



Praise for the writing of
Lucynda Storey

Lucynda Storey packs a heck of a punch into the steamy and sensual pages of **The Captive's Release**. Finola is my favorite kind of heroine - sassy, regal, and sharp-tongued. She's been betrayed by someone she trusted and has finally found the man she wants to be with, only to have circumstances prevent them from being together. Blaire is dark, scarred, tortured - in short a man who needs a woman's healing touch. **The Captive's Release** proves that fairy tale endings still happen and Lucynda Storey hits it big with this modern look at "once upon a time". Michelle, Fallen Angels-5Angel, Recommended Read

There is never a dull moment in this action packed adventure. I couldn't put the book down because I had to know what was going to happen next. Ms. Storey's characters are well done and so is the world she created. If you enjoy true to life heroes, feisty heroines, and well developed worlds this is the book for you.

Astraea, 5.5 Magical Wands, Enchanted Ramblings

WARNING

This e-Book contains sexually graphic scenes, scenes of violence and adult language and situations including f/f relations and forced sex situations. Store your e-Books carefully where they cannot be accessed by underage readers.

The Captive's Release

Lucynda Storey

Aspen Mountain Press

The Captive's Release
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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my beloved JR who encouraged my imagination and fantasies.

Chapter One

Finola wanted to escape, wanted to scream. The hot, heavy air in the room made it difficult to properly breathe. The close walls of the throne room were far too confining. Gazing out the window, the lush woods and cold streams beckoned her. In their splendor, she would be able to renew her beaten spirit, find a way out of the diplomatic mess her father had managed to get the kingdom into.

If only Calder were here! Her obstinate father had sent him off on some mission. The slight tapping of her foot gave her anger expression. Fools both of them, Calder for allowing himself to be manipulated and her father for placing so high a price on her maidenhood.

Calder's quick, clever mind would be greatly welcomed in this newest situation. How she longed for his wit, logic, and the strength and comfort of his arms. He always knew the right, stately words of an ambassador to say when she found herself embroiled in a situation like this one. Finola sighed, feigned a smile, and turned from the window and back to the conversation between the King, her father, and the ambassador from Hamre.

"Your Excellency, the king of Hamre expects a messenger within the week. In order to accommodate his wishes, I must send a rider no later than tomorrow. Will you or will you not concede to giving your daughter and her dowry to Lacombe?"

"Father," she genuflected toward him before turning to the ambassador, "Your Excellency. Am I to have no say in this matter?"

The men look at one another warily, the ambassador dressed in ornate, red silk robes with long fringe dripping from the sleeves and hem, her father in his warrior's clothing of hardened leather armor. The former armed to wage a war of words, her father ready for a march into battle, although he had precious few men to turn into soldiers. The tapping of her toes inside her suede boots became more insistent. She would not become a pawn in one of their stupid war games.

"No!" her father shouted.

"I would rather be kidnapped and raped by brigands than be sold to the highest bidder." She glared at them both wishing she had the power of magic at her command. "I will not be taken hostage to the Hamre Empire to live my life in the barbaric conditions imposed upon the numerous wives already forced to live with King Lacombe!"

The ambassador's face grew bright red, but he managed to hold his tongue.

Ignoring his discomfort, she continued, "Surely, your Excellency, you would not confine a woman of my stature and intelligence to living as a concubine?"

"Have you gone daft daughter? You would insult King Lacombe of Hamre? I, and I alone, will decide what is best for our kingdom, and the people of Talone, not you." He paused, perspiration beading on his upper lip. "You will do as you are told. You will bring honor to our house, not disgrace. Now, get out before I have you locked in the tower! Leave the running of this kingdom to me. I will not be usurped by an untried maiden, royal or not!"

Finola spun on her leather-clad heels, her long hair swinging wildly, and stormed from the room, without paying the formal courtesies required by protocol to either her father or the honored guest. Her father could have her flogged for her insult. Physical pain would be preferable to the emotional

suffering she was sure she would endure in Hamre. Hands clenched, she looked for something to strike

Like a horse, she bolted to her rooms, her cotton skirt flying against her thighs in the empty hall. The cool air of her room did nothing to diminish her temper. A few precious belongings, her lyre, her charcoals and a dagger Calder had given her, were stuffed in her seldom-used traveling bag. She pounded her fist on the ancient, wooden chest shutting it with a slam. She would not remain a moment longer than necessary in a house that considered her no more than expendable chattel. Damn their political maneuverings.

"I'll not stay here a moment longer." Let her father wrangle what he wished from the Hamre ambassador. Let them haggle until the moon was high in the night sky. Down the darkened rear stairway she fled. Finola inhaled the fresh air of freedom.

She was on her way, outside the gray, cold palace walls. It would be late before they discovered she was missing. If the Goddess was with her, she might even have until midmorning on the morrow. She twirled, spinning her skirts like the child she had been long ago, making them billow like sheets blowing in the breeze.

Through the grasses that waved their golden, ripened heads at her, Finola walked, head high. She wouldn't get far on foot, but a horse would be missed from the stable by nightfall and its height would expose her above the seasoned grain to any searching from the right windows in the cold, stone keep. Quick capture or theft allegations were not in her plans.

Besides, her father and the ambassador wouldn't suspect she'd fled. How dare her father threaten her as if she were a disobedient page! They'd be busy concocting treaties as they drank the strong wine of the kingdom. She'd have no reprisal to fear from their hands this night.

Finola didn't skulk. At least the tall stalks of grain gave the appearance of bowing to her. She smiled, waved to those limber stands recognizing her

nobility. The very grass saw she was worthy of better treatment, but not her father. The thought settled in her stomach like a stone.

She would not hide while she traveled through her own country. Finola straightened her back, tilted her chin, confident of her people, of her course in light of the most recent political blackmail. Amongst her own people, her father had done away with the first rights of the lords to take the virginity of a maiden. Why had he not afforded her, a royal daughter of the monarchy, with the same rights? Trading her virginity to a king was the same!

Ahead was the deep green forest she'd gazed upon from the throne room window. Following no path here, she would walk until the sun dipped beneath the horizon. "Come, night. Wrap me in your welcoming arms of concealment."

She would greet the magic of night falling and the cooler fresh air. Perhaps she'd finally tire, and with her energy expended, her anger would wane. Perhaps.

Twilight was upon her before she knew it. It gave way to darkness so suddenly she had no time to gather more than a handful of dried, brittle twigs to make a fire as Calder had taught her. Finola hurried to gather more dry wood. She piled the timbers in an uneven heap. Insects made high pitched, screechy sounds. The night did not seem as welcoming as she'd hoped.

Near a fallen log, softened by the weathering of many seasons, Finola cleared an area for her fire. The spongy ground, covered with short, tender grasses would provide comfortable slumber. Sleep would come easier knowing her back at least, was protected by the wood.

With the meager fire for warmth and the handful of nuts she found while wood gathering, she would continue on the morrow well rested. In the meanwhile, she would use the stillness to think, formulate a plan for both appeasing Hamre and accomplishing her father's goals, if such were possible.

She grasped Calder's gift dagger, clutching it so tightly, her fingers began to sting as they numbed and fell asleep. She forced her fingers to lessen their

rigid hold. The insect sounds of the woods dimmed. She was not in danger, yet. But tales had filtered back to the castle of attacks on wayfarers in the woods. She'd stay prepared.

If only Calder would find her and attend to her needs this night. He was the only one she completely trusted. His advice would be sincere and not full of double intents. He always came to her at night. So often had he quietly entered her chambers that he no longer frightened her. She could sense him when he was nearby.

That same insight let her know he was near the log. His presence alerted her, but she did not move, so content was she in her position on the ground. He crouched next to her, his movements slow, deliberate, and languid.

He couldn't help being so sneaky, she supposed. Their relationship was covered in the heavy curtain of secrecy. His life and hers would be forfeit if knowledge of his intimate, and desired touching became known. She slid toward him, to be warmed by his arms around her. The Goddess had answered her prayers.

"Finola, wake up, my Princess."

Her eyes opened to reveal his silken, yellow tresses framing his tanned face. His long hair was tied at the nape of his neck, just reaching his shoulder. She reached toward the thin, leather string that held it back and released his hair. Among the people, hair like his was an honor, a desirable gift of physical beauty. Daughters with hair like his, they would find husbands quickly.

Calder deserved every tribute he'd earned over the long years of unrelenting, unthankful service. Working for her father had come with a price.

His eye color, too, was held in high regard. She envisioned their brilliant blue, which marked him as touched by the Goddess. Among her people, he was the only one to have such eyes. However, none of that mattered now. Calder was here, with her. The world, her world, would certainly get better. He would

apply reason to the knot her father had created, thereby releasing her from her invisible prison.

"You've no idea how I've longed for you to be with me this night."

"Aye. I think I do. I could not keep my mind from you once the sun dropped below the horizon. I searched your rooms and when I didn't find you, I went to the king. Only I didn't have to speak to him to know what your heart told you to do, fair one. He and that buffoon from Hamre were congratulating themselves on a well-made treaty, with you at the center of it. I made a hasty departure without speaking to either." He lifted her higher into his arms and her flesh tingled in anticipation of his kiss, his touch.

"Why are you here alone, Princess?"

"If my father would sell me to King Lacombe, no one could know I'd left. He would find out immediately!" Finola looked into his eyes. "You understand what this means, do you not?"

"Of course, I do. You've run from a possible tyranny worse than that under which you currently live."

"You know?" How could Calder know about the workings of Lacombe's kingdom?

"Aye, Hamre is ruled with an iron fist. A fist that enforces the torture of its citizens for the slightest offense. You are in great peril. I cannot allow you to go to such a place."

Finola rubbed her eyes. "What shall we do? I will not be a prize heifer to be fought over between kings."

She quieted, and waited for his response. His arms, unbreakable steel bands, tightened about her. The silence of the forest echoed her abandonment and betrayal at the hand of her father. "Calder, is there nothing that can be done?"

"Aye, I can think of a few things. None of them pleasant, I fear."

"What can be worse than being held in Hamre, as nothing more than property? Even death is preferable."

"Let us pray, Princess, that it will not be such an irredeemable decision."

"What then? What shall we do?"

His large hand stroked her hair. Longing erupted in her. She nestled closely against his solid chest as he whispered, "Follow your original plan?"

"You know my plan?"

"From appearances, it seems you have no plan other than escape. My darling, you have simply run away, with no plan at all. In that, I can aid you."

Finola sighed. Calder knew her well. He'd always been able to see into her mind, from the time they'd been children playing games of strategy forbidden to women. She snuggled into him closer. "Why can't my father choose you for my husband?"

You know good and well her mind screamed. He has no wealth, no elevated position of noble power. He was nothing more than a child captive, given to an elevated commoner, the palace blacksmith, without a son of his own. Even though he was touched by the Goddess, his birth origins were held against him.

Abruptly, she halted the discussion, before he could reply. "Let us talk on this no further. I simply wish to be here, in your arms. The morrow will take care of itself. We must be careful to make the most of the moments we have together." She wrapped an arm about his neck, and pulled his head closer to hers. "Kiss me."

Behind him, Finola heard the pop of an ember. In the dark, the noise was loud and threatening. But Calder was here, her Calder. Closing her eyes, she gave herself up to the sensation of his rough lips on hers. She ran her tongue over the dry edges, moistening them before she delved into his mouth. He tasted of tepid, tart wine and reminded her of picnics in the summer sun.

His response to her wasn't long in coming. "Is this what you wish tonight, my Princess?"

Roaming the broad expanse of his chest with a free hand she searched for the tiny peaks she loved to torment. Slowly, she stroked a nub through the rough material he wore when he was on the road, ignoring his question. "How was your trip?"

"You know," he gasped, "I cannot reply to your questions intelligently when you abuse me so."

Slowly, she pulled up his tunic and allowed her hands to stroke the warm skin underneath. "Love me."

"A request or a command, my princess?"

"Both. I need you to touch me, as no other has."

Calder laughed. "I should hope not. I would be forced to remove the hands from the body of such a culprit."

With agonizing slowness, he untied the cotton strings of her bodice, releasing her breasts. They pebbled in the cool night air and she anxiously awaited the feel of his mouth on her.

Calder had taught her much about being a woman. He'd pleased her often without compromising her honor, making sure their mutual satisfaction did not come at the cost of her maidenhead. Oh that she'd given herself to him long months back, that she was married to him, that she carried his child in her womb. Then she wouldn't have to be concerned about being sold to the highest bidder or keeping an imaginary political peace.

"Do not delay, my love. I grow desperate."

His mouth conquered hers, forcing her to give up her assault on his lips while one of his hands cupped her breast, and toyed with the already hardened nipple. "I am happy to serve my Princess without hesitation." His whispered words sent chills through her. She moistened between her thighs as she anticipated the sensations yet to come.

Tweaking his nipple, she responded, "As you should be. What other man would dare to place his mouth where you have?" She leaned back in his arms, giving him fuller access to her breasts.

"No other will dare and not pay the price," Calder growled low in her ear.

Even as delightful shivers ran down her arms, she wondered at his words. How could he prevent Lacombe from touching her? She reached for the string on his breeches and loosened them. Beneath the heavy cloth, she could feel his maleness, hard and ready for her touch.

The intimate touching of his cock was her signal to him to touch her in her private place. His warm hand caressed her thigh, and sought out the place of her pleasure, the tiny nub above her damp folds of skin. His thumb rubbed her, making her damper still with need.

Gradually, he entered a finger into her. It mattered not which one, only that he was driving in and out of her as though it were his cock, and he was deflowering her. Faster he went, and she felt him slip another finger into her. "What am I supposed to think?" she said aloud, reciting from a dialogue game they often played.

"This is my cock," he pushed in harder with both fingers, "and I am taking you." His tongue lapped rapidly at the underside of her nipple.

"Yes, your cock. It feels so good." She bucked up against his hand. "Suck me, hard."

Calder took the breast he'd been toying with, and clamped his teeth around the soft flesh just past the nipple as he drew it into his mouth without any pretense of gentleness.

"Don't stop."

He lifted his head for a moment. "Aye. I obey your wishes."

His mouth returned to her breast and tugged on her harder. The sensation of his mouth warred for dominance with the feelings of pleasure his fingers created between her legs. Quivering began inside her, and her muscles

began to stiffen in response as the vibrations overtaking her grew. “Ah,” she cried.

His mouth left her breast and descended on hers, his tongue stifling her cry of pleasure. A hand squeezed her breast again, then twisted the nipple in a pinch that was somewhere between pain and paradise for her. “Goddess!” she screamed into his mouth.

Her inner muscles clamped around his fingers, soaking them with her juices.

“Someday,” he vowed, “it will be my cock inside you, not just a pair of my fingers. No other man will take your virginity but me, if I can help it.”

