginning or almost from the beginning, and moreover to challenge Ysuroth, for he had refused to leave or to allow her to escape.

She still could not fathom his motives.

But it seemed indisputable and beyond doubt, moreover, that she was as much a pawn in Shadowclaw's game as in the power struggle between Sangrey and Ysuroth. For if it had been no more than a yearning for her that Shadowclaw could not resist, he would not have stayed to face Ysuroth's wrath.

She could certainly think of no reason why anyone would choose to when they were bound to come off the loser in any contest with such a powerful sorcerer.

Unless he was laboring under some misguided chivalrous need to prove himself?

She dismissed that. It was not that she thought that Shadowclaw had no sense of honor or chivalry, but that she could not imagine him feeling the need to prove himself.

She was fortunate in that she managed to arrive on the third floor as Sara stepped out of the room--'her' room, for she would not otherwise have known where to go.

"There's nae but tha one tub," Sara announced unhappily. "I've nae notion what we're supposed ta do about that."

Angeline frowned, but merely nodded when she saw that Ysuroth was ascending the stairs for she had no desire to be cornered so soon again, and none for him to begin to suspect that she was engaged in some sort of conspiracy. The lady's maids were already in the room, however, examining it distastefully.

It exacerbated Angeline's already irritated nerves. She could see nothing about the room for them to turn their noses up at. Granted it was lacking any sort of luxury, but it was clean. She saw no reason for them to look around as if they had spotted dung in one corner and the stench still clung to their nostrils. "I do not need you," she said coldly. "I have Sara to help me."

The two women exchanged a speaking glance and looked at her again. "Lord Ysuroth brought us here to attend you," the older of the two women said, her voice as cold as Angeline's had been. "He did not say that we were to attend your orders, merely your needs."

She had expected as much and she was still taken aback. Nevertheless, her lips tightened. "My need at the moment is privacy. Guard from the other side of the door, if you like, but get out! And take care you press your ear directly to the door panel, for it is thick and you may miss something if you do not."

It was the maids' turn to look taken aback. After whispering between themselves for a moment, however, they left the room. Angeline was so weak with relief she almost wilted to the floor. After looking around, she found a three legged stool like the one in Shadowclaw's room and dropped onto it weakly.

Sara's cackle brought her head up. She was eyeing Angeline with a good deal of respect. "Ya can be a bit scary when tha notion strikes ya," she said approvingly.

Angeline gave her a wan smile. "I was quaking in my shoes." She looked down at her bare feet and amended that. "I would have been if I had shoes."

Sara shrugged. "Bein' brave's about facin' fear. It ain't about nae bein' afraid. I expect its tha surprise that works fer ye," she added musingly.

Angeline sent the woman a questioning glance. "Ye may nae have noticed it, deary, but ye've nae much bulk ta back up tha fierce talk." She shuffled over to the trunk the maids had been seated on and lifted the lid. "There's shoes here. Nae sure they'll fit yer feet. I've nae notion what we're ta do about a bath fer ye, though--less ye wait till his worship's done and dash through?"

"I would rather be boiled in oil than use it after that ... creature, unless it is boiled first to remove the taint, and scoured with lye," Angeline said, a hint of hysteria rising in her voice. "Just bring a pail of water and I will bathe off the best I can. Truthfully, I would consider smearing pig dung all over me if I thought for a moment that it would deter that creature from touching me, but I am not at all certain that he would notice.

"I do not think I can endure this, Sara. Really I do not! I had thought that I wanted to live more than anything, that I was willing to risk dying in the attempt if it only meant that I would have a chance. I think now that I would rather be dead. My flesh crawls only to be near him, for he is like a walking corpse, a dead thing.

"He smells like a dead thing!"

Sara tsked, shuffling over to the door and snatching it open. "Make yerselves useful and bring water for the mistress," she snapped and then slammed the door again before either of the women could protest.

"I did hear tell that he had defied death," Sara said conversationally as she returned to the chest. "Used his magic ta cheat death. I'm nae so certain now I've seen him that that was a good thing."

She pulled a gown out of the trunk and examined it. "Them said ye was ta wear this," she said, turning to show Angeline the gown.

It was a bridal gown of veils, much like the one she had been given to wear when she was being taken to become Sangrey's bride, except perhaps more fine, more sheer, for they were designed to display the bride's flawless perfection so that no one could be in any doubt of it.

Angeline took one look at the gown and looked frantically for the chamber pot as bile rose in her throat. She only just managed to grab it before her stomach emptied. On her hands and knees, she hovered over the pot until her stomach ceased to heave and finally gathered saliva into her mouth and spat to rid herself of the horrible taste, mopping at her lips with the back of her hand when she could not find a clean spot on the gown to use.

"It's as well I sent them on their way. Yer nae in tha family way, are ye?" Sara asked sympathetically, patting her back.

Angeline shook her head weakly, bursting into tears and covering her face as she sat back on her feet. "Not unless I got that way yesterday," she wailed, and then lifted her head quickly when she realized what she had said and looked at Sara in dismay.

"Took 'is sweet time about it then, he did," Sara muttered. When she saw that Angeline was gaping at her, she shrugged.

"You would not say anything?" Angeline gasped. "He will slay Shadowclaw!"

Sara looked her over curiously. "An' that would bother ye?"

Angeline's chin wobbled. "He is hard and unyielding, I know, but he is not an evil man. It is the terrible things that Ysuroth did to him that has made him as he is," she said pleadingly. "But I feel that there is still some goodness in him. I know there is."

Again Sara shrugged. "I did nae say he was. He treats us well enough. A sight

better than he's treated ye from what I've seen."

Angeline sniffed. "I can not hate him for doing as his honor demands, as his master commands him, and he has not treated me as badly as many others would have, not as badly as Darkraider treated me without any provocation, only because I was at his mercy. He has been extraordinarily patient given that I have been such a trial to him."

Sara seemed to think that over a moment. "Ye've tried his patience, ta be sure," she said finally. "I've nae seen tha man's temper before, an' that's a fact. Cold like stone was all he was before, nae matter what. Nae ragin' and bellowin' like most men. I nigh dropped dead with fright when he came thunderin' in behind ye yesterday, bellowin' fit ta lift tha roof."

"You will not say anything then?"

"Its nae my business ta talk about me betters," she said dismissively. "Nae but what it'll nae make a haypennie's worth of difference if I keep yer secret. His worship's bound ta figure it out."

Angeline dashed for the pot again at the image Sara had so offhandedly erected in her mind. She had nothing left to heave up, however, and merely gagged for several moments before she managed to get her stomach under control again. Mopping her face, she lay back on the floor without bothering to try to return to the stool again. "Mayhap I could fool him," she said feebly. "If I could get some blood...."

"Before or after ya puke on him?" Sara asked dryly.

Angeline lifted her head weakly and sent the woman a questioning look. Abruptly, she began to chuckle, and then to weep.

Sara shoved the chamber pot under the bed as she heard a bump at the door and went to open it. "Her ladyship's fine, thank ye," she snapped. Taking the pail someone handed her, she put her shoulder against the door and shoved it closed again, not without some effort on her part.

Angeline had covered her mouth when Sara opened the door, but she could not seem to stop once she had started and continued to laugh a while and cry a while until Sara finally scooped up a handful of water and dashed it in her face.

The water silenced Angeline abruptly for a few seconds before she began to chuckle again. She was calmer, though, and managed to contain it after a moment. "Mayhap it would not be such a bad thing if I was ill. Then, while he is washing it off, I could dab the blood on my thighs."

Instead of responding, Sara merely patted her shoulder consolingly and helped her up and then helped her remove the gown.

Kneeling by the bucket of water, Angeline cleaned her mouth first, gargling and spitting the water into the chamber pot before she turned her attentions to bathing. She frowned as she bathed, thinking about the sympathy in Sara's eyes. It might be nothing more than pity for her distress, or compassion for her for having to face the repulsive attentions of such a man, but she had a feeling that Sara knew something she was not telling.

By the time she had finished she realized what it was about Sara's attitude that was bothering her. It was not the commiseration for her troubles. It was the pitying way the woman had looked at her when she had said that she might fool Ysuroth with animal blood and she did not think that was because Sara doubted she was clever enough to pull it off.

“What is it that you are not telling me?” she asked when she rose at last and dried herself.

Sara’s eyes slid away. For several moments she frowned as she studied the garment over to find the openings. “His worship’s nae use fer ye as woman,” she said finally, her voice little more than a whisper. “Ye tried so hard ta escape, I thought ye knew tha tales about him.”

Angeline stared at the woman blankly, beginning to feel ill all over again. “I have heard many things--all terrible, mostly that he tortures for pleasure. But I do not understand what you are getting at. If he has no use for me as a woman, why is it so important that I am untouched by a man?” Angeline asked in a low voice.

Sara glanced at the door and then leaned close. “He’s a sorcerer, deary. He draws power from such things as tha blood of innocence. Nae trickery of yers’ll fool him. He’ll know tha moment he tries ta use it in one of his spells, fer it’ll nae work!