Finola sat up, got on her knees and took his length into her mouth. His declaration could not be fulfilled. How could this scholarly man protect her from the bed of the likes of King Lacombe? For now though, he would have to be satisfied. Her virginity was not being offered to him, but the chance to spill his salty seed into her mouth was.

Chapter Two

Calder held Finola in his arms as she slept. The things she could do to his body drove him to distraction. That she could suck him better than any whore he'd ever known, even the courtesans given him by the king, was undeniable.

As was the fact that he would never be able to claim Finola as his, no matter how badly he wanted her. She was of the highborn nobility. Comparatively, he was a well-educated commoner, of more worth than a peasant, but not of the same class.

The object of his lust stirred in his arms and he pushed a strand of long dark hair from her face and tucked it behind her ear. Her father had made it clear that Calder was not the man to wed Finola. Summoning Calder to the throne room, the king charged Calder with keeping Finola pure. If she were found no longer a virgin, the king would blame Calder and exact his punishment by removing his head from his shoulders. He rubbed his neck, remembering the credible threat. Finola was to marry the King of Hamre. Calder would find another woman to wed and bed.

That would be easy. Calder had lain with many women in and out of Hamre and Talone. For the past year, he'd dallied with Finola as a part of his plan to win her trust. She'd told him many things about her father's aspirations. Information he had sold to King Lacombe on several occasions for a goodly price.

And now, the little fool was running away from her father's decree. Until such day as she would wed, he protected the innocence between her legs, her only real value to either royal house, or himself.

"Calder?"

"So, you are awake," he said as tenderly as he could manage. "Have you decided on the course of action you will take now that the sun has touched the morning?"

"You have such a way with words." She stroked the stubble of his cheek. Her soft hand on his skin brought him more pleasure than she knew; lit fires within his loins that demanded to be extinguished.

"Mmm. Words are my sword, my lady." Oh, how he wanted her right now. But her virginity was not worth the bounty two kings would place on his head.

"I believe your sword to be elsewhere." She paused, then ran a hand down to the hard-on he'd had through the entire night. "Although I have yet to feel its piercing."

"You are shameful," he laughed half-heartedly. He had to laugh, to douse the flame of desire he had of taking her completely as a real man should.

A frown crossed her face. "I can only be so with you. You allow me to be myself. You give me a freedom that will no longer exist when I am forced to wed the King of Hamre."

"There are alternatives." He could take her maidenhead, spill his seed into her over and over again until she was with child, and claim rape. No king would want to marry a woman so sullied. Then he would beget a royal child off her, which might be enough to spare his life.

He turned the idea over in his mind. Should things not work out as he planned, Finola as a sexual hostage might be something to consider.

"Yes, I could throw myself in front of a runaway carriage."

He tousled her hair. "Would you deprive me of your company, fair one?" If only there were a way he could fulfill his physical needs. Would she suck his cock again?

He brought the silken strands to his nostrils and inhaled her floral scent. No doubt one of her herbalists had created the fragrance of lavender and other flowers just for her.

At this moment, all he could gain from Finola was the most simple of worldly pleasures. Pleasures of the flesh they mutually enjoyed. The Goddess knew he loved controlling her with simple touches to her femininity. How he longed to unleash his passion upon her and take what was rightfully his after months of torture at her hands.

"Perhaps your words can save me, Calder. Perhaps you can set the kingdom on fire with a missive that would call all to stand by my side in a great debate, asking my father to give me the same rights he gives other women." She pursed her lips, then sighed. "No, too many would suffer on my behalf the wrath of my father's anger."

"I doubt even my sword is that sharp, although, a letter purporting to be from elsewhere may give you time to marshal your forces."

"You talk of my armies?" She looked at him with wide, doe eyes. "Of treason against my father? I could not participate in such an action."

"I wouldn't give up your father," he lied. He needed the King's trust to continue playing the two kingdoms against one another. The information he ferried back and forth between the two had filled his coin bag several times over. "It would go against my honor to betray him."

He stood and lifted her with him. "But I cannot send you to that fiend, King Lacombe, not when I want you for myself."

"Women have gone to the likes of him before. I can lay in his bed, cold as a fish, refusing to satisfy him in the ways I have pleased you."

"Do you know what he does with his concubines, especially those that do not make his bedding of them enjoyable?"

Tears formed in her eyes and he watched her shiver, saw the tiny bumps rise on her exposed arms. "Just rumors."

Grasping her arms tightly, he forced her to look into his eyes. "If you do not please him Finola, he will strip you naked and tie you in public on your hands and knees. There, anyone or anything can take you when they please. How they please."

"Anything?"

Good, her voice was tinted with fear. "Yes, things, animals, objects, multiple partners in all sorts of unholy combinations. They will even abuse your body after you are long dead."

Setting her down, he paced to his tethered horse, then back to her, rubbing his hands up and down her arms, trying to stop the trembling he had created. "I cannot betray your father, no matter how angry I am with him. But, I can delay him for a short time. It may give you the opportunity to get away from this place and find sanctuary." He waved his hands around in a wide circle. "And you will have great need of it, for should you be taken after running, there will be no diplomacy to save you from whatever King Lacombe desires."

"Calder, you would do this for me?"

Clenching his teeth together he responded, "There is not much I can do. My war with words will begin as soon as I return to Talone, in order to afford you the possibility to escape the clutches of Lacombe."

"You know I would not be willing."

"And you know you would be dead before the sun set if you did not attempt to please him."

"Calder, take me. Sheath your body's sword deep into my body. Surely, Lacombe will object to being sent a wanton."

Frustrated, wanting to spear her just as she desired, he responded to her entreaty. "Think you that I am satisfied with just coming into your hand or mouth?" Tears threatened to spill from her eyes. Good, let her suffer as he.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I did not know you were not satisfied."

"To play with a man's shaft, to suck it, drink it as you have is nothing but torment when he cannot enter your body," he harshly replied. "And yet you know to enter you thus, and take your maidenhead unmarried, according to your father's law, would take from both of us our lives. Were you not of the nobility, it would be different. Your life is worth much more to me than the pleasure your willing flesh would give me. I'm selfish. I will want *all* the benefits your body has to give me over and over again." He groaned, "but I willingly take those pleasures you are able to give."

As if to show him what he would miss by not taking her, Finola took his hand and placed it under her skirts. The soft down between her legs tickled the tips of his fingers.

"This is madness." He tried to clench his hand into a fist, but the motion had his fingers sliding through her hot, slick folds.

"Nonetheless, do it. I command it of you." She forced two of his fingers into her ready opening.

He could not control his response to her. His cock was harder than his sword, and demanded of him immediate attention. "Then I would drink of your flesh."

She looked at him boldly, moving his hand against her. Imperiously she commanded, "Undress me."

Never before, outside a teasing sexual banter, had she used her rank to order him to please her. The tone of her voice rankled him. With the strings loosened, he pushed the thin material off her shoulders. Her creamy breasts jutted into view. Rose tips hardened with exposure. The light, muted by the branches of the trees overhead, cast a glow on her and she looked more sensual

than the suggestive paintings of nude women he'd seen. She was his, right now, for his gratification. He tried to give his voice a mock seriousness, but Calder knew all too well he meant each word he was about to utter. "You will pay for this, my lady."

Taking her free hand she cupped and lifted her own breast, bending her head and pushing it to her lips. "Would you prefer I pleased myself? Or perhaps found someone to take your place?" Her lips pulled her nipple into her mouth as she forced his hand to rub her.

"Mmm," she moaned. "This isn't half bad."

"Stop it!" The wench knew what she was doing. She was tempting him to rape her. For his plan to succeed she had to remain a virgin, until the appointed occasion. And when that time came, he would bring down Blaire, his arch enemy, the commander of Lacombe's armies, for good. Blaire's wife, a lady of the nobility, had been Calder's stepping stone to power. He should have been Lacombe's confidant, his trusted advisor. He smiled. Blaire had already begun to feel the pain Calder could mete out. But it wasn't enough. Blaire would pay for keeping him from an elevated position in the King's palace.

It was essential to keep his cock out of Finola's deliciously tempting pussy. After his plans came to fruition, he would take her often, any way he pleased. "I know what you are doing, wanton!"

She forced a third finger of his hand into her heat. "Take me," she whispered as she pushed his fingers in deeper. "Make me yours, in whatever way you will."

The desires of his flesh nearly burst through his breeches. "You would put me in control?"

"I am your captive." Her sultry voice wrapped around his desire.

He pulled her hand away from his and brought his glistening fingers to his mouth. He tasted her essence. Her dew made him covet possession of her body all the more.

"You would give all of yourself to me, without questioning?"

Her breath came in short pants, as if she'd just run into the thickly wooded forest. "I would that you would quench the fire that burns between my legs."

Need filled her eyes with yearning. He would release his hard-on within her body. "You care not for your own life, nor mine?"

"I care that I know you carnally as completely as your honor will allow before my life is given over to Lacombe."

He shook his head, amazed by her stupidity. She was giving it all to him. Oh the irony. He stormed to his horse, loosened the strings on the saddlebag and pulled a jar from the enclosure. He made it a point to carry the salve with him. Fucking assholes was something he thoroughly enjoyed, even more than tight, untried pussy.

Setting the jar on the fallen tree trunk, Calder loosened his breeches and let his cock spring free. He would not allow himself to take her virginity. She would still need to have her maidenhead broken by the King of Hamre. Calder might receive up to half of her dowry by delivering Finola, maidenhood intact, to the king.

Calder had taken her first virgin hole by fucking her mouth. The way she sucked him, like she was trying to get every last drop of come out of his dick, made him harden all the more. It was unclear who got the most out of her drinking of his semen but he always enjoyed the results. She was truly more talented than any of the concubines he'd fucked and he'd seen how they trained, experienced it in fact.

It didn't hurt that he liked seeing her grovel in the dirt beneath his member either. He would humiliate her as her father had done to him when the man made him beg for mercy in the dung of the horses stall for failing to curry the King's black stallion. He would fuck her until she could no longer walk. His

dick expanded more at the thought. “Then wench, remove the remainder of your clothing and pay homage to my cock.”

Chapter Three

Raw power coursed through Finola as she let his words sink in. He wanted her. Standing, she pushed her arms out of the leather sleeves so the entire bodice hung from her waist. Reaching behind her she began to untie her skirts.

He gasped and it pleased her. Sometimes she thought Calder immune to her physical assets. With her arms behind her, her breasts were nearly thrust into his chest. He could be swayed to her thinking, if she could keep him breathless like that.

Once the knot was undone, she shimmied, a little swing of her hips that had the skirts sliding into a pool of yellow cotton around her feet. Once complete, she turned to give him a full view of her buttocks as she bent over to arrange the clothing. If she could kneel on the cloth when she took him into her mouth, it would be more comfortable. She stole a look at Calder's face over her shoulder.

Comfortable was not at all how he looked. He held his mouth shut tightly, and his eyes were as big as jousting rings. His hands were fisted at his sides as if he were trying to contain himself from taking her. She smiled. It appeared his resolve to keep her a maiden was dissolving. He certainly seemed to be enjoying the view she was giving him judging by the swelling of his cock.

It was time for just a little more. Finola wanted this mutual release to be unforgettable. She rubbed a hand over her ass cheeks and to the opening of her anus. "I never knew my skin was so sensitive here," she purred as she lightly dragged her hand to the place his fingers had just been. "Ooh."

In truth, it did feel good to lightly touch that area. Would Calder use the knowledge she just presented him with to please her?

"Stop it, Finola. I can't stand your teasing any longer!"

Calder spun her around to face him once again, and she fell to her knees. His rod looked as hard as the scepter her father used. Without hesitation, she took him into her mouth. She grasped his buttocks to pull him in deeper, his balls resting against her chin.

"Gods, Finola. Do you understand how you pain me?"

Tipping her head to look at him, she stopped sucking momentarily. "This brings you a great deal of pleasure. I know how you enjoy my licking and sucking of your cock, how you like to shoot your hot come into my willing mouth for me to drink. I know how you desire to bury that stick within me as deeply as I take you into my mouth."

"Witch! You will kill me with your torture."

She ran her tongue along the purple tip, slipping her hand around the shaft to stroke him. "Your fingers in me tell me how badly you want to drive into me. How badly you want to have me." A precious drop appeared on the head of his cock. She took a finger and ran it around the edge of his hood, then followed her finger with her tongue.

"Stop, before I come on your beautiful face." Each of his hands took hold of a breast.

"You wish me to stop showing you my love?" She was playing with his discomfort now and enjoying it.

"Stand, wench."

Finola came to her feet, head bowed, staring at the magnificent erection he had. "I need you, Calder. Break my maidenhead and fill me with your seed so I can bear your child."

His thumbs rubbed her aching nipples. Her game began to pain her as well. She had to get all Calder would offer if she were going to be gone from him indefinitely.

Groaning, he replied, "Do you trust me?"

"Aye."

"Lay back on your skirts, with your feet drawn up to that lovely ass of yours."

She did as she was told. With her feet so near her butt, her legs fell open. Her femaleness was exposed to Calder's burning gaze. Inwardly, she cheered. He was going to break her maidenhead, she just knew it.

"Put a hand there." He directed her toward her point of pleasure and she complied. "Good, now slide your long finger into your heat." He smiled at her. What was he up to, keeping her open this way?

"The one thing I will say about the women of Hamre, they know how to service their men. Should you be housed with Lacombe's concubines you would be wise to learn the ways of the flesh from them. Those who don't are the ones who end up on the block I told you about."

Anger bubbled through her happiness like boiling water. "What would you know of the sluts of Hamre?"

He knelt down and twisted her tit.

"Ow!"

"They do not tease, nor do they hold back their favors from the one they've selected," he whispered in a voice that did nothing to conceal his frustration.

"I have begged you to take from me all the favors you desire."

"Yes, you have begged when you knew I could not indulge myself." He leaned back, glaring as if he would take them all this very moment.

The thought of him copulating with other women kept her from replying. Images of his thrusting into the cunts of other women froze her.

"Rub yourself," he commanded.

Meekly, she began to stroke herself, reacting automatically to his order.

"No. Rub the nub, then push your fingers down into your opening, then back up again. The way you have pleased yourself the many nights I've been away."

Another chill washed over her. Calder had spied on her? "What would you know of my methods to assuage my desire?"

"I have watched you, my love, when you thought I was not yet back from my travels." Fierceness entered his voice. "The moans from your mouth as you fucked yourself tormented me with lust-filled need. I know exactly what you do, and I want to see it, now!"

Closing her eyes, she wondered which of the nights he'd watched her do exactly as he described. It was the only pleasure she took while he was away. Nothing felt as good as Calder's hands on her. To think he'd seen her and that it aroused him burst through her anger and filled her with an erotic sense of power.

"Harder! Yes, that's it. I want to hear your desire."

Her eyes flew open. Calder's jaw quivered. Her juices, stuck to her finger made sucking sounds that joined her own moans.

"Do you really want me to take you anywhere?"

"Yes," she moaned close to the powerful precipice of pleasure. "Yes. I burn for you."

"Close your eyes, and do not open them. I am going to fuck you silly, as you wish. Now, turn over, and show me that ass of yours again."

With fanfare, Finola turned over and exposed her cheeks. Finally, she would lose her virginity and become one with Calder.

"Keep your eyes closed, and your hand in your slit." Kneeling behind her, he stroked her pussy with his fingers joining hers. "So hot and wet for me."

His wet fingers went to her tight, untried anus. He dipped them in gently, pushing apart the tiny opening. Somehow, he managed to play with her cunt as well as her ass. The combination filled her with hunger for his rod.

"Are you sure you want this?"

"Yes, I want to know what it is like to have you sheathed within my body, to have your hot seed spurting inside me."

Rubbing up against her, she felt his cock push against her ass. She reached back and grasped it, tried to guide it to her pleasure hole. Something thick and slick covered his shaft. He jerked his cock out of her hand and then he pushed into her asshole, his cock head forcing its way past the tight ring.

"Ah!" she cried out.

"I'm sorry if I've hurt you, darling. Just relax, keep your eyes shut. The worst is over now." One of his hands stroked her hair in an attempt to gentle her. He moved into her progressively, inch by inch, her body accommodating him.

"Calder, I . . ." she took a deep breath and felt her body adjust to his girth. The burning pain lessened, replaced by burgeoning pleasure. He continued to rub her slit, the sensations coinciding with his strokes into her ass.

He cut her off. "I am your lord, your master. Address me as such when we indulge one another." His voice was husky, as if there were more he wanted to say but was unable. "Have you ever tasted your lust, Finola? Take it to your lips. Eat yourself."

Never had she before considered tasting her own desire. His had always been enough. Tentatively, she raised her hand toward her lips. Gods, it was wild, wanton to do such.

“Keep your eyes shut, and your fingers in your mouth. Imagine my cock is there.” He pushed into her further, “and in your ass.”

She felt him go in deeper. Then he withdrew, before pushing back in. Her anus stretched to house him. He continued his plunges, each growing harder, entering more fully, until his seed sac nudged her. Her hips moved in time to his more insistent invasion as his hand played with her pussy. Was it possible he swelled more within her?

His fingers grasped her nipple, twisting and fondling it as he rode her hard, as if he'd been possessed. He grunted as his balls slapped against her slit. He released her tit, and grabbed her hips with his hands as he pushed harder and faster, pulling her onto him more fully.

She cried out, a combination of pain and ecstasy as he rammed into her over and over again each thrust going deeper. Each shove into her tightness hurt, even as his cock filled her. How much of his mounting could she take? Long minutes passed. In her mind, she tried to take herself to another time where Calder had brought her pleasure, not pain. His hands gripped her waist, her hair flying wildly as he heaved his considerable length fully into her. Each of his drives into her felt like a wedge used to split a cord of wood. She moaned with each of Calder's loud grunts as he pounded his wedge into her, forcing her open to accept all of him.

Trembling began in her ass, moved to her weeping pussy. How could he hurt her so and have her body react in pleasure?

“Damn!” he cried out, pumping faster as his seed coated her insides, and her anus clasped around him forcefully. Her pussy vibrated and she came with him still embedded in her ass.

Pushing off her firm cheeks, he pulled his cock out of her. Come oozed out from between her cheeks. Barely able to contemplate the loss of her anal virginity, Calder brought her to reality with a resounding smack on her ass.

Then another, then a third and fourth. He slapped her hard. Her ass burned as if it had been branded.

"That's for giving up your virgin ass to me, slut. Now roll over so I can finish you off properly."

Turning, she listened to his last words spoken softly, near her spread legs. Confusion clouded her mind as she tried to understand the reaction of her body to the pleasure and pain she experienced at his hands. He'd called her a slut, earlier a wanton. He'd just finished riding her like some sort of stable animal. And he'd struck her. Never in their relationship had he done anything resembling the treatment she'd received from him this morning. He *was* angry, and frustrated by their inability to fully consummate their relationship.

Perhaps her father had been right, had known that Calder was not the man for her. Her flesh crawled the way it did when she had to go to the dungeon area and help the warden with his prisoners as one of her father's punishments. The doubt lasted just a moment, vanishing completely when he kissed the inside of her thigh. His roughened hand stroked just above the kiss and his warm breath caressed the very spot his lips had vacated.

"You are beautiful." His lips kissed the top of her opposite thigh. "Here." He burned a trail to her knee with his tongue. "And here." The tiny buds on his tongue tickled her as he licked her back up her thigh. "But you are especially beautiful here."

At that moment, Finola felt his lips on her feminine folds as he entered her ass again, this time with a finger. "My, Lord!" she cried out remembering how he commanded her to address him. She did not desire another strike by his open hand.

Never before had he gone to the bud of her pleasure with his mouth. Her legs clamped against his temples, holding him in tighter, her hands on the top of his head, encouraging him to drink deeper. The feelings created by his tongue drove her wild.

"I would have you know that no other man shall live that would take you in this or any other manner save the king you are betrothed to. And not him if I could find a way to prevent it." His hand rubbed the curve of her buttocks. "You are mine, Finola, and we both know it."

His lips continued to devour her. Although it did not seem possible, she spread her legs open further, giving him easier access. The sensation of fire raced through her, as intense as the vibrations they'd created before. By the Goddess, her desire seemed to run, a sloppy wet trail between her cheeks that ended somewhere on her skirts, mixing with his fluid.

His hand reached up to stroke her ample breast, kneading the orb gently, creating a turgid peak. An unexpected longing for Calder to make love to her with his mouth and hands, hours on end, erupted. Finola wanted to share every physical delight known to man and woman with him. She could not go willingly to King Lacombe of Hamre now.

A rustling, like that of the formal gowns worn for the feasts, assaulted Finola's ears. "I fear we are no longer alone."

Calder's head whipped up from its perch between her legs. As cold and silent as a statue, he stayed perfectly still. There, another rustling of leaves. He must have heard it.

His voice was low and menacing. "Get dressed, Finola."

She rolled off the bower her skirt made for their loving and hastened to slide her legs through the waist of the come-stained material. She could see Calder retying his breeches. With her skirt fastened she stood up, just as masked men entered the small clearing. "Calder!" she screamed.

"Halt! Or you will be cut down where you stand." A tall man brandied a sword, while another held a bow with an arrow nocked and ready.

Finola stopped in her tracks, her arms covering her breasts. Calder didn't move. He'd had no time to retrieve his weapon before they were set upon. His sword lay at his feet. He would die before he came close to touching it.

In all, there were four masked men. Two remained seated on their steeds, one with a pike, the other with a broadsword. They left nowhere for them to flee.

The one with the broadsword spoke. "Take his sword, then bind and gag him." He pointed to the man with the long sword who hurried to carry out his orders. "You," he pointed to Finola, "come forward."

Finola lifted her head in defiance against the man's command. "Touch me and I'll have you beheaded."

"A firebrand, heh? No wonder King Lacombe wants you in his bed, Princess."

"Lacombe? No!" How had the bastard found her? Surely his ambassador's message had not yet reached the kingdom of Hamre. Yet, the man knew who she was.

Beside her, she heard the commander's soldier knock Calder to the ground. She winced when she saw how tightly the leather bound him. Already the strands cut into his skin around his wrists.

"Calder!"

"I'm sorry, Finola. I have failed you," he whispered just before a dirty rag was stuffed into his mouth and secured.

Kneeling next to him, she whispered, "No, my love, you had no time to prepare. I know and trust your skill with the sword. You *will* get us out of this and make Lacombe regret the day of this attack."

"Bring the woman to me," Broadsword yelled. "Keep Calder, the traitor, under control!"

The man with the pike leapt from his horse and grabbed her upper arm, pulling it away from her chest. His lips, partially covered by his mask, bent in an evil smile. "This one, Sir, is well-endowed. Have a look." He used his free hand to grasp her breast and lift it toward his commanding officer.

Whirling, Finola shouted, "Unhand me you, cur!" Her free hand connected with the face of her captor, and she kicked wildly with one of her leather booted feet, catching him in the soft tissue beneath his kneecap. His pike flew into the underbrush. He collapsed to the ground, writhing.

Calder struggled to his feet, only to be knocked down again by the bowman. The blow she heard delivered to Calder's head left her knowing she was in this fight totally alone.

She twisted back toward where Calder lay and grabbed his short sword. She may not be able to hold off their aggressors for very long, but she would die in the attempt. Anything would be better than enduring Lacombe's attack or his touch. With the sword in front of her, she slowly turned, trying to determine the threat of her three remaining adversaries.

Perspiration dripped from her forehead and ran in rivulets between her breasts. Her arms alternated between being chilled by the cool of the morning to burning hot with her anger to lop off a head. Broadsword remained astride his horse, and she could see his dark eyes challenging her to go further. He would be her greatest foe. The other two closed in; their boots quiet in the soft grass.

"Those are a fine set of tits," Longsword pronounced, licking his lips. "The kind a man could draw milk from, if he worked them hard enough."

"Have a care man, did you not see what she did to him?" Bowman pointed to their companion still unable to stand.

"Aye, be warned. I took him out of the fray, I can take you out, too," Finola boasted.

Longsword readied his weapon. Bowman nocked an arrow. "Use your sword skill on capturing the woman," the commander said. "Back off, and let Aneirin have at her first."

The bowman stepped back leaving her with just the one called Aneirin.

"A worthy prize for my puny efforts," he gloated.

"Your entertainment will consist of a very short sword fight, Sir."

"Yes, yes, well, do get on with it. We haven't all day if we expect to get her back to King Lacombe," the commander ordered.

Aneirin raised his sword and advanced. It was now or never. The wind kicked up. A sign from the Goddess, no doubt. But, what did it mean? Would she succeed in her fight? Her long, brown hair blew into her eyes, blurring her vision. Strands got into her mouth.

"Come, whore of Talone. I saw what you allowed that mouse of a man to do to you. Fucking your ass. Tsk, tsk. Your outrageous deeds will delight our king. He will open your asshole wider then send you off where others will continue your immoderate education, but only if he is well pleased with your attentions. If not..." the man licked his lips. Lust lit his eyes, no doubt his anticipation of what was to come when he took her down. "... then the likes of us get to teach you how to properly please a man."

"I would die first," she snarled, grasping the short sword tighter.

"As you wish. It matters not one wit to me. I can fuck you alive or dead."

Chapter Four

Finola readied her sword in front of her, as she'd seen countless of her father's soldiers do through the years. Not that she had sword-fighting experience that would be of any benefit to her.

The small silver blade was heavy. Her wrists ached, but she clenched it determinedly. Holding it in front of her tired her arms, made them throb. Would Aneirin strike first?

Broadsword spoke. "I grow weary of your game, Aneirin. Do as you have said, or let the woman go."

Aneirin turned his head toward his commander. It was a chance Finola leapt at. "Die you son of a pig!" She darted toward the man and thrust Calder's sword into his side, pulling it forth quickly.

Her victim bellowed. Whether in rage or pain, Finola couldn't tell. If an injured man was anything like a trapped, wounded animal, she knew she would have the fight of a lifetime on her hands. There would be no one to rescue her once Aneirin countered. She stumbled backward, wary.

Calder's sword had entered Aneirin just under his ribs. Finola pushed her hair out of her eyes. A safe distance back from the swing arc of his long sword, she allowed herself a moment to regain her breath. Surprisingly, Aneirin did not counter. Blood dripped, soaking quickly though his shirt before the material became saturated.

The long sword thudded to the ground, the normal ring subdued by the soft earth. Could she have won so easily, with one blow? She watched as the man placed his left hand on the wound, trying to staunch the flow of blood she'd created, even as his blood ran through his hands and onto the ground at his feet.

"She's gone and killed him," the bowman exclaimed with awe in his voice.

"Go to him, see if you can bind the wound before he does bleed to death," Broadsword commanded in a bored tone. "Then make a litter for him and get him to the healers."

It was then that Finola saw him move. In one smooth motion, he dismounted his horse and strode toward her.

"Don't think on doing to me what you have done to him," he sneered.

Eyeing him anxiously, Finola retreated. His sword was longer and heavier and would do her fatal damage should he choose to swing it. The ripened scent of his sweat reached her, nearly making her gag. She looked into his eyes, dark with rage and saw her death in them. The smell of blood was in the air. She'd not add hers if at all possible.

Resolve flooded her. If she were injured, how could she protect her beloved Calder? Dropping the short sword, she fell to her knees in an act of obeisance. "Do not slay me, sir. I only acted to defend my life and honor."

Through the curtain of her dark hair, she watched him carefully, frightened of his possible reprisal. He pulled a small dagger from his waistband and advanced, resting the broadsword against the very log she'd used as cover earlier.

"To defend honor, one must have it, wench." He pushed aside her hair with the blade, then touched the cold steel to her bare breast. "Rise, I would look at you."

Finola did as he said. Intuitively, she knew she was no match for this man's strength.

"Hands behind you."

Again, she followed his command.

"Bind her, and make it tight. I have no desire to have this hellcat knife me." Pausing for a moment as if considering, Broadsword continued. "Tie an additional length of rope to her waist. I would have her walk beside me as we travel. Perhaps, humbled thus, she will not be so feisty once we return to King Lacombe."

Quickly, she stole a glance at Calder. He still had not awakened from the blow he'd received. The commander turned his head to where she looked.

"Oh, yes, Calder. Take him to the dungeons, immediately. He will be made to answer for his treachery there."

Fear gripped her, squeaking like a trapped bird, "Please, don't send Calder to the dungeon's of Hamre! He's done nothing wrong!"

The man with the broadsword spoke contemptuously. "You intercede on behalf of this unkempt lowlife? I barely recognized him without his silk robes. You plead for his life?"

"He is a scholar, not a soldier or criminal."

The commander's interest increased, proportionally with Finola's entreaties. "He attacked a citizen of Hamre, taking valuable information. He was caught sneaking out of Hamre with it, and escaped, wounding several men in the battle. I intend to collect the bounty for his treachery."

Finola could not find her tongue. What could she say? There was a reward for Calder? He served the King of Hamre? He had perpetrated some crime against that realm? He had fought alone against a number of soldiers and inflicted serious damage? This was most definitely not the Calder she knew.

"I thought not, wench." He motioned to the bowman. "Go ahead of us, take him to the dungeon where he can await his fate."

She watched the man with the bow toss Calder, his legs and arms still bound, over the back of a horse. With those last words, Finola began her descent into the very bowels of hell.

Hours and hours they traveled. Sunlight dappled her breasts as twigs snagged and ripped her skirts. Out of the dark shaded forest into the lush grasslands. The sun blistered hot against her tender exposed skin where her hair did not cover it. At least in the forest her breasts were protected from the sun's heat.