“Take care ye mind yerself when he’s about an’ do nae be peekin’ at tha master when ye think nobody’s watchin’ ‘cause they’re always watchin’.”

Chapter Twenty

Ignorance was bliss beside what she now knew, Angeline thought as she headed downstairs with lagging steps. She supposed she had needed to know. She supposed there could not have been a time that was better for her to be told. Yet she wished that Sara had not enlightened her, not now, not when she had to go down and face Ysuroth across the table at supper.

She caught the heel of her sandal on the step behind her as she began her descent and it instantly brought her focus from her thoughts to the moment as her heart set to hammering. Placing a hand over it, she caught her breath and concentrated on taking each step more carefully.

Sara had been right. The shoes did not fit. Moreover, she had been barefoot so long now that she thought they would have felt stiff and awkward on her feet if they had fit as they should have.

After what she had learned, it did not make her queasy to look down at the bridal attire she had been told to wear, but she still found it revolting--and a curious circumstance, as well.

Why dress her as a bride if she was not to be one? Was it significant to whatever ritual he had in mind? Was she to be sacrificed tonight? The very moment she reached the great hall would they seize her and tie her to some black altar so that Ysuroth could perform his dark ritual?

Her thoughts made her feel distinctly faint and she paused when she was halfway down the second flight of stairs, flicking a hunted look around the hall to see who waited for her, what awaited her.

The great hall was bursting at the seams, filled with the wounded at the back, and Shadowclaw's men and Ysuroth's. A sea of faces greeted her, but she saw no one in black robes as her gaze flickered over them and lit at last at the high table.

Shadowclaw, she saw, was staring at her as if he had been turned to stone.

Ysuroth was staring at Shadowclaw.

Angeline felt for several moments that she would simply collapse then and there. Ysuroth knew! If any doubt had lingered in his mind at all, the look on Shadowclaw's face had eliminated it for his interest in her could in no way be interpreted as casual.

She dropped her gaze, trying to gather her scattered wits, resisting the urge to turn and flee back up the stairs she had just descended.

She realized then why she had been ordered to wear the gown--to test Shadowclaw.

And he had failed because he had been taken off guard and the gown signified something of weight to him.

After the briefest of hesitations, she continued down the stairs and crossed the hall to the high table, knowing there was nothing else she could do, more than half hoping that she would create a distraction at the very least.

Both men stood as she reached the high table, Shadowclaw to help her seat herself

on the bench, Ysuroth in feigned courtesy, a sneering smile curling his lips. He was dressed magnificently in gold and black and deep purple. From his bulk, Angeline strongly suspected that he wore his armor beneath, for she could not imagine such a skeletal head and neck perched upon such an impossibly broad chest and shoulders.

"The bride favors us with her presence," he purred, stepping forward to take her hand in his cold claw-like appendage and brushing a light kiss across the back.

Shivering, Angeline retrieved her hand, feeling as if acid had dripped on the back of it, or perhaps poison. She was relieved when Shadowclaw settled her in her usual place, to his right, where he sat between her and Ysuroth.

Ysuroth tsked. "This will never do. You are a hulking brute, Shadowclaw and I can scarcely see my bride's lovely face."

Shadowclaw sent him a sharp glance, but after a pause significant enough to display a great deal of reluctance, he got up and moved to the left of Angeline.

Angeline did not move down.

Ysuroth decided to ignore it. "I am pleased with my pretty little bauble," he murmured when Shadowclaw had settled. "Pleased to see that you have taken such ... excellent care of my property. She cleans up rather well. Do you not think so, Shadowclaw?"

Shadowclaw sent him a cool look. "Aye, my lord."

He was baiting them, both of them, Angeline realized as she focused her gaze on the trencher of food set before her. She did not know whether to be relieved that Ysuroth seemed content at the moment to merely play at cat and mouse with the two of them, or unnerved that he seemed to be deriving so much pleasure from it. She supposed she should be relieved. Whatever Ysuroth's reasons for tormenting them at least it gave them time they might not otherwise have had.

Time for what, she asked herself?

What could Shadowclaw do to protect either himself or her, particularly since it seemed obvious that he would not even have the element of surprise? From what she had overheard, most of Ysuroth's army was outside their gates, engaged with Sangrey's men on the bluff across the ravine from Bloodsbane. But even she could see that the men he had marched round the mountain to come up on the postern road outnumbered Shadowclaw's men two to one.

And they were not actually Shadowclaw's men. He was their master, but Ysuroth was overlord and ultimately their fealty was to him.

She hardly thought it mattered how she behaved, whether she looked at Shadowclaw or did not, but she clung to Sara's advice because she could think of nothing else to do.

She did not look at Ysuroth either. It took all she could do to pretend an interest in her food as it was, and to calm her rebellious stomach. She rather thought that if she looked at the man seated across from her at the head of the table she would disgrace herself again.

"It was most gracious of you to give up your own chambers for my use while I am at Bloodsbane," Ysuroth purred. "I am gratified to be offered the best that Bloodsbane has to offer."

Shadowclaw lifted his head to study his overlord for a long moment. "We are soldiers here. The outpost is remote and not readily accessible. We have no need for

luxuries ourselves, nor enough visitors to warrant the purchase of finer things.”

Ysuroth’s lips curled in a cat-that-ate-the-cream smile. “But, surely you anticipated my coming when you sent word that Sangrey’s army was gathering? Particularly when you were so conscientious as to point out that you were holding my lovely little pawn--I beg your pardon, my lady--bride--here--on the border?”

Angeline was not certain whether the look of surprise on Shadowclaw’s face was real or feigned. Apparently, neither was Ysuroth. “Did you send word that you would come in person? I had not anticipated it, no, for I have never known you to concern yourself with overseeing border skirmishes.”

Ysuroth was effectively silenced for a time, focusing on his food. Despite Angeline’s reluctance to look directly at the man, she noticed. She did not think she could have helped but notice, for although he wore the trappings of a great lord, he had none of the niceties of manner. He ate like a pig, dripping gravy and meat juices down his chin and the front of his clothing, scattering crumbs and other far more revolting debris around him, and consuming in a very short time enough food for three men.

She could not imagine where he put it all.

“I was not pleased at the lost of Darkraider,” Ysuroth said when he had finally had his fill and drained his goblet to wash it down.

Shadowclaw sent him a steady look. “No? I would not have thought he would be a great loss.”

“Is that why you slew him?”

Shadowclaw did not even blink. “Yes.”

The shock wave that went through Angeline was so sudden and profound, everything around her seemed to recede for several moments, light, sound, warmth.

Apparently the bold reply took Ysuroth off guard, as well.

“And yet you allowed him to leave Bloodsbane? If you had reason to consider that it would be in my best interests to dispose of him, why allow him to leave at all?”

Shadowclaw shrugged. “I did not realize then that the reason he had failed you was because he had an ... unhealthy interest in the woman.”

Heat washed over Angeline at that that was so fiery in contrast to the cold that had gripped her moments before that her flesh stung with prickling sensation.

“And?” Ysuroth prompted.

“He had not had the opportunity, yet, to eliminate her usefulness, but he was to return for her and I saw no reason to allow him to do so when I knew he intended to betray you if the opportunity arose.”

“This conversation distresses you, my dear?” Ysuroth purred, transferring his attention to Angeline abruptly, although she very much doubted that he had been completely unaware of her any of the time.

She said nothing. She could see no reason to when it was patently obvious that he had already noticed her distress. In any case, bile had risen in her throat and she was struggling against the new revolt. Only the fear that Ysuroth would interpret her loss of control as Sara had suggested gave her the strength to battle it into abeyance. After a moment, she reached for her mug and took a cautious sip of the ale, hoping it would steady her nerves.

“Cat got your tongue?” he asked caressingly.

Anger sparked to life. She could see he thought himself very clever and

suggestive without mentioning Shadowclaw by name.

"I saw no reason to state the obvious, or try to deny my distaste for the subject," she said unsteadily.

She had no idea how Ysuroth might have responded to her impertinence, but he was distracted at that moment by a commotion near the entrance. A messenger had arrived, and he strode quickly to the high table and knelt. "You have news of the battle?"

"Yes, my lord. We have driven Sangrey's men back to the pass. I was sent to ask if you wished for us to hold them there or press forward."

"So quickly?" Ysuroth asked, looking very pleased for several moments before he began to drum his long, talon-like nails on the table top. "This is almost anti-climatic," he added musingly after a moment, somewhat petulantly. "I had thought they would put up more of a fight."

Angeline shifted, wondering if she might take Ysuroth's distraction as a dismissal, or at least the opportunity to escape. He moved like a striking snake, hooking one of his talon-like nails in the ring in her breast and giving it a sharp tug that made her wince. "What do you think, my precious?"

A tremor went through Shadowclaw even as Angeline went still. His hand, resting on the thigh nearest Angeline, balled into a tight fist. She dropped her hand to rest on top of his fist for a fraction of a second and removed when she felt the tension ease in him slightly. "Enough men have died, surely?" she managed in a shaky whisper.

"Do you agree with her, Shadowclaw?"

A muscle worked in his jaw. "That would depend upon the objective."