If Lacombe were going to see her thus, he would not be at all impressed. Her long hair tangled and leaves littered it, dirt and sweat streaked her breasts. She reeked of her own perspiration. Her ass cheeks chafed as Calder's dried semen caused them to rub one against the other.

Finola wondered what her father was doing. Did he know she was a captive, being ill-treated, like a commoner? Not that it mattered much to him, unless his honor was involved. He'd planned to send her to Lacombe in marriage anyway. Now it seemed assured, as long as she kept her virginity.

Yes, that would be her solution! If her maidenhead were broken, she would not have to wed Lacombe. But, could she allow herself to be intimately touched by someone other than Calder? Then thoughts of Calder bedding other women came to mind. What allegiance did she owe him when it came to her body? He'd not afforded her the same.

If trading her body allowed her to escape, and ultimately to rescue him, she would do it. She loved him, owed him her loyalty despite the accusations of Broadsword. She knew Calder; he was none of the things this commander said he was.

"Sir," she whispered. "Might I rest and have water?"

Broadsword looked down at her. "See to her needs." He looked sternly at the pikeman she'd crippled with her kick.

Oh no! This man, Pike, would take whatever advantage of her he could, especially with her arms tied behind her.

"My lord," she interrupted, her voice as humble as those of the peasants she'd heard come before her father. "The man you send has a grievance and would damage that which you take to King Lacombe."

Broadsword dismounted. He still wore his mask so she could not see if he were compassionate to her plea or not. "Wench, no harm will befall you that I have not approved of."

Goddess! So cold. Even though he was impatient with his own men, he knew she had to be protected. If one of his lackeys were responsible for raping the future wife of King Lacombe no doubts heads would roll, including his.

"We make camp for the night." His deep voice sent shivers deep into her. How many women had he himself debauched?

Pike shoved her in the back and she pitched forward onto the dried pine needles and sharp undergrowth. The bits scratched, poked, and prodded her burned flesh, and as she tried to stand the vegetation pierced her deeper. The skin that Calder had often told her was softer than the finest of silk sheets was now an ugly pink, marred with cuts and scratches.

Perhaps Pike wouldn't mind if her breasts were damaged. He'd enjoy knowing he had done this to her. Finola just had to convince him that his rough way excited her. If she could get him into a state of need she could both lose her virginity and see Pike to the punishment that would be justly created for his crimes.

Pike's rough hands under her the front of her shoulders lifted her from the ground. He held her arms tightly with one of his hands as his free hand pulled her long hair off her chest. The motion raised her chest. "She does have great tits!"

"Indeed," Broadsword responded, not at all moved by them the way Pike was. "As is, they aren't likely to attract the attention of any man, much less the

King. She's a filthy mess. Scout about for some water. The wench needs a bath, and badly." He dismounted from his horse. "Release her arms, and then tie her to that tree. I'll not have a repeat of our earlier experiences."

She tilted her head slightly to Pike and spoke to him in husky words. "I'm glad you like them. They are large enough, aren't they, to pillow your head upon during the night? To suckle." Sidling closer, she hoped he got a better look.

"Go on, tie the woman up so you can continue your duties!" Broadsword was not at all happy with Pike's slowness. The commander disappeared behind some trees.

"I'll pillow something between them alright," Pike whispered as he slipped a hand to her breast and twisted, hard. "There will be plenty more of that action later, love."

Swallowing hard, Finola bit back the cry of pain Pike had tried to elicit. She'd show him what she could do with a cock, given half a chance. "Does your come taste as strong as you are? I love sucking cock."

Pike pushed her toward the tree Broadsword had pointed out, taking every chance he could to fondle her injured breasts. "I'll make you pay, bitch, for what you did to me. And you will taste every drop of come I shoot into your slut's mouth."

She had no doubt the man would try. She would use his lust and need for revenge to her own advantage though. If she could control the revulsion she felt when he touched her, could master ignoring the stench coming off him that made her want to vomit. If she could keep her heart from railing against her sexual treachery to Calder.

If, if, if. So much depended on the whims of the Goddess. With a will of iron she began to plan her seduction of Pike to make good an escape, licking her lips as if in eager anticipation for what they would do together.

Finola couldn't dwell on Calder's potential response right now. She had to rescue him and the only way she could do that was to get away from Pike, Broadsword, and the reviled King of Hamre. Pike's dick would be buried so deep in her that there would be no doubt the underling had taken her. She would make sure they would lie on top of her skirts so the evidence would be clear.

If all went as planned, Broadsword would come upon Pike taking her, and kill the man himself. That would leave her with fair odds. One on one, she'd use any and all of her wiles to bring the last of her captors down.

The bark of the tree was rough against her back. Pike tied the rope around her waist, looped it over her breasts, then around her arms. Trussed thus she wasn't going anywhere for a good long while.

Broadsword's deep voice swept through the trees. "Remove the vixen's skirts. When you find water, attempt to clean the foul smell emanating from them."

She gasped. Why would Broadsword take the last vestige of her modesty from her? The smile on Pike's face showed her how much he would enjoy this final, humiliating disrobing of her. Gathering her strength of will, she watched him come toward her, prepared to do his master's bidding. He made no secret of his hunger as his coarse hands skimmed her waist.

When Pike finally untied the strings to her skirt, he slid those same hands over her hips pushing the skirt down, then stroked the curve of her ass, fingering the hole he said he'd seen Calder take. He pushed himself tighter against her. She could feel his erection practically invading her.

"You are not at liberty to intimately touch the King's betrothed," Broadsword growled. "Get the water!"

Pike backed off, whispering, "Yes, bitch, I am going to so enjoy making you pay for ruining my knee. I'm going to fuck your mouth, your ass and your

tits. And you won't enjoy one single moment of it. Oh, yes, by the Gods, you will pay."

Chapter Five

While he carried out his duties, Finola watched Pike. It was good he was unable to quash his erection. The man who believed he would slake his lust in her was unaware that his very life would be forfeit. A self-satisfied smile curved her lips. With luck, she would be able to seduce him, lose her virginity, and avoid humiliation as a captive Princess Wife to the vile Lacombe. Without luck, she hoped she could make it look as if Pike had raped her and taken her maidenhead.

The soft crunch of the leaves alerted Finola to the presence of Broadsword behind her. What could Broadsword want from her at this point? He came around to face her, staring at her breasts, her wet skirt dangling from his hands.

“Step into it.”

She did as he ordered, staying quiet while he fastened the garment about her waist. The water in her skirts cooled her legs, eased the scratching of the rough bark on her bottom.

“The men are right,” he began. “Under the grime I can see you have a nice set of tits.” He lifted each orb into his large hands, his thumbs running over the nipples in a seemingly careless gesture. “Yes, a pity Lacombe will not appreciate them.”

"Not appreciate them?" Her voice squeaked. Finola knew her breasts were her finest feature. She could hear her heart pound, unnaturally loud. Did Broadsword hear her terror?

He lifted a hand to her face, and caressed her cheek. "He likes his women much, much flatter."

Odd sensations flooded her before it dawned what he meant. She saw her eyes widen in the reflection of Broadsword's deep brown ones. "I cannot believe this. How am I to satisfy a man who wants his women to look like boys?"

"You can't. You can only hope I put in a good word for you regarding your favors." His lips went to hers after he spoke, drawing deeply from her partially opened mouth. "Mmm."

Finola's heartbeat leapt like that of a doe racing through the woods. By the Gods, his kiss excited her. She fought the reaction of her body. "You presume to kiss the future wife of the King?"

"I can see why Calder was smitten with you. You have spirit."

"But you kissed me!"

"A kiss hardly constitutes rape." He paused. "Princess Finola, you really are quite beautiful. Combined with your fighting spirit, you would be an excellent addition to the King's harem, or a prize worthy to be married off to one of his officers. Once you are cleaned up, you will be more aesthetically pleasing to King Lacombe."

"Tell me your name," she asked breathlessly, "Or why you cover your face."

"All in good time, all in good time. The King has promised that once he is done with you, that you will be mine, if I so choose."

He reached under her skirts. "But, I must know if you can accommodate me. Otherwise, there will be no need for you to warm my bed, and someone else can have you."

He put another finger into her and pushed in and out. Then he entered her with a second, then a third, and she felt him spread his fingers apart. "Bastard," she spat.

"Spread your legs," he whispered.

When she didn't respond immediately, Broadsword did it for her. She was punished with a fourth finger jabbing into her pussy. Those fingers pumped her over and again until she felt her juices coat them.

"Good," he commented, withdrawing from her, and wiping his fingers on her skirt. "I am even bigger around than these four fingers diddling you."

Bigger than what she felt inside her already? Gods, how big was he? As if he read her mind, Broadsword unleashed his cock from his breeches. His meat appeared thicker than the cock of their breeding stallion at home. He placed his hand firmly around his dick to tuck himself back into his pants. "Meet your new master, Finola. I will bed you once King Lacombe has taken your virginity and had his fill of you."

Her nipples were rock hard, her pussy dripped her juices. She wanted to come. Badly. But escape from the clutches of Lacombe was more urgent. How was she going to accomplish that, tied to the tree?

She grasped at the idea she'd had earlier. Let Broadsword take her, she could kill him in his sleep if need be, but only if he would have her. "Sir," she said. "You leave me in a sorry state."

Broadsword turned to her. His erection strained against the confines of his breeches. "No more sorry a state than you deserve."

"I suffer!"

"And I do not?" He removed his cock again, and slowly stroked it.

"I will ease your pain." Her heart hammered in her chest like the incessant drumming of the announcement gong. Taking him would not be an easy task.

He quirked an eyebrow at her. "What do you suggest? I cannot trust you. If I were to release you in order to satisfy your lust you would slice me open." The muscle in his jaw twitched. She could see he wanted to relieve his need, but fought it.

Finola's mind raced as her escape plan became clearer. "Stake me to the ground. I will have no need of my hands on you. I will do whatever you ask, only take this burning from between my legs!"

Broadsword stalked closer. "Oh, I shall stake you to my bed, but not this night. No, I think I will keep you tied against this tree."

"Touch me now, my lord, else I die from the pain of unfulfilled lust." She took deep breaths intended for the lifting of her breasts. If she could command her body, and recreate the sensations she'd felt with Calder, an air of authenticity would be added to her act. Her breasts enticed this man, she'd use them to help her.

"Women have difficulty handling my member," he cautioned.

Oh how she wanted to handle his member. She'd either use the opportunity to win him to her aid, or she'd create the chance she needed to escape. For now, the efforts of her escape were rewarding. Finola just couldn't let her lust ruin her plans. Men were controlled by their lust, not women. She writhed against his cock head, reveling in the sensations created between her legs.

He continued to rub her clit through the material of her skirt. He kissed her deeply, using his tongue as if he were trying to draw water from a well. "You are such a slut," he whispered into her mouth.

"I am," she lied. She ground her hips against him harder, felt his cock slide between her covered legs. "I want you to take me."

"Where?"

"Anywhere," she gasped, realizing she had regained her opportunity to escape Lacombe's clutches. She writhed harder against him. "I want your dick

buried in me anywhere, everywhere, so I can have the satisfaction that only your cock can give.”

“Then come, my little slut. I will give you all you wish and more. With proper training you will learn to please me well.” He plunged his tongue into her mouth, and she sucked it as she had sucked Calder’s cock before.

Calder! His life was in her hands, or more specifically in Broadsword’s huge cock. Trembling ran through her as her captor pinched her sensitive nipples. His dick rubbed her pussy faster, faster.

To her side she heard a strangled noise. She turned her head. Pike was there. His hands encircled his cock as he stroked his rod faster and faster. The leer she’d seen on his face earlier was replaced with a look of intense concentration. White, stringy come shot out of his dick.

“I will love you absolutely everywhere, Finola. And you will never, ever deny me,” Broadsword whispered into her ear rubbing against her harder.

Those were the last words she remembered him saying as her trembling erupted into satisfaction.

* * * *

Now that her masked man had retied his breeches and slaked her need, Finola slowly came to her senses. As much as she’d tried to keep her physical responses controlled, the passion of her body, so different from what she’d experienced with Calder, would not be denied.

Instead, she knew she would use Broadsword to take her virginity, and enjoy the process. Her nipples hardened at the thought of his huge cock buried between her legs and not in her ass as Calder had been. Her pussy dampened once more at the thought of this masked commander taking her.

Broadsword removed his shirt and pulled an axe from his saddlebag as he moved to join Pike in preparing wood for the fire. Sweat glistened on his honed

shoulders. Drops of his perspiration rolled down his shoulder, over his chest, and gathered at the muscular v above his breeches. Half-naked, he was magnificent to look upon.

Goddess, but she wanted him to stroke her heat again. She sighed and licked her dry lips. Why did she want him so? Was it because of the new sensations he'd made her body experience? Or did it have to do more with Calder plowing other women, especially after he'd tried to make her feel guilt at his inability to have her completely?

Clearing an area, Broadsword began to lay twigs and small branches. Finola's stomach growled. How long had it been since she'd eaten? Perhaps they would have some of the bounty of the woods. "Tend the fire," he commanded Pike.

Picking up his dagger, Broadsword walked to her. "Are you ready to be a good little..."

"Slut?" she whispered, finishing his sentence.

"Princess?"

Heat flooded her face. Had this man only been playing with her? Using her sexual desire to get her under control? Using her, the way she tried to use him? "What would you have me do?" she said tersely.

"Give me your word that you will attempt nothing that will make me want to give you over to..." he placed his dagger to her heart in emphasis, "... my man tending the fire."

"I give you my solemn word you will not regret my behavior." She'd do damn near anything if she wouldn't have to have that vile man close.

Moving the dagger to her bonds, Broadsword sliced through the rope. "I'll keep the length on your waist for my peace of mind."

With her hands free, she didn't know what to do first in her seduction plan. She ended up throwing her arms around her captor and kissing him freely. His mouth opened and she plundered his, taking his tongue, the way he'd taken

hers. Her soft breasts were crushed against the firm planes of his chest. He pulled her away from him, a befuddled look on his face.

"Enough, wench. You need to be cleansed, and thoroughly. Right now I wouldn't let my worst enemy have you." He picked up a bag near her feet, and pulled on the rope. She was following him no matter where he went.

A large pond, hidden by tall grass, was their destination, and Broadsword picked her up and unceremoniously threw her in, retaining his hold on the rope. The ice-cold water hardened her already sensitive nipples, and slopped against her pussy as she shot to the top, ready to upbraid him. She stopped as soon as her eyes focused on him.

Standing at the edge of the pond in the shallow water, her captor was stark naked, except for the black silk that still covered his face. Catching her gaze he placed a hand on hard cock. "Do you like what you see?"

She was speechless.

"I think you can't see it, and need a closer look."

He stepped into the water, headed directly for her. Gods, what was he going to do with this great sword? The water buoyed it, keeping its presence right in front of her. She exhaled. His rod approached her mouth. She'd wanted to drink of it earlier, to entice him, to bring him down, to facilitate her escape. She tilted her head downward and opened her mouth. Her lips fit barely around him. If he'd been any larger, he wouldn't have been able to enter her mouth.

He jerked out of her. "Time for that after the King. Now we bathe you."

A bar of soap he'd concealed in a hand was now revealed. He dipped the soap in the water then washed her vulnerable breasts. The dirt dripped from them. Finola felt her face color. She'd been filthy and now he was cleansing her.

The next pass of his hands went between her legs. He rubbed the bar against her clit. How on earth was he able to make even that feel good?

"Take a deep breath, slut of Talone. I'll push you under and hold you there long enough to wet your hair."

"You'll drown me."

"As you gave your word, I will give you mine. I'll not allow you to drown."

Inhaling, she allowed herself to be forced under the water. Strange, she didn't fear harm at his hands, he'd sworn to bring her to Lacombe, but the names he called her hurt. Wanton, yes. Until her capture, her sole desire had been for Calder, and no other. She was not a slut as Broadsword said. Although she couldn't control the physical responses of her body to her captor, she would use them to get away.

It perplexed her. Why did it matter what her captor thought of her reputation? Because, she told herself, she wanted to be worthy of his respect. There was something commanding, masterful about Broadsword that called to her. He had a presence that Calder did not, and, as sorely as she had tried to ensnare her captor, he hadn't taken the intimacy she'd offered. Every time he'd near given in to her enticements, he'd pulled back. He'd been loyal to his King, as much as a man could be, in the tempting circumstances she'd designed.

Loyal. Calder hadn't been faithful to her. He'd admitted to sleeping with the women of Hamre. Her stomach twisted painfully. She'd so wanted him to be the one, and he'd betrayed her by sharing his body with others.

A moment later, she popped to the surface, then Broadsword's hands were in her hair, lathering it, allowing soap bubbles to roll down her back. Water streamed down her face.

"Again, woman."

Down she went again. His hands were on her waist and he brought her back to the surface, holding her tightly against him. Excitement coursed through her as fire burned her skin where he touched.

Her captor appeared affected as well.

The black mask he wore didn't cover his firm lips and they descended on her. The tenderness of the kiss molded her to him and she kissed back, her

hands around his neck tugging him down to her. He pulled back, shock in his eyes.

“You are very nearly cleansed,” he said breathlessly. “We have one small task left.” He took her hand and led her to the soft grass at the pond’s edge.

Chapter Six

Finola knew she should run. Yank Broadsword down and drag him through the dried pine needles. She didn't. Why she didn't baffled her. Instead, she allowed Broadsword to lead her to the grass like some sort of prized lamb.

She planted her feet and didn't move another inch. The rope pulled against her waist, the rough fibers scratching her skin. "Sweetling, why do you tarry?"

"Don't call me that." Hands on her hips, she continued. "What do you intend to do with me?"

Broadsword sauntered back to where she stood. He took her face in his hands, stroking the corner of her mouth with a thumb. "You frown. Have you not been treated well by me?"

The question played around in her mind like a squirrel jumping from limb to limb. "I currently have no argument with your treatment of me. Suspensions, though, as to why you tease me plague my thoughts."

Needing some sort of answer, she pinned him with her stare. "One moment you can't seem to keep your hands to yourself, the next you look shocked at how we respond to one another."

"Ah. You don't trust me." He paused. "Were our positions reversed, I would have the same doubts. Let me assure you that it is in both your and my best interests that you arrive in Hamre in good, no, near perfect condition. No

matter how you flaunt your wares, no matter how much I would enjoy partaking of them, I intend to present you as the grand prize you are."

Flaunt her wares! She squinted. He might think so, but he didn't know her motivation. She'd done so in an ill-conceived attempt to earn her freedom. "How can you do that when I am abased by you and your underlings? When I am refused the simple dignity of clothing?"

"Come now, Sweetling, you expect me to believe you didn't enjoy your release earlier?" He kissed her, his tongue delving into her moist mouth, probing with gentle earnest. The sensation of butterflies tickling her ran across her skin just before he broke the contact.

"Besides, are we not both in an equal state of undress? Your dignity needs no clothing here with me."

Gods, his kiss sent daggers of fire racing through her. He dropped his hands to her shoulders and began to gently massage them. The fire only continued, jumping from one nerve ending to another. Somehow, her plan of seduction was failing. She pushed back from him. "Why? Why do you do that?"

His lips grazed her neck as he replied, "I find you quite desirable, despite your hellcat attitude." He paused, taking a deep breath. "Maybe because of it."

"But you take me to the King," she protested. Hope trickled through her the way cooling water eased a parched throat.

Emotion choked his voice. "I am even now in the final preparations for your arrival to Hamre. You will be clad in the softest leather, your hair adorned with jewels befitting a lady of your rank." He placed his mouth near her ear. "Even if you are an unquenchable tart."

Lifting a strand of her hair, he caressed her face with it. "It is far too sad a thing you should go to Hamre. I doubt any there will appreciate your talents as well as I."

She felt him tongue her outer ear, and then he blew against it ever so slightly. Shivers ran down her arms. "When you go to him, remember me."

Abruptly, he smashed the romance of the moment as if he'd taken a mace to an enemy.

"Now, come. I will finish your ablutions, and dress you." He extended his roughened hand to hers.

As if in a trance, she placed her smaller hand in his, fascinated by how his seemed to swallow hers entirely. *This was how he was, she thought. He swallowed alive all those around him, in such a way they didn't know they had been consumed.* He was eating her alive, ingesting her very soul, and she didn't mind.

In the distance, the birds sang their night songs. The sun had nearly finished its descent, putting shadows on nearly everything. Finola's world had turned gray. Where once she was sure she knew what was the right course of action, uncertainly reigned. She thought she loved Calder but desire for Broadsword continually pushed him from her mind.

On the beach, small candles had been placed in tiny wooden urns around a bulky blanket. Pike had placed thick pillows on top of a woven mat. "What is the meaning of this?"

"The candles are to give me light to perform my duties and to keep the insects at bay for your personal comfort".

"And the pillows?"

"For your comfort too, Princess Finola."

She turned her head toward Broadsword. "Why do you call me 'princess'?"

"It is your title. Would you rather I call you cuckold?"

"I'm not a cuckold," Finola retorted. "I've not married, I've not relinquished my maidenhead."

"Come, come, Finola. Don't make the mistake of thinking I didn't see how you let Calder take you like the animal he is."

"Calder is no animal."

He stroked her face again. "So much to learn. Nothing is as it seems, especially your beloved Calder. Particularly when your most lustful desire is to have me take you as mine."

"I have not betrayed Calder! I have not given my body to you. Nor, sir, do I wish any such dalliance with you." The lie shot from her lips faster than the flight of an arrow.

"Don't you?" He positioned his hand between her legs and his fingers caressed the dampness of her entrance. "Don't lie to me, Finola, don't ever lie to me."

She wasn't going to admit she desired him just as he'd said. Reaching within her, she called up indignation to conceal her true thoughts. "Why? You will stake me spread wide in the town square?"

"No. Staking you for abuse in the town square would be child's play for a wanton like you. I will see that you are in a state of perpetual need without any opportunity to alleviate it."

For a long moment, Finola was silent. Even the birds quieted. Shudders ran through her arms and legs and she rubbed her arms in an attempt to subdue the chill she felt. "How is it you found us?"

"I followed Calder when he left Hamre."

This time it took longer for Broadsword's statement to sink in. "You, you followed him? From Hamre?"

"It was no great trouble, he is often in and out of the Hamre lands."

"Often? I don't understand."

"Calder has been useful to the King, going where His Highness could not, gathering information."

"As an emissary?"

"Calder is a self-serving opportunist." Broadsword spat. "And a cold-hearted murderer."

"A murderer?" She felt her eyes widen at the news. "How could you know?"

"He left one alive who recognized him." He set his lips in a grim line. "Now, enough of this talk," he commanded. "You will be prepared as the virgin you claim to be for the King."

Broadsword drew her to him again.

"Please," she begged. "Why do you do this? You know I do not wish to be wed to King Lacombe."

In the stillness, she heard the steadily increasing beat of his heart. Yet there was no give in his muscular chest, and his arms wrapped around her like iron bands. His hard staff ground into her. The heat of his body flooded her. He'd known she desired him.

"Finola," he rasped, "if it were in my power, I'd release you from your obligation, but I cannot. The King must claim you first. This is decreed. It cannot be changed."

"What about finishing what we've started?" Finola begged. Goddess, hear my prayers, she thought, let this man make me his and keep me from Lacombe.

"As much as I desire to take you to bed, now is not the time. Your ardor has been replaced with anger and plotting. When I take you, it will not be with those emotions between us."

Placing her palms on his chest, she tried to push away as he lowered her to the blanket. "Please, no."

"No?"

Finola gasped. "I've heard tales of how he takes his women. Do not send me to him. Don't do this. Take me, let me fulfill you."

Broadsword smiled, and that leer sent shivers of anticipation throughout her. "No, no, my dear. My loyalty to the King is sure."

He looked her over closely and Finola felt as if he'd just nibbled every part of her exposed body.

"At the moment though, I must say, you have aroused my curiosity regarding your talents." Ferocity burned in his brown eyes. "But, I want more than just a willing body. There is something in you that calls to me. I want to discover that. I want to woo you when it is my time."

Fine, light blonde hairs ran down those arms and she fought the urge to nestle against marble like muscles. Naked he was more exciting than he'd been with just his breeches dropped. He was right. She did want him to have her, completely.

He soothingly placed her upon the pillows. "Trust me. I promise you that all you will feel is contentment from this final cleansing practice."

"Contentment?"

"Yes, and an opportunity to cover what remains of your modesty." He paused, and then exhaled slowly. "First though, I must blindfold you."

A black band was pulled from a bag near one of the candles. Finola felt her eyes widen. "Is this necessary? I will not run away. I am hardly in a maidenly position to do so." Her heart raced.

Laughter erupted from Broadsword before she could think further, and it poured over her like a warm wine, reaching to her core. Should she have been offended? Perhaps, but his laughter didn't make her take affront. Instead, it eased her fears.

"If this is a necessity, I will obey." She watched his smile widen. He must think her silly to backtrack from her earlier objection.

"Sweetling, the customs of Hamre do not allow foreigners to observe our rites."

"Although I will experience them?"

There was that smile again. Somehow she'd managed to amuse him. "Customs are difficult to change when they've been in place for centuries.

Although you may feel the rite of cleansing, you still will be unable to report what exactly has been used, thus fulfilling the law requirements of the King."

"Very well," she said with as much dignity as she could muster. "Blindfold me."

Sitting up straight, Finola waited patiently for the placement of the blindfold. Broadsword knelt behind her, his hands gentle on her shoulders. "It is for the best. You will not be hurt, you have my word of honor."

Word of honor. Yes, Broadsword did have honor. Deep within, she knew he was a man of his word, not given to giving misleading impressions. He desired her, and could not have her, at least, not before his liege had taken her to bed.

The blindfold was light yet thick enough it darkened her vision. The material, so soft, it caressed her eyes and temples. Broadsword knotted it behind her head carefully. He didn't catch strands of her hair in the knot.

Anticipation coiled in her stomach. *Relax, Finola*, she told herself. She took calming breaths and kept her arms at her side, resisting the temptation to remove her blindfold.

"During the ceremony, do not talk."

"What will happen if I do?"

"I'll have to punish you." There was a hard edge to his voice.

A shiver went through her. In her mind's eye, she could see Broadsword meting out punishment to those under his command. How well she remembered his muscular arms swinging the ax against the wood.

Then the image of Calder came to her. How he'd struck her in the woods after their intimacy. The pain, the pleasure, and the confusion, which hadn't lessened with his departure to the dungeons.

"How long will the rite take?"

"Less than the time it takes sand to run through the glass. You can stay quiet that long, can't you?"

She nodded. She would call upon the Goddess to give her the strength to endure the rite of cleansing in silence.

"Then we begin." Tenderly, Broadsword pushed her back, until she was reclining comfortably on the pillows.

A cool breeze from the pond kissed her skin, making her keenly aware of her naked state. She already wished the ritual were over.

"Raise your arms above your head."

Doing as she was told, she lifted her arms, fighting her fear. The air in her lungs came in constricted puffs. What was he going to do? Should she run? No, he would only catch her anyway, and his anger at her would be palpable. The motion juttred her breasts into an uplifted position where the fall air caressed them.

"Such fine tits." The words wisped across her chest, and completely hardened nipples that were already sensitive to the chill air around her.

With care, he applied a salve to her breasts, easing the pain of the sun's burn. Each slow stretch of his fingers against her heightened her arousal as the potion seeped into the damaged skin. "Gorgeous really, so responsive. Such a waste, such a waste."

The statement both pleased and worried her. There was power in knowing her body affected Broadsword. Yet, his comment about waste concerned her. How could she give her virginity to a King so difficult to appease? A man who didn't appreciate large, responsive breasts?

A warm thick liquid was spread on her underarms. The faint scent of mint tantalized her nostrils. She tensed. Cold steel rasped against her skin, scraping it, taking away the balmy substance. The sound echoed in her ears, reminding her of the sharpening of a dull blade on the whetstone. The steel in Broadsword's hands repeated the operation underneath her other arm.

At any moment, he could end her life. Despite the warm evening, chills of sheer terror flooded her, made her skin ripple with tiny bumps. She swallowed

hard, the constricted muscles in her throat making the action difficult. Rational thought returned with sheer force of will. Calder knew she was a captive, and the King expected her arrival. Broadsword would make sure she got there in one piece.

Slowly, he dragged the metal over her body, lightly scraping the curve of her breast, the hardened peak, and down her stomach. Lower she felt the blade go, until it stopped at the juncture between her legs. The liquid was spread there, and against the valley between her sex and her thighs. Fear fled. Her body was afire with the sensations this cream and metal on her skin created.

"To be taken by the King, you must be denuded, your essence of womanhood clearly seen."

He pushed her legs further apart and then his breath was on her pussy. With his head between her legs, she thought of Calder and the pleasure he'd given her with his licks, kisses, probes and nibbles. Wetness pooled between her legs, threatening to mix with the potion Broadsword had buttered on her. Her ass wiggled in eagerness.

A sudden yank on her nether hair stopped her movement. She hadn't spoken and yet she was sure punishment was coming. His hand didn't release her. Instead, she heard the razor sound as metal stripped her of her private pelt. The blade moved quickly. Air rushed to kiss her mound and to partake of her juices. Desire grabbed her and she squirmed again trying to ease the lust within her.