After studying Shadowclaw for a long moment, Ysuroth turned to look at the messenger again. "Yes, the objective. Did you leave Sangrey's head by the door, by chance?"

The messenger turned ashen. "We have not managed to lay him by the heels, my lord."

"Then why did you come to ask me what to do?" Ysuroth growled in a voice that grew in volume until he was nearly shouting and a deathly quiet settled over the hall.

The messenger's mouth worked. He grabbed his throat as if some invisible hand had caught it in a vice grip, clawing, gagging. His face turned red and then purple. Angeline made an abortive attempt to jump to her feet and then gasped and stilled when Ysuroth's fingers tightened painfully on her nipple ring.

Abruptly, Ysuroth released whatever hold he had upon the poor man and he began to gasp and choke. "Go back and tell that moron, Childen, that he is to decimate the army! Decimate it! And he is not to stop until he has brought me Sangrey's head for daring to breach my border and lay siege on Bloodsbane if he has to chase that weak, sniveling coward all the way back to his lair. Is that clear enough?"

"Yes, my lord!" the man gasped, almost falling on his face in his haste to bow and scrape before he made his escape.

"Now, where were we?" Ysuroth asked almost pleasantly when the man had dashed away. He stared musingly at the nail he still had laced through Angeline's nipple ring and finally released it. "I believe we were about to discuss our nuptials, my precious," he said in a purring voice, flicking the ring almost idly back and forth with his nail. "I confess, I had ... other things on my mind when I left to collect my little stolen bride," he added with a glance at Shadowclaw. "But she is such a dainty little thing, and

quiet flawless, as I am sure you have noticed, that she inspires me to consider my lack of an heir. I believe she is worthy of a king. Do you not?"

Shadowclaw's face was stony. "I would not presume to judge," he replied coldly.

"Perhaps it is only that you have not looked at her that you feel you can not make a judgment? Stand up, my dear, and allow Shadowclaw to see how truly flawless you are."

Reluctance settled in the pit of Angeline's belly like a rock, but she did not dare argue. With an effort, she got up from the bench and stood. Ysuroth, to her horror, stood, as well, moving around to hover over her and turn her first one way and then another, pointing out the round fullness of her breasts by cupping each in his hands and then her waist and belly and her buttocks while Angeline struggled to keep herself from shuddering noticeably. Shadowclaw's gaze was hard as it moved over her with a reluctance that matched hers.

"As you say, flawless," he said finally.

Ysuroth smiled thinly. "You are not enthusiastic. Have you no taste for women then? Or perhaps it is only that you find it as difficult as I do to find women who share our enthusiasm for the darker side of pleasure and so you do not have much to compare her with? Ummm?"

He pinched Angeline's buttock and then slapped it. "Run along, my precious, and get your beauty rest. We will have time to become better acquainted tomorrow, and I do believe that you are disturbing my very dear Shadowclaw with that pale little face."

Angeline was more than happy to go. Without looking at either man, trying not to look as relieved as she was, she left the great hall and climbed the stairs. She checked when she reached the top of the second flight of stairs, dragged from her rambling thoughts by the abrupt realization that she had been moved down the hall. Feeling positively ill at how nearly she had followed the habit of going to Shadowclaw's room, she hurried to 'her' room and went inside.

There was no relief to be found even there, however, for the women Ysuroth had brought to attend her were waiting to help her prepare for bed. Sara was waiting, as well, eyeing the women as if prepared to wage a territorial battle ... or as if she already had been waging one to while away the time while she waited for Angeline to return.

She did not want Ysuroth's creatures around her. More than that, she simply wanted a little time to herself to try to come to terms with what had transpired downstairs. She knew she was not going to get it, however, until she had climbed into her bed--mayhap not even then, but certainly not before then.

Yielding to the inevitable, she sent Sara off and allowed the women to help her ready herself for bed before she sent them to seek their own pallets. She did not know where they would sleep when the castle was filled to overflowing, but she was not the mistress and it was not her concern where they slept, so long as it was not in the room with her.

They were gone for perhaps thirty minutes and then returned with their bedding, settled it on the floor of her room and made themselves at home.

Gritting her teeth, Angeline put her back to them and resolutely closed her eyes, trying to empty her mind of any thought at all. She roused the following morning when the maids got up and dressed, but since she felt very much as if she had only just closed her eyes, she rolled over and covered her head.

It was light outside the window when a scraping noise roused her the second time and Angeline opened her eyes as Sara directed the two servants dragging the heavy tub. "I've seen ta it tha tub's been thoroughly scrubbed. I figured ya might want ta make use of it for his worship got back."

That comment brought Angeline thoroughly awake. "He is gone?"

Sara's lips flattened. "It's nae good ta look so hopeful, deary. He's only gone with tha master ta oversee tha fightin'."

Angeline contained her impatience with an effort while the men brought the water in and filled the tub. When they had gone, she climbed out of the bed and moved to the tub. "Shadowclaw is gone, as well?" she asked as casually as she could as she sank gratefully into the water.

"Aye, I said so, did I nae? An' most of tha men, but if yer thinkin' what I think ye are, ye might as well forget it. Them he brung with him are downstairs. They'll be followin' ye step fer step."

It had not actually occurred to Angeline even to attempt an escape. She knew she had no chance at all with so many soldiers in the area. "I was not thinking about that. It is only ... Do you think that they will go into battle?"

"Nae his worship. He's far too fond of his hide fer that, an' would nae want ta be put ta tha trouble of having ta use his powers ta protect himself when he's got plenty 'o men ta fight an' die."

Angeline frowned. "I did not think there was much hope that that creature would fall in battle."

"Yer hopin' tha master will?"

Angeline sent her a horrified look. "Do not say such a thing!" she gasped and then frowned at the knowing look Sara sent her. "I would not wish evil on anyone," she added a little stiffly.

"Cept his worship."

Angeline decided to ignore that. "He spoke last eve as if he meant to force me to marry him. Do you think that he was only taunting ... me?"

Sara shrugged. "I'm thankful ta say I do nae know tha man well enough ta say what he would do. If I was ta go by what I've heard tell of his worship, though, I'd guess he just mostly likes ta toy with folks, ta watch them squirm. He's got spies everywhere, deary. An' even them that might nae want ta be's more'n willin' ta tell him whatever he asks. Ye seen what he did ta that poor lad, an' him nae more'n a messenger."

Angeline shivered and finally covered her face with her hands. "I think my father was right. I would be better off dead."

"Shush! Ye should nae be talkin' like that, deary. Where there's life, there's always hope."

"My father told me once that hope was for fools who had the unrealistic expectation that everything would turn out all right when there was no reason to believe that it would," Angeline muttered glumly.

"I do nae think I much care fer yer father, deary, if ye do nae mind me sayin so. Or if ye do, fer that matter," Sara said tartly.

Angeline could not help but feel a spark of anger at the remark, because he was her father, after all, but she let it pass because she simply was not up to trying to defend him or his actions. She saw when she had finished her bath and stepped from the tub that

Sara had pulled yet another bridal gown from the trunk. "Is there nothing else in there?" she asked in dismay.

Sara shrugged. "Nay."

"I would almost prefer to go naked."

"I do nae expect tha men would mind, but his worship might. An' I'm fair certain tha master would nae be pleased."

Sighing, Angeline allowed the woman to help her into the gown. She had not been serious. As revolting as the thought was of wearing the things that Ysuroth had brought, had chosen, she thought, specifically to torment her, it would be easy enough to ignore all of that so long as Ysuroth was not around.

"Ye've slept right past tha mornin' meal an' it'll be a while yet 'fore tha noon meal. I could bring ye somethin' from tha kitchen, though, if ye'd like."

Angeline shook her head, smiling faintly at the elderly woman. "There is no sense in you climbing the stairs when I am not even hungry. How are the wounded faring?"

"Some well enough ta be glad they were nae well enough ta go out when Shadowclaw gathered men ta go out an' fight. Two have died an' mayhap a half dozen more have tha fever an' likely will die."

"I will go down and see if I can think of anything to do for them," Angeline said decisively.

"His worship's only lookin' fer somethin' ta spring ta trap, deary."

Uneasiness went through Angeline, for she knew that Sara was right, but she pointed out that he was not in the castle at the moment. And he was not likely to catch her off guard with his innuendos about her behaving as if she was the mistress of the castle a second time.

When Angeline had checked the men Sara indicated and Angeline saw they did indeed have fever, she went into the kitchen to see if she could find the herbs she needed to brew a tea to reduce it. Sara followed her. "It does nae bother ye ta tend soldiers of yer enemy?"

Angeline glanced at the woman sharply. "I do not think of Shadowclaw as my enemy."

"Tha men here are Ysuroth's men, when all is said an' done. An' they're bent on slayin' yer countrymen."

Angeline frowned as she selected the herbs and found a stone to grind them into powder with. "I have no country," she said after a few moments. "No home, no allies, no countrymen. My father sent me to wed a man who is guilty at the very least of misusing his wives, and at the worst, murdering them whenever the whim strikes him. He tried to kill me himself when I went to plead for peace for the people here.