"Almost done, Sweetling," he whispered against her femininity. "Then tell me what you want me to do to ease the voracious itch you feel within."

Warm wetness, poured by Broadsword, rolled over her virgin skin. Gods, it was sinful how she lusted to be taken by him. She wanted his sex everywhere. She wanted to see if the procedure he was performing made him ache to be in her.

"Turn over and kneel like you did for Calder."

Calder again. His name spoken with venom she didn't understand. All Finola wanted at this moment was for Broadsword to enter her without a word about her former lover.

His strong hands roamed her cheeks, and then spread them further. Again warm, thick liquid covered her. A few strokes and that hair was removed as well.

"One more thing, my dear. Stay in position." His voice was calm, neutral, almost uncaring. Had he removed himself so thoroughly from this rite? Was he suddenly so unaffected by her?

A finger entered her ass. She clenched tightly around it, and wanted to ram back on it, and take it in deeply. In the next moment, a finger as large as the first entered her pussy. Both her openings packed? Throbbing began in earnest in both portals.

Then the most unexpected of all things happened. Heat filled each aperture as if a man's seed had been expelled in both places. How could Broadsword accomplish such a feat? A physical craving for more engulfed her as she tried to hold the warm liquid within her. Then the fingers, or whatever Broadsword had used were removed and fluid poured from her.

Near her, she heard the sounds of objects being picked up, muffled sounds of them being wrapped and put away. She nearly cried out. She needed release after being invaded thus.

"You are now clean," he pronounced as he removed her blindfold.

Chapter Seven

As he removed the black material from her eyes, Finola grabbed his hands. "Touch me, I beg you." She glanced at his sex before moving his hand between her legs. He couldn't believe that she would ever be reduced to begging, but something called them to one another and he fought the desire to do as she beseeched.

Through clenched teeth, he drew in air, a small whistling sound accompanying the action. The procedure aroused him, as well.

"The blanket is wet." He disengaged his hand from hers and stood, trying to stay away from this woman whom he now irrationally craved.

"Call for your man to remove it." She turned so her lips were level with his cock. In an instant, she had him in her mouth, her delicate hand stroking his hard shaft.

Blaire snapped his fingers barely retaining his self-control. He pushed her mouth off his cock and lifted her to her feet, enclosing her in his arms. The sound of leaves being crushed underfoot disturbed the quiet. Pike appeared. "Exchange this blanket for a fresh one."

The man nodded and moved as quickly as his injured leg would allow, disappearing without comment as Blaire donned his linen shirt.

"I am not content. You told me the procedure would bring me contentment." She pushed her heat closer to him.

"What will bring you contentment, Princess Finola?"

"You buried in me."

The need to possess Finola threatened to overtake his senses. She not only belonged to the King, but also had lain with Calder. "You would have me take you like Calder?"

"I would have you expend your hunger on me." She grabbed his cock, stroking it in emphasis.

Blaire drew her closer, unable to quell the pleasure her touch gave him. "And what about the King?"

"I would that you ravished me instead."

Gods it was true. If any man of Hamre had to have her, it should be him. He could bring her great pleasure in the final possession of her body, not the humiliation his brother would deliver.

"And when you are not a virgin on your bedding?"

"I will blame the dead man for my violation."

"You have this planned out well, don't you." His lips grazed her neck. Her scent mingled with that of the perfumed soap he'd used, assailed him.

"I burn for you. Can you not tell?" She stroked his dick again. "I cannot wait until such time as you can take me as you take Lacombe's other wives."

He smoothed her dark hair, and bent his head to kiss a nipple, giving in to the temptation to draw it into his mouth. "Your breasts could give me sustenance."

"The rest of me will give you satisfaction," she moaned. "Keep your promise. Ease my voracious itch."

"It's the unguent. It heightens ones sexual needs."

"Please."

Broadsword lowered her to the fresh blanket spread moments before. "I will ease your itch, Sweetling." Dear Goddess, he was fighting this sensual battle and losing.

"Mmm."

"Tell me, Sweetling, do you burn like this for Calder?" He would not have her if she remained loyal to that pig!

"Why do you ask so often of him?"

The dark strands of her hair he wrapped around his fingers, using them to caress her cheek. "I would not have him touch you again if I could help it." He squeezed her breast, then bit the nipple lightly before kissing his way down her belly. "I don't want you to crave release at his hands."

"Calder alleviated my lusts."

"I will increase your lust. You will only need me." He spread her wide, and began to suckle the juices between her legs.

Swirls of delight ran through Finola as she gave herself over to his tender pleasuring of her body. His tongue danced over her sensitive nub, circled it, flicked it, until she squirmed. One hand held her breast, softly twisting the nipple first one way, then the other.

"You are so wet, Sweetling," he said as he pressed a finger into her. "I would test your ability to handle my size once again, this time with your desire for me flowing."

"You make me wet, so wet I am sure I could handle you." She felt another finger enter her as his mouth began to suckle her essence.

The two fingers stretched her, and she felt them go deeply into her. Broadsword returned to her mouth and kissed her, his hot, silken tongue mating with hers as his fingers continued to gratify her. She rubbed against his hand, attempting to set in motion the sensations that would lead to her fulfillment.

A third finger entered her and thoroughly packed full her moistness. With one of the fingers, he petted her inside, his finger moving languorously. By

the Goddess, it was delightful, as if a thousand sparks had entered to tease her. Her arousal with this man was unlike anything she'd ever felt with Calder.

"Please," she gasped. "Stop this torment. I must have release from this!" The man played with her. She was but soft clay to him, bending hither and yon to the slightest movements of his fingers.

"You would have me satisfy you, wench, but remember you are the captive. What would you do to bring about *my* release?"

"I would swallow you whole, then milk you before I drank you dry. Would that not ease your pain?"

"Indeed. Get on your hands and knees that your ass would be in my face."

She couldn't determine his plan, but did as he asked. She burned to be taken by him, as long as she reached satisfaction at his touch. On her knees, she lifted her ass to him. A hard smack hit her bottom. "Ouch," she cried out, only to be slapped again. "Why do you strike me?"

There was no answer, just another stinging hit. "Stop!"

For her cry, she was struck again. A moment passed and she managed to keep her tongue, ready for the next hit. It came, but not when she expected it, nor as hard. Warmth filled her skin in the spots she'd received the blows. She could not decide if she liked this striking or not.

One of Broadsword's hands spread her cheeks, and began to toy with her tightly shut hole. Sensation flooded her lower regions and she could feel herself become moister. "Please, take me." She couldn't resist demanding help for her release.

His hand struck her again and she moaned. Her ass was undeniably hot. The anticipated sensations of his touching her clit would be more intense. Another slap followed and she wisely stayed quiet. "Speak only when you are spoken to. This is as the King wills."

Nimble fingers played with her portals. She squirmed, imagining the pleasure yet to come.

"Would you like to test the length of me?" He leaned over her and placed a hand on her breast, rolling the hardened nipple between two fingers.

"Yes, oh, yes."

"I may not have your virginity. Would you give me what *he* has already taken?" He pinched the nipple he held.

The thought of being pleased by this man drove her response. "Yes, please, yes."

Time seemed to stop. She barely noticed that Broadsword neither moved nor spoke. A thousand tiny embers of flaming need danced on her skin, between her legs, over her breasts.

"I cannot do this," he finally groaned, jumping to his feet.

"Why? What have I done?" Finola spun around in time to see Broadsword's back disappearing into the trees. "Get dressed."

There was a hint of resignation in his voice.

* * * *

She was tied again, as well as blindfolded. The scent of roasting duck wafted to her, making her stomach growl like a wolf. The loss of sight enhanced her ability to smell. The turning of a spit creaked against the wooden legs holding it, each grease pop of the fire an explosion in her ears.

The softened leather skins that Broadsword demanded she wear caressed her healed breasts the way she longed for him to. What was happening to her that she desired the man that would see to her eventual demise at the hand of his King? She remembered the spankings after he'd performed her ablutions. When the stinging diminished, the heat of her skin had not.

Her hands slightly shook even though she was tied. She needed to say something to him, to break icy wall of silence he surrounded her with. "Thank you," she whispered.

"For?" he replied as he held a bowl of water to her lips.

The rebuke didn't come. Emboldened, she continued, "For attending to my injuries."

Finola hadn't realized she was holding her breath until she felt the water in the bowl caress her lips. She drank, the water refreshing and cool.

He tenderly caressed her cheek. "I'll get you something to eat."

On his return, she sniffed a cooked piece of chicken which he fed to her in tiny pieces. And he talked. This soldier, who fought his need to make love to her, was a poet. He recited some of his words, and some of others. He revealed a tender side Finola had never seen in any man before. Even Calder. While Calder knew how to use language to press home a point, Broadsword knew how to make expressions paint pictures.

Sleeping had been uncomfortable, her hands and feet tied. Broadsword had spent the night sitting against a nearby tree keeping watch. Over her.

Warm, bright light shining on her face woke her. The sunlight, muted by the blindfold, had made its appearance in the morning sky. Broadsword helped her eat some gruel, and then removed the blindfold before they mounted his steed. The new day seemed to have changed his mood, back to that of the stern commander set on frightening her into submission.

Broadsword seemed delighted in letting her know, in graphic detail, the life she was going to be living. "He will lash your arms and legs, one to each of the posts of his bed. Then he will have his last favorite enter the room where he will become aroused by her lips. I am told he is as big as I." He nudged her bottom with his hard, thick manhood.

"Why do you tell me this," she moaned.

"Would you rather be caught unaware, Sweetling? You must take care to fill his needs. T'would be a pity to have you injured or punished."

The thumping, rocking motion of the horse continued. It didn't lull her into complacency. She trembled at the thought of the monster she was being given to.

"Once he has freed his shaft from the woman, he will stroke it to greater fullness." Broadsword pushed against her a little harder. "Then with guards holding your head, he will oblige you to watch as he forcefully slakes his lust on the woman."

Finola gasped, unable to stay silent. "He would take a woman with others present?"

"He would have all know he is in complete and utter control. He makes sure the rumors of his cruelty, as well as his prowess with virginal women, are spread far and wide." Broadsword's chest leaned more fully into her back. "When he has finished toying with them, I, as his second, am allowed to do with them as I will."

She swallowed hard and tried to keep wavering from her voice. "What will you do with me?"

Around her waist, she felt his arm grasp her. "I *will* come for you. Minister to you, woo you, until I am all you want. But then..." he leaned forward and kissed her cheek, "...it will depend on whether the King has a party or not."

How could a party affect Broadsword's decision as to what to do with her when the King of Hamre was finished? "I do not understand, Sir."

"Since you are the daughter of his former enemy, the King may have special plans for you."

The tongue in her mouth felt heavy and thick as she considered what special plans could be in store for her. "What would he do to treat me differently from his other wives?"

"He may keep you on display longer. You may become the symbol of his utmost power over his neighboring enemies, a visible warning of what could happen to their wives and daughters should any others try to cross swords with him."

The incessant drumming of the horses' hooves on the leaf-matted forest floor became more and more muffled as Finola dwelt upon the possibilities becoming such a trophy wife would present. Her time of even limited freedom was drawing to a rapid close. Not once since she'd been placed on this horse with Broadsword had she heard the unique bird whistle Calder used to signal he was near. He had not managed an escape? If he did not appear soon to rescue her, who would?

"You said visible warning. What is it that he would do to make an example of me?"

"Why, Sweetling, he'd take you by force in front of the entire company."

It was impossible to keep her hand from flying to her mouth in a vain attempt to hold back a screamed verbal barrage. The King of Hamre was even more of a barbarian than her father suspected. For a woman to be thus treated in her own bedchamber was her lot in life. To find a man who wedded and bedded one and allowed her to retain her honor, a rarity. But to be thus dishonored in front of strangers could not be tolerated. Finola was unaware of any man, royal or commoner, that would treat any woman in her kingdom in such a manner.

Broadsword had made it abundantly clear his loyalties lay with the King of Hamre. Even his intense physical desire for her would not be enough to change his allegiance from the King to her. His fealty would be hard for her to secure.

If escape were her destiny, it would have to come from her own hands.

Chapter Eight

Finola couldn't explain the change in Broadsword's attitude. Once she'd been confident she could turn him to her side, now doubts reigned. He seemed more negative, less talkative the closer they came to the border of Hamre. He even ceased describing the king's bedding activities.

It wasn't as if she hadn't tried to seduce him over and over again as they journeyed through the forest. She'd try anything to escape the scenes he depicted regarding her deflowering and subsequent use. She'd made sure Broadsword caught glimpses of her creamy skin, that her skirt rose high to reveal her thigh, to remind him of what he'd almost taken. Several times she'd glimpsed his monstrous arousal and tried to entice him to slake his lust, but all Broadsword did was glare at her, dismount, then turn his back to her and disappear into the trees.

He was true to his word though. He'd seen she was dressed, as a Princess bride-to-be of Lacombe should be, in order to be presented to the King. Baubles sparkled on chains of gold braided through her hair.

This was only part of her raiment. The soft leather of her dress was matched with gauntlets that nearly reached her elbows. These were covered with a delicate sheet of pounded gold. In fact, gold was the color selected for her. Small cords wrapped around her ankles, of such fine workmanship they

would snap with little effort. A golden chain wrapped around her waist, not once, but twice, and the ends reached to mid-thigh.

About her shoulders was a cape of silky ermine fur, a beautiful, maidenly white. A fine, highly polished tortoise shell edged with gold clasped the mantle at her neck to close the cloak. The rich attire was a burden she'd carry the remainder of the trip. She hoped she'd be able to move with the dignity and grace expected of a woman of her rank.

The persona Broadsword created screamed she was a priceless jewel of her father's realm. "Why, sir, do you go to such efforts to make me what I am not?

His roan snorted as if the horse too wondered why she would ask such a question. "I dress you such, because you are a valuable gift from the King of Talone."

"He threw me to your king with little thought to my supposed value. Just as you do." The malice of her words caught her by surprise.

She turned and saw strands of blond hair escaping the confines of his hood. "Politics between men like your father and my king offer little choice in how a life is lived. Rest assured, a father does not easily give up a daughter to a strange realm if there is another way known to him."

Tenderness crept into his voice as he spoke through his mask. "Know the sacrifice of your virginity is to prevent war and thus will save the lives of many people, both in your father's kingdom and mine."

The reply was far gentler than she expected. "You speak as if you have suffered a similar loss."

"Aye."

Broadsword said no more. It was the most he had revealed to her about himself in the last two days. Perhaps he'd inadvertently revealed a chink in his armor. Could she find a way to use his loss to leverage her own escape?

He returned to his new stoic self. He allowed no words to pass between them, and kept close behind her in their saddle. Had she been a man and revealed as much as he had, she would have kept her emotional distance as well.

Around them the forest thinned. There were signs of small farms dotting the landscape. She knew from overhearing Broadsword's conversation with his man they would be at the king's residence before nightfall. Her fate was sealed unless she could convince Broadsword to secure her release.