"I have been used as a pawn to start a war that has nothing at all to do with me and it seems to me that my life is forfeit whatever I do. So I will do as my conscience guides me, and that is not to ignore the suffering of those around me if I can do aught to help.

"In any case, it helps me to take my mind off of my own troubles and I would do it for that reason even if it did not bother me to watch people suffer when I could do something to stop it."

Ministering to the wounded did not completely take her mind off of her own

troubles, but it did occupy her hands and mind enough to help ease the strain of waiting and wondering what was happening. Unfortunately, as the day progressed, her anxieties grew and her tasks diminished. The urge grew upon her as the sun began its downward trek to go outside and climb the defensive walls to see if she could see any sign of Shadowclaw. She fought it for a while, certain that she would not be allowed to climb up on the walls even if she did go out, but finally she could not bear it any longer.

Gamon, she discovered, had been left in charge of the castle's defenses while Shadowclaw went out to join the rest of Ysuroth's army. He met her at the top of the stairs and told her to go back. Angeline scanned the men lining the outer wall and returned to the captain. "There is no danger now, surely, with the fighting so far away?"

"Ye have nae business here. Go tend yer mendin'."

Angeline's eyes narrowed. "This is not my home, but my prison. I have nothing to do here but wait for my fate to be decided. I have not been allowed outside for days. It can not hurt for me walk a while to take a little fresh air."

His lips tightened, but finally he moved out of her way and allowed her to gain the walk. Tamping her sense of triumph, Angeline divided her attention between the view beyond the walls and her feet as she strolled along the top of the wall. The sounds of war were more pronounced atop the wall, for the wall itself blocked much of the noisy business of men killing men, but it was still dulled by distance. Machines of war, broken and partially burned, littered the ridge across from the castle. Bodies littered the ground, as well, for there had been no opportunity for Sangrey's army to collect their dead. Carrion birds circled overhead but flocks of them already hopped along the ground, picking at the bodies and fighting each other over the corpses.

Sickened, Angeline did her best to ignore the sight, focusing on the distance where she could see that the army, or at least a part of it, was far closer than she had believed it would be. Either the messenger had been over confident, or Sangrey's army had turned when they had reached the pass and begun to regain the ground they had lost.

Try though she might, however, she could see no sign at all of Shadowclaw. She had already accepted that her hope of catching a glimpse of him would go unrewarded when she heard the pounding of hoof beats that heralded the approach of riders, a good many riders. She was so focused on straining to watch for them along the road approaching the castle entrance that it was not until she heard the commotion at the postern gate that she realized the riders she had heard were coming up the back road.

Her heart surging with hopefulness that it was Shadowclaw returning, she froze to watch as mounted riders trotted through the rear gate and into the courtyard. Ysuroth was already through the gate before it dawned on her that she did not want to be seen on the defensive walk and by then it was too late.

Even as she began to move as quickly and unobtrusively as possible toward the stairs, Ysuroth looked up and spied her. She checked when she saw him turn and stride toward the stairs to meet her, but realized at once that there was no hope for it. There was no other way down.

He gained the walkway and strode toward her. A shiver went through her when she saw the look in his eyes. His thin lips curled in a parody of a smile. "Surprised to see that is I who have returned, my precious?"

Chapter Twenty One

A cold wave of terror went through Angeline, annihilating any possibility of rational thought. "Did you do something to him?" she gasped fearfully, her voice little more than a hoarse whisper.

All pretense of humor vanished from his face as completely as if it had never been there. He seized her arm with surprising strength and dragged her over to the wall, releasing his grip on her arm then and caging her with his arms against his body. "Do not be so concerned about your lover, my precious," he murmured in her ear. "He will be along presently I am certain, for he has shadowed my movements the entire day. He will have realized by now that I am here, with you. And then we shall see if he is as smitten with you as you are with him."

Appalled at the blunder her fear for Shadowclaw had led her to, Angeline struggled to free herself from his grip. He only coiled more tightly, constricting her until she could scarcely drag in enough air and darkness began to swirl threateningly around her.

"You made it too easy, my precious," he whispered near her ear. "I am vastly disappointed for I have found this far more entertaining than anything else in many years. One becomes jaded after a time, you must know, and it becomes harder and harder to find any sort of challenge in a battle of wits such as this."

"You are mad," Angeline gasped, realizing it was probably useless even to try to recover her mistake but desperate to try anyway. "The sick things that you have done have turned your mind until you see treachery where there is none."

His arm tightened so abruptly around her that it squeezed the air from her lungs. Angeline was a little surprised she did not feel one of her ribs crack. "Take care, my dear. You do not need your tongue to bait my trap."

Angeline subsided, not because of the threat but because she had to focus on trying to drag air into her lungs to fight the darkness that had filled her vision until she could not see, and the heaviness that was stealing over her until she could scarcely hold her head up.

"There, you see, my precious? I told you he would come for you!" Ysuroth exclaimed, excitement threading his voice.

Angeline blinked as she felt herself being dragged along the walk, trying to clear her vision, but she could barely pierce the darkness. She could hear the thunder of hoof beats, however. Shadow, she thought despairingly, knowing she had sealed his doom, trying to jog her mind for something she could do to prevent him from riding blindly into Ysuroth's clutches.

Go back, she thought as she heard the rattle of the chains as the men began to lower the drawbridge and the creak and groan of the gate and portcullis being opened. Dragging as much air into her lungs as she could, she voiced the thought. "Go back!"

Ysuroth released her abruptly. Stunned, Angeline grappled with the why of it even as the shift in her equilibrium screamed in her mind that she was falling. She did

not stop falling, did not hit the wall or the floor of the walk. She fell on and on as if she would never stop. The roar of air past her ears altered became the thundering roar of the Chimera and Angeline realized belatedly how Ysuroth had intended to use her to spring the trap. He had pitched her from the castle walls into the ravine.

The collision was not what she had expected. Heat enveloped her. The breath she had only just managed to collect in her starved lungs was knocked from her and darkness descended as abruptly as a slamming door. It was neither deep, nor profound, however. Although she was only vaguely aware of striking the floor of the walkway at last, she felt it in the jolt that seemed to travel through her entire body.

Still disoriented, she struggled to push herself upright, driven by the need to warn Shadowclaw. She saw as her vision began to clear, however, that it was far too late to warn Shadowclaw of anything.

She had not imagined the roar of the Chimera. Shadowclaw had shifted, had caught her and brought her back to safety. As she watched in horror, he lunged at Ysuroth, swiping at him over and over again with his great claws, roaring in rage as he snapped at Ysuroth again and again with his powerful jaws.

And yet he did not strike once.

Moments passed before Angeline could even grasp that much and moments more before it slowly sank into her mind that Ysuroth was holding him at bay with his magic. The flicker of hope that had sprung to life inside her died a swift death, for even as she realized that Shadowclaw could not pierce the sorcerer's magic, Ysuroth gained the upper hand, forcing him back inch by inch, forcing Shadowclaw's familiar back inside of him until it was the man who challenged his master, not the beast. For several moments more Shadowclaw struggled. Abruptly, a powerful blast shot from Ysuroth's fingertips, slamming into Shadowclaw and pitching him backward. Angeline screamed as Shadowclaw flew off the walk and landed on his back in the courtyard below. Before she could gain her feet and rush down to him, Ysuroth seized her by her hair, almost yanking her off her feet.

He was breathing heavily as he jerked her around to face him, sweat pouring from his pores and slicking his thin red hair to his skull. "Witch!" he screamed at her, shaking her until she thought her neck would snap. "Do you think your pathetic powers even begin to match mine?"

Stupefied by his accusation, Angeline merely gaped at him uncomprehendingly.

"Seize him!" he roared, transferring his attention immediately from Angeline to Shadowclaw. "Chain the traitor to the whipping post!"

Shadowclaw, Angeline saw as Ysuroth began to drag her toward the stairs, had regained his feet. He did not yield easily. More and more men rushed to join the fray as Shadowclaw downed one after another with powerful blows of his fists until, finally, he went down under the sheer weight of numbers.

Uttering a scream of helpless rage as she watched Shadowclaw hauled to the post and chained, Angeline whirled abruptly on Ysuroth, catching him so off guard that she managed to claw trenches down both his cheeks with her fingernails before he wrapped his hands around her throat and choked her until she lost consciousness.

She found herself lying in the dirt when she swam up toward awareness again. It took her a moment to interpret the meaty thuds echoing in her ears. Slowly she lifted her head and found herself staring into Shadowclaw's eyes. Something flickered in them.

Relief, she thought, feeling ill as she dragged her gaze from his and looked at the man wielding the whip just as he brought the leather strips down on Shadowclaw's back again.

His facial muscles tightened at the blow. His entire body flinched, but he gave no other outward sign that he was even aware of the leather slowly and painfully cutting the flesh on his back to ribbons.

Angeline flinched as well, feeling her belly tighten painfully in empathy. She made an abortive attempt to rise and found she couldn't. Her hands were bound behind her back. Undeterred, she managed to get her knees under her, but a hand clamped on the top of her head, pushing her down again.