An opportunity presented itself when they stopped to rest and water the horses near a wide, fast running creek. The loud babbling was far from soothing. "Please, I would talk with you."

"You have nothing to say that I want to hear."

"I don't know how I have offended you. Are all men of Hamre of such temperament? I would learn, so as not to repeat my folly."

He crossed to her and grabbed her by the arms. "You would know of the men of Hamre? We are men of honor."

"Honor? When you abase your women in the ways you have described? I don't call that honor, Sir. I call it rape, I call it abuse."

"The women I have described for your benefit are not the women of Hamre. They are our captives, the spoils of war justly earned in battle."

"Am I to be treated thus, as a spoil of war, despite my supposed value to your king?"

"I've no precise thoughts on whether what he will do with you will be the same or different from the others."

"Don't you? He will take the honor of my land, my honor."

Broadsword spat. "You, woman, have no honor. No woman of Hamre would give herself to any of her declared enemies, as you have tried to with my man, with me."

Finola spat back. "Then I fear many of your womenfolk have died the death I would not allow. For us life is precious, something not to be thrown

away when it can be easily secured by offering oneself to the enemy. What good is honor, sir, if you are dead?"

"Without honor, you are nothing."

"I'd rather be nothing and alive. I'd rather live to fight another day and carve out the heart of my abuser from his chest."

"Just another of your barbarian traits."

She raised her hand and struck Broadsword as hard as she could. "How dare you call me barbarian!"

He caught her by the wrist and pulled her close to him. Anger flashed from his eyes, his covered jaw clenched, and his teeth ground together. His breath caressed her cheek as his words carved into her mind. "You will never strike me again, or you will suffer a fate far worse than that which you fear."

A muscle in his chin twitched. His raw, barely controlled power stirred her. He was an adversary worthy of her father's exploits. "You think you are impervious to me, to my allure. Though you fight the attraction, I know that I affect you."

"I will not lie, Finola. I find your body very desirable, but beyond taking you to bed once the king is done with you, I wouldn't count on that desire to get you far. Your allure extends no further than the release you can give me."

Standing on tiptoe, she seared him with a kiss. "You are not impervious to me."

He pulled her closer yet and drove his tongue deep into her mouth. Lightning erupted with his invasion. He yanked his lips from hers. "I am a battle-hardened man, Finola. There is not a woman in ten realms that I would fight for outside those of my own family."

"A shame. You must be an incredibly lonely man."

He spat through the opening of his silk mask. "No more so than your Calder? He takes any woman he wants, when he wants, no matter if she be the

wife of another. The traitorous dog should be drawn and quartered. He does neither of our kingdoms a just or honorable service."

Finola laughed. "You couldn't compare to the likes of Calder. He has ever and always had my safety, my best interests at heart."

"Nay, woman, Calder has only one interest at heart, his. Where is he to rescue you from your soon to be fulfilled destiny? What will he have to do with you once the king has made you his? Nothing, I can assure you. He too, knows the king's methods. He has participated in those rites."

"He will come! He loves me!"

"Aye, the way he loved his former wife by giving her to the men of his band. They raped her until she died."

"You lie!"

"Think what you wish. Do not expect rescue at his hands."

The impact of Broadsword's words struck her like an open hand across the cheek. Calder had participated in the King's...she could not finish her thoughts. Tears sprang to her eyes. Calder with a wife? Dead by his deeds? Her stomach churned.

To the south lay the kingdom of Hamre, north that of her father, and here she was, alone, left to suffer all that her captor had told her. Unbidden, Calder's words returned. Learn from the women of Hamre how to pleasure a man. Broadsword had followed him out of Hamre, stated Calder came and went at will.

Her resolve to fight departed her as quickly as a buck ran through the woods when hearing a hunter. Despair enveloped her.

Broadsword was right. Calder was not coming to her rescue. If that had been his intent, he would have done so under the cover of the forest. He could have easily escaped the bowman who had the wounded soldier to tend. He could have ordered his band to find and rescue her. Neither had happened.

It would never come to pass in the open fields. If Calder refused to rescue her, was it so far fetched to think he had participated in the deflowering rituals? How could she have allowed his touch? Why had she been unaware of his activities during his long absences? With a clarity she'd never before experienced she knew that Calder would no longer benefit from her innocent trust.

To her right ran the stream where they watered their horses. She glared at Broadsword, unable to speak, then turned and dashed toward the rushing water. The liquid seeped into the leather of her boots, the edge of her gown. She pushed onward, toward the center where the water was deeper. She would not live to carve the heart of her enemy out of his chest. Nor would she allow herself to be abused the way Broadsword described.

No one owned her, nor ever would. Taking her own life was all that was left if she were to have complete control of her future. The swirling water reached mid-thigh. Without a backward glance, she threw herself face first into the eddy, letting the weight of her clothing and its golden ornaments pull her downward.

The water was cold. She fought to control the urge to fling her arms toward the surface and gulp in air. Around her the light dimmed, the edges of her vision darkened. She closed her eyes and gave herself up to death.

* * * *

Sputtering, she awoke, her eyes flying open. Intuitively, she knew she had not died, no matter how much she'd willed it. Finola could hear the crackling sound of a fire. Her limbs started trembling and she could not force them to stop. A voice, his, reverberated through the air.

"Send a message to the King. Tell him what has occurred and that we are delayed. Return at once with his instructions."

The dull thud of a horse's hooves beat through the field. A knife cut through her clothing, and Broadsword's strong arms lifted her out of the new rags and carried her toward a heat source. Unceremoniously, he dumped her onto a blanket on the ground. It smelled of horse. She picked up the edges and tried to wrap it around her. The material itched and would not cover her completely.

She watched as Broadsword stripped his sodden clothing from his body and laid the material on rocks near the fire. His body was taut and hard. A spring of desire rose in her, having nothing to do with escape plans, nothing to do with suicide. She wanted him to take away the ache of the betrayal she felt.

He removed his mask, and laid it next to the other articles of his clothing. She stifled a gasp. His pale angular face was as hard as the rest of his toned body. Brown eyes peered intently at her, daring her to speak. The corner of his right eye was scarred as if someone had tried to gouge it out. However, it was the scar that ran the length of his face to just under his chin that caught her attention. It was easily the work of incredible cruelty, so deliberate was its path.

Pulling the blanket from her hands, he sat behind her on it and wrapped her in his arms. He was as cold as she. Together they would become warm. They sat in the quiet, watching the sun go down, and then on into the darkness until there was nothing left of the fire save hot coals. Without speaking, he left her and placed more wood on the waning glow. His muscles flexed as he placed larger logs onto the thin branches that lay on the rekindling embers. Broadsword was truly a formidable man.

She rose and brought the horse blanket closer to the fire, then laid out her full length near its newly reignited flames. He came to her and stretched out behind her, his arm securing her to his body. Neither spoke. It was not a time for words.

Together they stayed wrapped so, as the twilight descended. She shifted and turned to face him, her bare breasts brushing against his chest. His cock sprang to life, teasing her belly, and yet he did not move or speak.

Tentatively, she placed a finger near the scar of his eye. How she longed to kiss it, to kiss him, and offer her acceptance of him as he was, a marred, yet beautifully masculine, man. She traced the line of the other scar down his cheek to under his chin. She edged closer to him, and wrapped her arm around his neck pulling him close to her.

Their lips met, and the explosion of heat that shot between them was more overwhelming than any she'd experienced. His lips, once rigidly firm, gave way to her soft kisses. Their tongues danced about one another. She drank deeply of his mouth and he of hers.

Broadsword opened his mouth to speak. She silenced his attempt by stroking his tongue with hers. Pushing him onto his back she lay on his chest, continuing her kisses. One hand held her firmly to him as the other ran down her back and stroked her bottom. Her blood quickened even as moisture pooled between her legs. It would be so easy for her to impale herself on him, to take what she'd wanted since she fled Talone.

Yet, she held back. This decision was not rational, not when his touch made her ache to be possessed by him. Nor when she believed she had deep feelings for another. Her mind tumbled wildly, forcing her body into submission. Her flesh knew she belonged with the man underneath her. As it told her so, her mind reminded her that this man wanted nothing to do with her other than using her as a portal to his pleasure. There was nothing to be gained by coupling with him now. They were too close to Hamre.

He grabbed her around the waist and rolled her onto her back. As he continued to make love to her mouth, he fondled her breasts. Her nipples hardened at his touch creating a deeper need within her to be taken by him. A desire she would not give in to, not when his life could be forfeited.

Lifting his mouth from hers, he looked into her eyes before he descended to suckle at the dimpled peak. Passion shot through her hard and fast as if a red-hot sword had been pulled from the blacksmith's fire and rammed into her heart. His touch surpassed that of Calder. Yet, it was more. Broadsword, the soldier, was hard and unyielding, but the man that held her now, the one that wanted to be her lover, was tender, loyal, gentle.

His need nudged her juncture. Unable to maintain control against his powerful, sensual assault she wrapped her legs around his waist, murmuring, "I surrender. I am yours to do with as you will."

Chapter Nine

Blaire stopped the swirl of his tongue around her nipple, her words jolting him back to reality, responsibility, loyalty to his king. Crackles and pops of the wood in the fire emphasized his words. "Ah, Finola. Do you have an idea of how tempting you really are?"

"Don't leave me."

"I have no choice, nor do you. The only way for us to find our mutual fulfillment will be after your wedding night with the king."

She reached up and brought his mouth down to hers, kissing him as if he were all she would ever need in this world. The thought made his heart swell.

"All I want is you," she whispered huskily.

"What you want is not yours to obtain. You belong to another. I was foolish for letting even this happen."

"You cannot deny what occurs when we kiss."

It was true. Initially, her wild willfulness challenged him to tame her. His undoing had been that very first kiss. Despite his attempts to control his cravings, none had worked. "I cannot deny it. Nor can I do anything about it."

"I will not allow him to take me, not when I belong to another."

"You will. You spoke of survival. This, too, you will survive. Perhaps your love, your Calder, will rescue you yet."

Gently, she pushed against him and he rolled off her. "On this you were right, Calder will not come for me. If he'd wanted my release he would have acquired it already." She wiggled her lithe body down his, until her lips were near his cock. He inhaled sharply, anticipating the feel of her mouth on him.

"For a man of military cunning you have much to learn about the ways of the heart." She kissed the tip. "I do not love Calder." Her mouth went around the head. She stroked his shaft with her hand and tongue. "Once I begged for you to take my virginity. Now, I would not dishonor you so."

She took the broad expanse of him into her mouth then slowly released it. Again, she let her mouth slide down his hard member and she licked her way back up it.

Blaire's hands fisted into her hair. "Stop."

"I will not."

"I cannot have you."

"But I can have you." Finola took him into her mouth deeper.

A moan escaped his lips as he pushed himself more fully into her tantalizing warmth.

She ran her lips up and over his shaft, then licked the tip. "Tell me ... tell me what you want."

More than anything, he wanted to make her his. He wanted to keep his brother from her, keep Calder from ever seeing her again. Picturing her laughing in the orchard behind his home, he was filled with longing for something much more than Finola heating his sheets. He wanted the right to woo her, win her to him with gentle words of love.

Words he could not speak now. "To come in you."

"Once?" She pushed him, wanting him to confess to more than an afternoon of sexual gratification. Blaire had once told her that he'd take her and be done with her. Did she remember?

She wrapped her tongue around the purple head of his rod. He moaned again, "No."

"How many times will you please yourself with my body?" she persisted.

His hips shot up toward her lips. "As often as you will let me, vixen."

Again she ran her tongue down his shaft. He reached under her shoulder and he slid her up and over his torso so they were again face-to-face. "I would have you now were my honor not at stake," he whispered savagely.

Finola kissed him. He responded by stroking her intimately, his fingers caressing the folds of her femininity, before delving into her dew. "Mmm," she moaned against his lips.

His fingers entered deeper as the heel of his hand rubbed her. Blaire pleased her and she continued fondling him. His cock became harder in her small hand.

Drops of the seed to come wet the top of his cock head. As his rhythm increased against her sensitive entrance she increased the pace of her hands on him.

Suddenly she arched back, her breasts swaying in front of his lips. Wave upon rippling wave of pleasure began crashing around his fingers and she cried out, "Goddess help me!"

Her body crumpled upon Blaire's in a boneless heap. Moments later, his seed sprayed upon her belly as he grunted his own release.

* * * *

They lay together entwined in one another's arms throughout the night. They shared more than body warmth, Finola thought as she relished again the strength of this man and his arms about her. The sun would rise soon and their idyll would come to an unwelcome end.

"I will not give myself to him," she whispered against Broadsword's chest.

"There is no other way for you." He stroked her hair but it did not reassure her. "Knowing what I do, I can accept this. If you resist, your injuries," he paused as if searching for the right words, "your injuries could be severe, enough so to take your life."

"If that is the will of the Goddess, then so be it."

"What happened to the hellcat that was going to cut the heart from her enemies?"

"She has fallen in love," she whispered, "with her captor."

Broadsword tensed. "What do you know of love, Finola? You said you loved Calder. Do you give your heart so easily?"

"I didn't know of his atrocities, of his traitorous ways." She laid her head against his chest, listening to the steady beating of his heart. "I am content to be here with you. This is as the Goddess wills."

Tenderness filled his whisper. "I cannot love you, Sweetling."

"It is not the time." Lifting her head, she traced a finger down his scar. "Who did this to you?"

His large hand covered hers. "It was long ago."

"The loss you endured. Is it related to this marking?"

"Aye."

"I would know the answer to my question."

Cupping her face in his hands he stared at her intensely. "You will not like the answer."

"Who?"

"Calder."

"Why?" She kept her voice soft, kept disbelief from ruining Broadsword's admission. "It is difficult to believe Calder would do something so inhumane."

"It would not be the first time a man reacted viciously. Calder fought desperately and when he thought he had me defeated, he pressed his opportunity to humiliate me further."

Questions jumped around in her mind like a hare avoiding a hunter. "What has Calder done to you?"

"He raped my wife. Dishonored her before the elders when his seed took root. They allowed the babe to be birthed then took my wife to serve as a temple prostitute."

"I don't understand. How was it that he inflicted such a wound?"

"I saw him taking her, as he took you when I first came upon you. He used any entry for his pleasure and he went into both of hers at will, sullyng her thoroughly. Between the raping and the beatings she endured at his hands, rage filled my senses and blood lust consumed me."

Broadsword stopped his tale, sorrow and hatred filling his eyes. Finola caressed his cheek. "Is this why you sent him to the dungeons? Say no more. You do not need to remember the pain he caused you."

"I am not a weakling. I would tell you all so you would know what I've endured at his hands. What sort of man you pledged yourself to."