Coughing at the dust that clogged her throat, she twisted her head until she could look up at the man behind her. She discovered that he was not a soldier as she had expected. Instead, she saw Ysuroth leering down at her.

Leaning down, he grabbed a handful of her hair and used it to pull her upright. "You can not see from there, my precious?" he growled. "Let me help you, then. I do not want you to miss a moment of it."

Angeline's gaze met Shadowclaw's again as Ysuroth pulled her head back until she'd begun to think her hair would come free of her scalp or her neck snap. Shadowclaw's eyes blazed with explosive fury. He lunged against the chains manacled him to the post. The post shuddered against his thrust, but remained standing. The chains strained, but held.

"Twenty!" the soldier wielding the whip yelled, allowing his arm to drop by his side, his chest heaving with exertion.

"You know, I do not believe he has learned his lesson yet. Again!" Ysuroth purred.

"Don't! Please don't!" Angeline gasped.

"What's that, my dear? Fifty!"

"Nay!" Angeline cried.

"She says twenty is not nearly enough. Fifty this time."

"Please!" she sobbed, no longer able to see Shadowclaw's face for the tears blinding her as the man began to lash him again with the whip. "Do not hurt him any more! Do not do this! You will kill him!"

"I am certain you are wrong, but if by chance I am mistaken you must realize that he will die happy, my precious!" Ysuroth murmured beside her ear. "He enjoys this. I taught him to enjoy the pain so even while his flesh is torn from his back strip by strip and his blood drains from his body, you may be sure that he will be feeling the heights of ecstasy. I almost envy him."

Angeline blinked the tears from her eyes, struggling against a wave of nausea. "He is not like that," she said numbly, staring at Shadowclaw hopelessly. "He is not like you!"

"No? What a pity!"

"I will do anything," Angeline babbled. "Only make him stop. I can not bear to see him hurt. Please, please stop."

"Anything? Well, that is intriguing!" Ysuroth said in a pleased voice. "What would you do, my precious? Take his place?"

The question took her breath. She glanced at Shadowclaw and saw that he had

heard, saw him shake his head. She licked her lips. "Yes."

"No!" Shadowclaw roared, jerking at the chains again. "I gave you my gift!"

Angeline's heart jerked as if he had fisted his hand around it. But doubt immediately assailed her that she had understood. She could not speak his secret name without making others aware of it.

Ysuroth froze in the act of pulling her to her feet, snared as surely as Angeline was and likely because he had realized what Shadowclaw meant.

Realizing his inattentiveness was all the chance she would get, Angeline whirled abruptly and slammed her foot into Ysuroth's knee cap.

Ysuroth lost his balance at the blow, slight though it must have been, jerking her off her feet as he fell backwards. The fall winded her, but Angeline scrambled up at once. Freeing her hair from Ysuroth's slackened grip, she stumbled toward him. "Cain! Summon your familiar to free yourself," she gasped out when she fell to her knees a little more than a yard shy of her goal.

Around the courtyard, men frozen with surprise when Angeline managed to knock Ysuroth off his feet, yelled and began to pound toward her. Glancing frantically up at Shadowclaw, Angeline saw that he seemed locked in an inner battle as he struggled to summon his beast.

Ysuroth was holding the Chimera at bay, she realized in dismay. Muscles and tendons stood out in Cain's arms, his chest, his neck as he struggled to send Shadowclaw forth. His body contorted, became part man part beast. He uttered a roar of rage that was Shadowclaw's alone, jerking and slamming against the whipping post.

Ysuroth was too strong, Angeline realized as hope began to drain away. She had no powers to fight him with, to help Cain control his beast and Cain, however determined, however ferociously he fought, could not break the hold on him.

For a few moments, they all seemed frozen in time, suspended in motion and then Ysuroth surged to his feet and his men surged around Cain, swords raised. And then, as suddenly as Shadowclaw had appeared, he vanished as Cain lost the battle and sank toward the ground, held up only by the manacles around his wrists.

"Shadow!" Angeline cried out, trying to get her feet under her to run to him, terrified that he was dead.

Ysuroth backhanded her as she managed to get to her knees, sending her sprawling, skidding painfully along the dirt. Through pain and tear blurred eyes Angeline look up at the man. He was ashen, shaking, though she was not certain whether it was from the strain of holding Shadowclaw or pure rage.

"Put them in the dungeon until I have decided what I want to do with them!"

Relief, tentative but hopeful, fluttered inside of Angeline. He must be alive, she told herself, else there would be no reason to put them in the dungeon. She strained to stare at him as long as she could keep him within her view, searching for signs of life as she was seized by a guard and half dragged, half carried across the courtyard.

The dungeon was accessed by way of a trap door set into the floor of the great room near the hearth. Angeline had not noticed it before and had wondered when she had heard the dungeon mentioned how there could be one when she had never seen access to anything below the ground floor. She realized as she saw the men pulling the door open, however, why she had not noticed it before.

The trap door was set into the floor beneath the place where the high table was

generally set up.

Very little light spilled into the black pit, and Angeline stiffened as the guard shoved her toward the edge, wondering if they would merely pitch her in. As men gathered close by with torches, however, she saw a stair leading down. More ladder than stair, it was so steep that Angeline did not manage more than half the steps before she stumbled and pitched forward. The guard leading her made no attempt to break her fall and she landed brusingly on the stone floor below. He helped her up by yanking her to her feet by her hair. Dragging her to a cell, he shoved her in and slammed the door, locking it.

She lay where she fell, trying to gather the strength to struggle up as she heard the other soldiers tramping down the stairs. Shadow landed on the stones in the cell beside her with a solid meaty thud. He did not catch himself. He did not even flinch as he landed limply and Angeline uttered a sob, scrambling closer to the bars that separated them.

Instead of simply tossing him inside and leaving him as they had her, however, two guards entered his cell, dragged him by his arms to the back and clamped heavy manacles and chains around his wrists and ankles.

It was the only sign at all that he was still alive and Angeline could not help but worry that he was not, that they had only chained him because of their fear of him. When she had steadied herself, however, she saw the shallow rise and fall of his chest. Mildly comforted by that discovery, she settled near the bars, watching him fearfully when she saw that his back was a mass of raw, bleeding welts and open wounds.

He had not even been able to heal himself. He had expended all his strength in trying to get free to reach Ysuroth.

"Cain," she called quietly after a few moments. "Can you not summon the magic even to heal yourself?"

His eyelids fluttered and for several moments she held her breath hopefully, but even that small movement stilled.

They were both going to die, and in the most horrible way Ysuroth could imagine.

Swallowing against the knot of misery and fear in her throat, Angeline settled to watch Shadowclaw, no longer certain that she should even pray for his recovery considering what he would be facing. He had suffered enough in his lifetime for ten. He was unconscious, unaware of the excruciating pain from the beating. If she loved him unselfishly, she would pray with all her heart that he would never wake up, that he would slip peacefully away and never endure another moment's pain.

Tears welled in her eyes. She tried really hard not to be selfish about it, but she discovered she was not willing to let him go. She could not bear to think that she would never see him again as he was.

"It is my fault," she whispered. "All my fault. I am so sorry, Cain, so very sorry. I wish ... I wish that I had done so many things differently. I suppose it does not matter now, but you are beloved of Angeline. I do not even know why. I suppose no one ever really does. It is just ... many small things, I think, and ... other things not at all small," she added with a sniff, remembering how he made her feel when they were intimate. When she closed her eyes, she could almost feel his touch, and her mind filled with the answers she had been searching for.

She loved his eyes, loved the way they gleamed when he looked at her with

amusement or doubt or desire, found they fascinated her even when they were tumultuous with anger or confusion. She loved his hands, loved the way they felt when they touched her. She loved the way his eyes would gleam with amusement at times and his lips curl just faintly as if he was about to smile because it not only warmed her with unaccountable pleasure. It made her feel as if she done or said something very clever, earned a gift that was not given easily and was more special because it was not easy to attain.

When she was near him, when she had not seen him in a little while and he would come into a room, it would thrill her to her toes only to look at him, leave her breathless with excitement. And even though he always seemed so remote, so aloof that she thought he hardly noticed her at all as a person, it made her feel special that he always thought of her needs and comfort, always saw that she was taken care of, would not allow harm to come to her if he was near enough to prevent it. And it was the fact that, in spite of everything, no matter how angry she made him, he had not once struck her or even threatened to strike. He made her feel safe and protected. He made her feel beautiful and desirable. And when he made love to her, he made her feel blessed to be alive and to be able to feel such wonderful things.

A whisper of sound next to her dragged her from her rambling thoughts and she looked quickly at Shadowclaw. He groaned as her gaze settled on him.

“Does it hurt terribly?” she asked sympathetically.

He opened his eyes, stared at her hard for a long moment as if he was trying to focus his eyes and finally flicked a look around the room. His gaze came back to her after a moment, moved over her assessingly. “Are you injured?”

Angeline’s chin wobbled. She shook her head, afraid that she would burst into tears if she tried to speak.

Frowning, he dragged his attention to the manacles, testing them. “How long was I unconscious?”

Angeline sniffed. “I do not know. It seemed a very long time to me,” she said in a small voice. She studied it over. “Perhaps thirty minutes.”

He lifted his head to look up at the floor above them, stilled as if he was listening. “No one will come until the castle has settled for the night,” he said finally, more as if to himself than to her.

Angeline felt a flicker of both hope and dread, wondering if he meant that Ysuroth would do nothing for a while, or if he was suggesting the possibility that someone would come to help. She decided it was probably the latter because she could not think of anyone that would be willing to risk it, or able to manage it even if they wanted to help. “Ysuroth said that we were to be put here until he had decided what to do with us.”

He uttered a non-committal grunt. “His predictability is his fatal flaw,” he muttered. “You are still bound?”

Angeline nodded. “They just shoved me in.”

His lips tightened. “Try to move them as much as you can, your fingers if you can not move your hands,” he said absently as he lifted his head to study the ceiling again.

Angeline had the sense that he was waiting for something, expecting something to happen, but she could not imagine what that would be. She got up after a while to try to stretch her cramped muscles, searching the small cell in the dim light for anything she

might conceivably use to cut the cord binding her wrists together. Without much surprise but with a great deal of disappointment she saw that there was nothing she could use as a tool, nothing inside the cell with her beyond layers of dust.

It was cold in the dungeon and she had very little to protect her from the chill. The walking helped but between the chill in the air and nerves, she began to shiver.

“You are cold?”

Angeline sent him a quick glance. She smiled wanly. “You heard my teeth chattering together?”

He looked away angrily, glaring at the manacles he could not free himself from. “A few hours, Angeline. Only a few hours.”

Chapter Twenty Two

Angeline had finally given up on stirring any warmth into her body by pacing the small cell and lain down on the cold floor, curling into a tight knot to hold what little warmth she could to herself when she heard a creak that roused her. She lifted her head, but the light from the single torch in the room barely illuminated the small area near the cells. It did not penetrate the gloom beyond. She had just settled her head against the stone again when she heard another creak. This time, a moment later she heard the scuff of a shoe on the stone floor.

“That was not at all wise, Cain,” said a woman’s voice that Angeline did not recognize beyond the glow of the light.

Cain lifted his head, his brows furrowed as he strained to penetrate the darkness. “It served its purpose, Mother,” he responded coolly. “He expended power he could ill afford in holding me.”

Angeline blinked in confusion as the woman reached Cain’s cell door at last. “Sara?”

The woman glanced at her. Even as Angeline stared at her her features began to change. In a moment, the woman looked nothing at all like Sara. She was not old, but mature, her blond hair threaded liberally with white. Her face was not lined or sagging, but youthful, and the frumpy servant’s gown now followed the lines of a more shapely figure. “What have you done to Sara?” Angeline gasped, abruptly fearful that she had harmed the poor old woman.

The woman smiled at her. “I have not harmed her. I am Sara ... Or rather the person you knew as Sara. I am Aurora.”

Angeline did not believe her, but the woman shook her head when Angeline opened her mouth to question her further and looked down at the lock of Shadowclaw’s cell door, murmuring something beneath her breath. Angeline heard the scrape of moving metal and then the door opened.

Shock went through Angeline. Bemused, she stared at the woman as she moved briskly into the cell and muttered at the manacles holding Shadowclaw. “That was not what we had planned to do,” she told him admonishingly. “And it nearly drained you of strength altogether.”

Shadowclaw rubbed his wrists, transferring his gaze to Angeline. “We had not planned for him to throw her from the walls to her death,” he responded coldly. “She was supposed to be with you, under your protection.”

The woman glanced at Angeline uncomfortably as Shadowclaw shoved past her and left the cell. “She is headstrong,” she said in her defense. “She slipped away because she was worried about you.”

Shadowclaw divided an irritated glance between Angeline and the woman she abruptly remembered he had called mother as he grasped her cell door and shook it. The woman made a hissing noise of impatience and hurried over, pushing at him to move him out of her way. “Men! Main strength is not always the answer! You will wake the entire

castle battering at it.”

When she had murmured the same incantation she had used to open Shadowclaw’s door, and release his manacles, the door of Angeline’s cell opened. “You are the witch!” Angeline said abruptly. “Ysuroth accused me of being a witch.”

The woman shrugged. “Sorceress,” she corrected primly. “He noticed? Mayhap he is not as weakened as we thought?”

She directed the question at Shadowclaw, but he merely grunted as he struggled with the rope binding Angeline’s wrists. She gasped as her hands fell free and pain shot through her arms and hands. Grabbing them one at the time, he rubbed each briskly until Angeline had to clench her teeth at the pain of returning sensation. “Better?”

She caught her breath, nodding, because it hurt too much to speak and she did not want to complain when he had tried to help ease her discomfort. He caught her face in one hand and leaned down. “Liar,” he murmured, covering her mouth in a kiss that was thorough, but all too brief.

“We do not have time for that!” Aurora said testily. “We must go quickly if we are to reach the others before dawn.”

Still thoroughly confused by what had transpired Angeline followed numbly as Shadowclaw drew her from the cell. Reaching up to pull the torch from the sconce on the wall, he lifted it, waved it briefly as he searched the darkness and then tugged her behind him as he strode briskly toward the distant wall. Handing the torch to Aurora when they reached the wall, he ran his hands over the surface for several moments and finally pressed against a stone that protruded fractionally from those around it.

Angeline heard the sound of stone rubbing against stone. An opening appeared. The torch flickered and crackled as a rush of air rolled over them. Angeline resisted when Shadowclaw tugged at her to enter and he glanced down at her in irritated surprise.

“I do not understand ... any of this. This was ... planned? All of it?”

Shadowclaw’s face hardened. “This is not the place or the time for questions. We need to go now.”

Angeline was not certain, abruptly, that she wanted to go with him and the woman he had called mother. Her mind was too chaotic to sort the things she had heard, but the impressions had settled into the pit of her stomach with a sickening sense of dread.

“You are not fool enough to consider staying to find yourself at Ysuroth’s tender mercy?” the woman, Aurora hissed impatiently. “Ask your questions later, when we are not at risk of being retaken!”

Ysuroth, Angeline realized, was beyond doubt the worst choice she could make. She yielded abruptly, following the woman who led the way with the torch. A shiver skated down her spine, however, as she heard the heavy stone door close behind them and felt the narrow walls of the corridor close in around her in the darkness as if she had been sealed in a tomb.

The pace Aurora, who led the way, set was brisk enough that it brought some warmth back to Angeline’s flesh, but the chill inside of her was harder to banish. She should have felt better, easier in her mind as they left Bloodsbane and its frightening master behind, but she did not. Instead, her mind churned over what she had heard and everything that had happened since she had arrived at Bloodsbane and slowly pieced together a puzzle that was unthinkable, that was so diabolical it made her feel ill.

She shied away from it, unwilling to believe that she had correctly assembled the

pieces, but it returned again and again.

No matter how hard she tried to avoid it, her mind kept bringing her back to the fact that Sara had already been at Bloodsbane when she had arrived. And it seemed to her that that could only mean that she had been expected to arrive.

It was possible that the 'plans' Shadowclaw had spoken of had been drawn after she arrived, but she knew that she was a pawn that had been used to ignite war between Sangrey and Ysuroth. Ysuroth had believed the idea was all of his making, but what if it had not been? What if he had been manipulated into seeing her capture as the opportunity that he had been looking for to provoke Sangrey?

Shadowclaw had said that Ysuroth's predictability was his fatal flaw.

No one knew Ysuroth, she doubted, better than Shadowclaw.

Revenge?

Shadowclaw had reason enough to want revenge and if he had somehow chanced upon the woman he had been taken from as a child, or if she had discovered that he was the son she had lost and come to find him, would he not have even more reason to want revenge for all that had been done to him and all that had been taken from him?

She could not figure out who the 'others' were that Aurora had spoken of, though.

It did not seem to fit her suspicion that Shadowclaw and his mother had joined forces to destroy Ysuroth. In any case, if they had had a hand in her capture, then they would have needed allies, or perhaps hired mercenaries.

All of the men who had taken her were dead.

Was that why Shadowclaw had slain Darkraider, not because he had abused her as she had believed, but because he was a part of the conspiracy and knew when all of the others were set upon and slain that he could not trust that he would not also be a victim? Eliminated because he was the only one living who knew?

That did not seem to fit either. She had been with both men when they arrived at Bloodsbane. She thought she would have noticed if there had been undercurrents between the two men.

Abruptly, she remembered the strange comment 'Sara' had made when she had been so upset she had let it slip that Shadowclaw had taken her maidenhead. She had said that he had taken his sweet time about it.

He had done it to prevent Ysuroth from using her to bolster his waning powers, she realized, feeling a knot of hurt fist in her throat so that she could scarcely breathe, not because he had wanted her so much that he could not control himself, not to protect her from Ysuroth's evil designs. She stumbled, blinded by the tears that filled her eyes as the realization sank in that he had been using her for his own agenda the entire time.

Shadowclaw's hand shot out to catch her to keep her from falling.

She sent him a look of accusation as she righted herself, jerking against his hold sharply. He looked momentarily surprised and then his face hardened. Almost reluctantly, he released her.

The corridor they followed seemed to go on forever, climbing for a while, and then descending. From time to time it opened into a cavern, but still they followed the trail that had been marked until Angeline's hurt and anger began to burn itself out with sheer exhaustion.

Stubbornly, she kept pace with them, unwilling to ask for respite.

The sandals she wore protected the soles of her feet somewhat from the rough

floor they traversed, but she was not accustomed to wearing them, and they had not been designed for walking distances. Blisters formed on her feet where the leather rubbed tender skin and then burst. Long before she realized that the light from the torch had been joined by another light source, her feet were sticky with blood and walking had become a pure agony which she stubbornly refused to acknowledge.

Aurora dropped the torch to the floor of the cave as they reached the opening through which early morning light was spilling. Thrusting the heavy brush that blocked the entrance aside, she pressed through it and paused. So weary by then she had to concentrate only to stay on her feet, Angeline moved far enough outside to allow Shadowclaw to exit and stopped gratefully, glancing around to see what Aurora seemed to be looking for.

Her heart seemed to stand still in her chest when she saw the army that was spread across the plain before them. As if they had been waiting and watching the cave, a small party led by a tall man dressed in the trappings of a king separated from the main body of the army and began to ride toward them at a hard gallop.

She glanced uneasily at Aurora and then Shadowclaw. Shadowclaw, she discovered, was watching her, his expression unreadable.

It resurrected the hurt and she looked away again.

Aurora, she saw, had already begun to pick her way down the hillside to meet the oncoming riders. Angeline started to follow her but was jerked to a halt as Shadowclaw grasped her arm. Even as she whirled to throw his hand off, he caught her, scooping her into his arms. She struggled to free herself. "I will walk, damn you!"

His face was grim. "You will not," he growled. "Your feet are raw already."

"Put me down!" she gritted angrily, still wiggling to try to break free.

"You do not want to test my patience right now, Angeline," he growled.

She subsided because she did not want to discover how he might decide to subdue her, but she was still hurt and furious because she could no longer be in any doubt that she had been their pawn, Shadowclaw's pawn in his conspiracy to exact revenge.

They arrived well behind Aurora, but Angeline was too angry at first to notice the man who had leaned down and scooped Aurora up onto the front of his saddle. Confusion filled her at his actions, though. She had thought they must be taking her to Sangrey, for it was patently obvious that they were enemies of Ysuroth. She did not know Sangrey, had never seen him at all, so she had not expected to recognize him.

It seemed odd, though, to say the least, that Aurora had gone to him with such joy, and he had caught her up and settled her before him in the way of a man who was both gladdened and relieved to see his woman.

A jolt went through her when the man lifted his head at last and turned to look at her and Shadowclaw.

He was the image of Shadowclaw, far older, but there was no doubt in her mind that he was blood kin.

"Malik," Shadowclaw acknowledged the man with a nod.

Aurora sent him a reproachful glance when the man nodded stiffly in return.

"Can you not bring yourself to call him father?"

"Leave it," the man said testily, his gaze moving from Shadowclaw to Angeline.

"What of the girl?"

"She has served her purpose," Shadowclaw said harshly. "Send her to Viridan."

King Malik frowned, seemed to wrestle with himself for a moment. "Sangrey and Ysuroth are both weakened and their armies diminished from days of heavy fighting, but we must strike hard, and we must strike now if we hope to crush them before they have the chance to flee back to the source of their powers and regain their strength and rebuild their armies," he said warningly. "We should keep her close."

"No," Shadowclaw said implacably. "Send her away from this or I will take her."

The man's lips tightened. Obviously he was not accustomed to being questioned or his opinion discounted. Finally, he nodded, signaling for the other riders to come forward. "Captain Corelin, you will escort Lady Delgado to Viridan with all haste," he said.

The man saluted. "Yes, sire, with all haste."

Angeline did not even attempt to struggle as Shadowclaw handed her up to the man the king had spoken to. She was too devastated, and too focused on trying not to show it to even consider fighting them.

Shadowclaw stared up at her for a long moment when the man had encircled her with his arms. "Do not be deceived by this fragile vessel you see. The gods created her to make fools of men, for she has the heart and spirit of a lioness, and she is too quick and clever for her own good. Watch her well, for she will do her best to escape you, and I will expect to find her when I come for her."

It took an effort for Angeline to free her gaze from Shadowclaw's, but she did so, refusing to look at him as he gave her guard his instructions. It took even more of an effort not to look back when Corelin turned the horse and he and the dozen soldiers escorting her headed south toward Viridan. For a time, her anger sustained her, but she had not slept more than a few moments since she had been thrown into the dungeon and she had walked much of the night. Weariness overcame her after a while and even the jarring pace of the horse could not keep her awake.

The trek was as nightmarishly unreal as the time when Darkraider and his men had captured her, except that Corelin behaved as a gentleman. They stopped only briefly a few times for her to attend her needs. The remainder of the time, the horses were only slowed to walk to rest and the men rested in their saddles. Thankfully, they were not many days in the saddle as she had been before, for they were no great distance from Viridan, as she had already surmised, and the tunnel they had followed had taken them a good deal closer.

She was too grateful to be off the horse to care much what happened after they arrived at Malik's castle even if she had not been heartsick over what she had learned of the full scope of the conquest of Byzania. It was ironic that the one man that neither Sangrey nor Ysuroth had considered of any significance, Malik of Viridan, was the man who had orchestrated their downfall ... and she did not doubt that he--they--would triumph for they had set the trap very well, using Sangrey and Ysuroth's weaknesses to leach their powers from them. If she had not been used as the centerpiece of the plot she would have admired what they were doing.

She did admire it. From everything that she had heard of Malik, he was a good king and a just and honorable man and Viridan was a prosperous land. That was why she had desperately wanted to flee to Viridan before.

She could not think of anything more noble than ridding Byzania of two of the most evil rulers that had ever been known and uniting the three kingdoms beneath one

good king. She did not resent that she had been a pawn in a noble cause that would help so many people have better lives.

She resented that she had not been asked, because she would have been willing to help, but she supposed they would have felt that they could not chance that she would agree. And if she had known, then there would also have been the risk that she might have inadvertently given that knowledge away.

What broke her heart was that none of it had been real.

She had convinced herself that she had managed what no one else could. She had touched a Summoner. She had been convinced that he cared, at least a little, and that he had begun to feel true affection for the first time in his life.

But she had not. And he had not.

Somehow, he had been reunited with his mother and father and they had known one another--small wonder when Shadow--Cain--was the image of his father--and the family tie had pierced his desert of emotions, setting the entire plot into motion. The determination to be as ruthless as Sangrey and Ysuroth in order to destroy them for what they had done to his family and to him was what had driven Shadowclaw, and she imagined his mother and father, as well.

The sense that she had had that he was protecting her had been real enough. It was just the reasons behind it that she had been wrong about.

It occurred to her to wonder what was to become of her now that she had served her purpose. Would she be 'rewarded' for her service to the new King of Byzania? Settled with a husband who had been paid to accept a soiled bride?

That thought made her want to weep. As hurt and furious as she was she could not imagine being with anyone but Shadow.

Two weeks after she had been sent to Viridan, the triumphant army of the new King of Byzania returned. Angeline had thoroughly exhausted every facet of her emotions by that time, hating Shadowclaw a while and weeping for the love that was never to be because it had never existed in the first place. She had spent part of her time worrying herself sick that something would happen to Shadowclaw in battle, that he would be mortally wounded, or killed out right; fearing that Ysuroth and Sangrey would somehow manage to elude them.

She did not go out to watch the returning heroes. She had not been confined to the luxurious suite where she had been settled, but she did not leave it often and she could not bring herself to leave it when she learned from the maids who attended her that the royals had returned.

Instead, she paced the sprawling living area of her suite nervously for hour upon hour, expecting momentarily that Shadowclaw would come to claim her as he had promised when he had sent her away. And when he did not the fear and anger and hope that had been coiling inside of her slowly waned and grief took its place as the realization sank in that he would not be coming.

She went to the window then and stood watching the wild jubilation in the streets of the city, wishing that she was far, far away because their happy excitement only made her own misery deeper.

The sun had already begun to set when she heard someone come into her suite. She ignored it, certain it was the maids come to light the lamps and candles. She wanted a dark place to hide in.

The footsteps did not move about the room, however. The tread was heavier, stride longer. Her heart lurched even as she turned to see who it was who had come in.

Shadowclaw had paused half the room away from her and stood studying her. She checked when she saw him, lifting a hand to the painful pounding of her heart. It took her a long moment even to recognize him, for he was dressed as she had never seen him before, in the rich clothing of a king's son, the heir to the throne of Byzania.

Angeline stared at him several moments more before that sank in. Abruptly realizing that she was standing gaping at a royal, she sank into a curtsy. "Your grace," she stammered. "I beg your pardon. I had not thought ... had not expected" She halted uncertainly, embarrassed that she had forgotten her manners and could not even find grace in addressing him.

He made a dismissive gesture with his hand, his expression hardening. Doubt and uneasiness flickered in his eyes. He said nothing, as if he could not think what to say. Finally, he lifted his head and looked around the room as if noticing it for the first time. "You have been treated well?"

The coldness inside of her thawed a little, but it was not the warmth of pleasure that he had asked after her. "A cage is still a cage, gilded or not," she said coolly.

He shot her a hard glance, his lips thinning with displeasure. "You have been confined here?"

Angeline swallowed. Somehow she had not even been as intimidated by Shadowclaw the Summoner as she was Cain, Prince of Byzania. "I beg your pardon, your grace," she mumbled.

Uttering a sound of impatience, he closed the distance between them and caught her shoulders in his hands. "The trappings of a gentleman have scattered your wits?" he asked tersely. "Do not speak to me as if I am a stranger."

"You are a stranger," Angeline responded, an edge to her voice now.

His grip on her eased. "I am the same man who sent you here not two weeks since."

A hard knot formed in Angeline's throat then and all the hurt and anger crashed back onto her as if they had never left. "I did not know that man!" she snapped. "He was not the man I had come to He was someone else, someone who cared nothing for me beyond the 'purpose I served'," she gasped tearfully, giving up the effort to try to hold in the pain she could not bear to hold in any longer.

His hands dropped to his sides. He swallowed thickly. "You do not love me?"

Angeline sniffed, mopping at the tears on her cheeks with her hands. "You do not deserve my love! You used me with no care for me at all!"

An arrested expression settled over his features. "I did not say that I did. I asked only if you did love me."

"I loved the man I thought you were!" Angeline said tightly.

Anger gleamed in his eyes, and frustration. "I did what I had to do, what my honor demanded of me, because I had given my word, vowed to do what I could to destroy Ysuroth long before I knew you, before I ever saw you. I could not decide to fail those I had given my fealty to because from the moment I saw you I was divided in my mind, because I did not want to use you to do what we had set out to do.

"The die was cast, the course set. Yes, I agreed to use some nameless, faceless female to draw Sangrey and Ysuroth into war, to draw them from their lairs so that we

could drain their powers and weaken them.

“Ysuroth came because he suspected me of treachery, because I made certain that he would. Shroudskull is the main source of his power and he is ... was invincible so long as he remained holed up there. If he had been certain of my treachery, he would not have left. I had to convince him that it would be safe enough to venture forth, and you were the key to that. The belief that he could always sacrifice you if he found he was weakened, coupled with his desire to watch his enemy die and his need to punish me if he found I had turned on him were enough to bring him out.

“I could not deviate from the plan once it was set into motion or it would have brought the entire scheme to naught and many, many more would have died because of it.”

Angeline shook her head at him, unwilling to accept that he could have done nothing different, that he could not have spared her something. “So you waited until the trap was set to take my maidenhead so that he would not be able to turn back.”

Something flickered in his eyes. “Nothing but the blood on an innocent would have availed him in his black arts. You were not an innocent,” he ground out. “You had already known a man’s touch. Darkraider saw to that.”

Angeline stared at him in disbelief as it slowly sank into her mind that she had not been wrong about him, that it was not as she had thought it must have been because of what Sara--Aurora had said. Perhaps it would have been if Darkraider had not done what he had done, but it was not, and that was all that really mattered, she told herself. The only thing that mattered to her was that he had made love to her, not used her to further the plan to destroy Ysuroth. “Then why did you ...? If I was a maiden still I would at least have something to give to my husband and he need never know that I had known the touch of a man.”

His face hardened. “Because I could not stop myself,” he ground out. “I had taken the greatest of care to see you came to no harm, no easy task when you were so careless with yourself! But you defied me at every turn, risked your life needlessly. Twice you nearly died that day, and I could think of nothing but that I would lose you. I knew I should not dishonor you, but I could not stop once I had started for a madness had come upon me.

“I meant to leave you as I found you. Before the gods, I never intended to take what I knew I had no right to. Believe that, at least, that there was no intention to cause you harm. I know it does not change what I did, but I did it because I wanted you and I could not stop myself, not to use you, not because you did not matter. I took you because you mattered so much to me, because I could not bear to think another would have you.”

He studied her face in baffled anger, grasping her shoulders. “You told me once that love wanted to forgive. I did not mean to hurt you. I am sorry, Angeline.”

Angeline swallowed her tears with an effort, shook her head slowly. Dragging in a shaky breath, she reached up to unlace his tunic. “No. You are not sorry that you did it. You are sorry that I am angry,” she said quietly, tipping her face up to his as she pushed the front of his tunic open and raked her nails over his bare chest. “Before we are done, you will be glad that I am a very forgiving woman.”

His face went perfectly blank for a moment before a half dozen emotions flickered over it in quick succession. A gleam of both amusement and desire lit his eyes. Ever so faintly his lips tipped up at the corners. He released a harsh breath and pulled her

against his chest, wrapping his arms tightly around her and squeezing her before he caught a fistful of her hair and dragged her head back.

His mouth was hot and demanding as it covered hers, his taste and scent intoxicating as it filled her, evoking an instantaneous, hunger. She made a sound of complaint in her throat as he broke away and scattered hot, open mouthed kisses along her neck and the upper slope of her breasts.

It had been too long, she thought, ignoring the popping sound of snapping threads and parting seams as she struggled to relieve him of his clothing. He released his hold on her long enough to shuck out of the tunic, then grabbed her again, pulling her against his bare chest as he covered her lips once, sucking and nibbling at her tongue as he tore at the lacing down the back of her gown.

The ribbon snapped. The bodice of her gown loosened, dropped to her waist as he yanked at the neck and filled his palms with her breasts. She moaned at the pressure as he massaged them, pinched her nipples until they burgeoned, stood erect with the blood pulsing into them.

Dizziness assailed her as he tipped her back over one arm and replaced a hand with his mouth, suckling at it and then nipping it sharply with his teeth.

Fire coursed through her veins, pooling in her lower belly like acid, burning her with need. "Bed," she gasped dazedly as he shoved her gown from her waist and knelt to rake his teeth along her lower stomach, sucking little bites of flesh into his mouth.

"Later," he growled, catching her and swinging her down until she settled on the rug at their feet. Her head swam with the movement. She raked her nails lightly along his arms as he caught her hips, lifting them and tugging at the pantelettes she wore beneath her gown, tearing the tie loose when it knotted and defied his attempt to delve the intricacies of the bow.

She bent her knees as he moved over her, parting her thighs so that he could settle between them, uttering a soft moan of pleasure as she felt his turgid flesh digging into her through his breeches. Arching to meet him, she rubbed her cleft along the hard ridge, feeling sharp currents of pleasure jolt through her as the movement teased her bud and the ring that pierced it. Her woman's place quaked, tightened painfully, wept to sheathe his engorged flesh as she undulated against him.

Breathing harshly with his own needs, he settled on one arm beside her head, dipping his head to kiss her breasts, her throat, and nip at her ear as he tugged at the lacings of his breeches to free himself. She felt his manhood settle heavily against her belly and reached between them to grasp it, massaging it with her hand as he shoved his breeches down his hips.

He uttered a harsh grunt, thrusting against her hold and then lowering himself to catch one of her nipples between his teeth, bearing down. The fever of urgent need descended upon her like a clap of thunder, forking through every nerve ending and setting her body on fire. Releasing her grip on his cock, she grabbed at his body as he began to suck at the tender bud of flesh, digging her nails into him, arching against him, demanding that he assuage her need.

Instead, he continued to pluck at her nipple until she was near mindless and then moved to the other breast to tease it as he had the first.

She raked her nails down his back to his buttocks, digging into them as she arched against him again. He released her nipple abruptly, reached between them to align their

bodies and thrust into her.

Groaning with satisfaction to feel his flesh parting hers, she curled her hips to meet him, digging her heels into the rug. Mindless bliss inundated her senses as he at last sank deeply inside of her and set the pace she had so desperately craved, sending waves of escalating pleasure through her with each thrust and with each retreat. She groaned, feeling her body burgeon, lifting to meet each driving plunge inside of her until her body began to quake with exquisite shock waves of release.

He released a harsh breath, shuddered, began to thrust faster as he reached his own culmination and finally sagged heavily against her, struggling for many moments to catch his breath. Finally, dragging in a deep, shuddering breath, he gathered her to him and rolled onto his side.

More content that she could ever recall being before, Angeline snuggled her face against his chest, glorying in the comforting feel of his body wrapped tightly around hers.

He sighed deeply after a moment. "I do not know if I can ever truly feel the things that you speak of, or be what you want," he murmured against her hair. "All that I do know is that I want what you gave me before, that it has been more painful to me than anything I have known before only to think that you might not forgive me and love me as you did. Stay with me. Be my wife, and I will give you all that I have to give. I will try to learn how to give you the tenderness you yearn for."

Angeline nuzzled her face against his chest. "You are what I yearn for," she murmured. "Be my husband and I will be content."

The End