Beneath her hands, she could feel his rage. His muscles tensed and his jaw twitched.

"I rushed into the room intent on stopping him. So great was my anger that I didn't see his bodyguards stationed on either side of the doorway. I lunged for him. One of his brutes struck me on the head and I went down, but not before I'd driven my sword through the bastard's heart. By then, the other had a knife to my throat. The guard tied me and forced me to watch as Calder brutalized my wife."

Long moments of silence passed. The cold of night would soon end. Pale light edged the eastern plains. A new life awaited her, but not with the man she

cared for. Even if she were free, Finola wondered if anyone could truly ease the ache of his heart for his former love.

"When Calder was done, he forced an herb down my throat and told me the man I'd murdered was a relative of the King, attempting to usurp the crown. If I revealed a word of what I'd seen the story would come forth that I was a traitor along with the dead man. I would no longer be able to fulfill my oath to the King."

"What is this oath?" she whispered against the warmth of his chest.

"The oath is an old one, handed down generation after generation. To be the King's most trusted, honored servant. To fail in this would bring shame upon my house and force the end of the lives of all in my house, be they slave or offspring. Such is the rightful punishment for betraying the trust of the King."

"And your eye?"

"To make the women turn from me in disgust, to fill the little children with fear. Calder attempted to cut it from my face. He had begun his butchery when a ruckus began in the streets. The din would alert the King's peacekeepers to his presence, so he fled my home, leaving me to bleed to death on the floor of my wife's bedchamber. A servant found me sometime later."

Guilt and disgust filled Finola. Guilt that she'd been attempting to seduce a married man, disgust at the horror inflicted by a man she once thought she loved. Now she recognized that feeling as nothing more than an unschooled woman's lust.

She stroked Broadsword's face. His scars were a vivid reminder of what he'd suffered. It was no wonder he sought to keep them hidden, both from himself and the others who would not understand the emotional anguish casual conversation would bring to his heart.

"What of your wife?" She lowered her head to his chest again, her conduct a thorough embarrassment. Had she forced him to deflower her, they

both would have been utterly disgraced. A dalliance with an unwed man, while frowned upon could be accepted, even forgotten, as long as a child did not result.

Not so sleeping with a married man. The women of the villages in Talone would rise up against a husband stealer and attempt to stone such a foolish female with no regard for her rank. Often they succeeded in securing the woman's death and when they did not, the wild beasts of the forest frequently finished the task.

It was simpler and worse for the married man. He would be deprived of his seed sac.

"She never again uttered a single word following that day. Once she regained her strength after Calder's child was born, she leapt from the wall of the temple and was trampled by a carriage."

Tears flowed freely down her cheeks. How could she have possibly thought she loved someone as cruel as Calder?

"Come now, Sweetling. The past cannot be undone. Her wrongs will be revenged." He held her more possessively. "We must dress before I am accused of that which I have fought."

Broadsword gave her his linen tunic. It was finely woven, a sign of wealth. The man she longed for with all her being was no commoner. Nor would he participate in the sort of attack he'd ascribed to Calder. Truly, Broadsword was a man of honor. His loyalty to his king, in the face of the agony he'd endured and the temptations she'd placed before him, proved his worth.

There was but one way to demonstrate her value to him. She would go to the King of Hamre as ordered. Broadsword wrapped the golden chain about her waist again, placed the armbands about her wrists. Swallowing hard, she tried to memorize each touch. "I will do my duty so no dishonor would come upon you." Straightening her shoulders she continued, "How long until you come to me?"

He leaned his forehead against hers. "Sweetling, you have been alone overnight with a man. The King is no fool. He knows what temptations befall a man conveying a beautiful woman to him endures. You will be kept apart until such time as he is assured there is no bastard growing in your womb. The length of your confinement will be set by his decree."

Heat rushed to Finola's face as she pulled away from Broadsword. Just as quickly the heat fled, leaving her chilled. She was to be apart from Broadsword even longer than anticipated. Her brow furrowed. "No! How can this be? He would know I could not be with your child if my maidenhead is intact."

"It is his practice. He has done so in all situations like this."

"How many women has he found to be impregnated?"

"Three."

"Three!"

Broadsword nodded, drawing her into the circle of his arms.

"What happened to them."

"The women, as well as the men, were executed."

The possibility of causing Broadsword's death unnerved her. "I could not let that happen to you."

"Nor I you, Sweetling."

She couldn't believe her ears. "You have feelings for me?"

"Aye, little hellcat."

"When? How long have you felt thus?"

"Since you tried to drown yourself. I knew immediately I would miss your tempting sway and your sharpened tongue." Her caressed her face, stroked her hair. A sad smile crossed his features as he donned his mask. "It seemed a shame to miss the pleasures I know you will be able to give me once the King has moved on to his next conquest."

Finola tried to make sense of his revelations. It was no declaration of love, only of desire, lust. For now, she would take it. If the Goddess gave them enough time, she would make Broadsword love her.

He handed her up to her seat and they began the final portion of their journey to Hamre. Although she was afraid of what the King would do with her, Broadsword had given her a precious gift. A tiny seed of hope.

Chapter Ten

They resumed their journey and had only been on the trail a short while when Pike returned bringing a fresh horse. "I see she wears your tunic, Sir."

"Indeed. The river ruined the leather. I could not bring her to Hamre naked as a babe."

"King Lacombe wants her brought before him immediately, no matter what affairs he is attending." Pike came nearer Broadsword, "My liege, he will insist on the period of confinement."

"Her virtue is intact."

"You misunderstand me. Calder has been released from the dungeon and brought before King Lacombe. He told the King that you had your way with her, that she is no longer a maiden."

"Bastard."

Both men turned at the sound of her voice.

"He really does hate you, doesn't he?"

"Aye. He cares for no one save himself. Are you surprised by this revelation?"

Finola sighed. "I had still thought he would remain loyal to me. I now see I was mistaken and that you were truthful."

"Lord, Calder has also told the king that she murdered Aneirin. The king was fond of Aneirin and is in a great rage over his death."

"So, he did not survive his wound." He shook his head. "Your temper, Sweetling, is revisiting you."

"There is a way out of this, isn't there?"

"We must do as the King commands. To give him any less than your complete obedience will give credence to Calder's words." He directed his next comment to Pike. "Where is Calder?"

"He is under house arrest, Sir."

Broadsword rubbed his chin, recovered in the black silk she'd first seen him in. "This bodes ill. He will foment unrest with his cronies. Princess Finola can reveal the truth regarding her virtue once the King takes her to bed. Calder will not want this."

His gauntlet-encased hand covered hers. "You are not safe alone. We must see to it that you are protected at all times." He lifted her from his steed and carried her to the new arrival.

Remounting his horse, his decision made, he continued, "We will need to have her watched by one of the concubines. Come, let us hurry to Hamre and deal with Calder once and for all." Broadsword slapped the rump of Finola's horse then spurred his into a full gallop.

Finola was not a great horsewoman. The horse took off at breakneck speed, running where it willed. The galloping of her steed was more than she could control. She clutched its mane with all her might, screaming at the top of her lungs. "Help me!"

Behind her, she could hear the horses of Broadsword and Pike chasing her. Would they stop her before the horse threw her and trampled her to death? "Woah," she shrieked.

The sound of her voice increased the stallion's pace. Clouds of dust lifted as the horse's hooves pounded into the ground. From the corner of her eye she

could see her honorable knight pulling alongside her. She turned her head. Pike neared her as well. The horse continued on, as if racing with the other two.

"Hold tight, Finola." His deep voice rose above the pounding of the turf as he sped ahead of her steed, dangerously close. The animal turned its head and ran toward Pike. He, too, came closer to the wild beast.

The turn allowed Broadsword to come near the horse's shoulder. Leaning low over his trained stallion, Broadsword reached for the rein. His first attempt to grab it failed, and he nearly lost his seat. He achieved his goal on the next try.

Her horse spun about. Dirt, dust, and fragments of grass flew through the air. Finola screamed once, as the mount reared. She lost her grip and slid off the animal, hitting the ground with a thud. Pain shot through her lower back and down her legs. She lay in the dirt, waiting for the dust to settle, not daring to move. Her body throbbed. She had no idea where the horse had gone and if its temperament had changed. She had no desire to be trampled.

Broadsword's arms went around her. He ran a hand down one arm, then the other. "Are you all right?"

Carefully, she nodded. Already she could feel her body bruising. "I don't think I've broken anything." She moved slightly, then grimaced.

"You are hurt." It sounded like a statement of fact. He checked her legs through the tunic that served as her dress. "Your legs seem to be intact." He glared at her. "Why didn't you tell me you couldn't ride?"

"I do ride," she replied. "I don't gallop, nor race, or put any of my stable through what you just did. Riding for me is only to linger in the woods quietly, a form of outdoor entertainment."

"This will never do," he said as he lifted her into his arms. "I can't have you falling off whenever the pace quickens. "Tie her horse behind yours," he shouted at Pike. "Let us be off at once. Delay will only give more credence to Calder's words."

He lifted her onto his stallion, and then mounted, securing her by placing his arms about her. Finola leaned back into his chest and despite the discomfort enjoyed the ride. How could she not, in his rugged embrace?

They reached the gates of Lacombe's castle before noon. The common grounds were filled with people performing their labors for the King. The smith hammered away on his anvil; peasant women hawked their vegetables. The sounds assaulted her ears so accustomed she had become to the quiet of the woods.

They raced through the outer ward, on to the inner gatehouse, crossed the inner ward, and abruptly stopped at the great hall. Broadsword dismounted, then pulled her from the horse. It was tempting to tarry in his arms for a moment longer, but he put her away from him as hurriedly as if he'd pulled his hand from a fire.

With as much grace as she could muster, she walked stiffly up the stairs and into the great hall. The vaulted ceiling gave the room the ability to magnify their steps with its echo. At the far end was the throne of the King of Hamre.

Colorful banners fluttered near open windows and she recognized many of the pennants. Former enemies of Hamre, subdued by King Lacombe's armies. The symbol of her house was nearest the throne, the blue and gold of the royal crested eagle on a banner pole. King Lacombe himself was busy talking animatedly to men kneeling before him. She supposed they discussed important affairs of state.

It was several long minutes before the King's supplicants were finished and departed the room. Finally, Finola moved forward with Broadsword and they were admitted into the presence of the King of Hamre. The dais he sat upon was made of white marble. Pristine and cold, the majority of the area near the king had nothing adorning the walls, nor fur on the floor to warm the feet of those who approached. This end of the room was foreboding, as if inhabited by the ghosts of those who gave up the banners.

Finola gasped when she saw King Lacombe. His face was familiar to her, as were his brown eyes, his blond hair, and the very build of his body. He was the mirror image of Broadsword. How could two men look so similar and be of such different temperaments?

"Brother, welcome."

Broadsword knelt and Finola followed his lead, trying to recover from the shock she'd received. "My Lord."

"I see you have brought me my bride. Rise, both of you."

Finola scrambled to her feet, ungracefully. Her muscles rebelled with soreness caused by her earlier accident. She kept her head bowed, and through the curtain of her hair tried to examine the differences between the brothers. Broadsword was taller, more fit. The King was older with a look of suspicion in his eyes. Both had deep brown eyes but Broadsword's didn't hold the open distrust Lacombe's did. She knew Broadsword had scars running down the side of his face. King Lacombe's features were flawless. "Undress, Princess Finola."

She stole a glance at Broadsword who kept his eyes focused on the man who held both their futures. He gave her a nearly imperceptible nod. Finola untied the lacing of the linen with shaking hands.

"Too slow." The King whipped out a dagger from his belted linen robe and grabbed the tunic she wore, slicing through it from the bottom of the neck opening to its hem. He pushed the ruined cloth from her shoulders where it fell to pool at her feet. "She looks worse for the wear."

"Aye. We have had quite the adventure these past days. I am sure Princess Finola would benefit from a bath, and perhaps a massage at the hands of one of your women. She had a nasty fall from a horse only a few hours ago."

"You were alone with her last night."

"Aye."

"She will need to be confined."

"Aye."

"Is there more you would say?"

Finola listened intently. These men were deciding her fate, testing one another with words, acting as if she were not standing there naked and exposed in the throne room.

Broadsword's voice flowed over her, warm and reassuring, giving her the strength to keep her words to herself. "Aye, there is more I would tell you. We came upon her with Calder."

"He has accused you of deflowering her."

King Lacombe continued to speak, never once asking for her explanation of the events that lead to her capture. Deep within she felt anger's fire begin to burn. It wouldn't take much to create an out of control flame.

"My Lord, the Princess is yet a maiden." Broadsword knew of her innocence. "However, only you can prove her purity. When you take her to your bed, you will be reassured. In the meantime, you would confine her where she is at great risk of being raped by Calder or one of his men. He would be delighted to have his lies look to be the truth."

The King appeared to consider Broadsword's words. "If she is a virgin as you say, then she could be in the danger you describe. She will also lack knowledge in how to please me. I shall give her tutors and see to it that her purity is protected."

Broadsword bowed low, picked up the remnants of his tunic, and handed them to her. "I can ask no more."

* * * *

Finola accepted all she heard with seething anger as she covered herself with the remainder of the tunic. Broadsword handed her to his brother without protest. Determination gripped her. She *would* get out of this situation. She would apply herself to the teachings of her tutors. Anything she could learn to

help the King's brother she would heed. The lessons of the concubines would enable her to please Broadsword all the more when they could be together.

A large man escorted her to a room with long windows set high in a stone wall. The openings were covered with tapestries that moved on long cords. There was no obvious way for her to use the windows for escape. Today, the tapestries were pulled to the sides of the windows allowing shafts of light to brighten the room. A breeze though those same windows brought fresh air to its occupants. There were three women in the room. Only one had a royal carriage to her gait, and was dressed in the deep purple colors of a sovereign. Her brown tresses were piled on the top of her head like a braided crown and were interwoven with strands of gold.

It was this woman who spoke to her now. "I am Konoko. I will be your teacher. You have been given a great honor to join with the King as his wife."

"Who are the others?"

"These two are my servant women; they too have served as concubines of the King. They have many talents as you will discover." She clapped her hands three times and two of the women rushed to her side. "Remove the rag. Burn what is left of it."

"Please, don't. It is special to me." Finola clutched the shredded linen against her breasts.

The girls pulled Broadsword's tunic from her hands and off her body.

"Very well, cleanse it and put it away." She looked over Finola. "You need a bath."

"Indeed."

"Phillipa, Liona, prepare a warm bath. Get the oils ready as well." The women departed without a word. "You've been injured. Turn around so I can see if there are other areas that need our attentions."

Finola did as she was told while she listened to the tsk, tsk of Konoko. Around her, she watched the concubines unblock a stream of water letting it

flow to a deep hole in the floor. Then they lit candles, placed around stone ledges near the tub.

"Come, step into the pool. It will relax your muscles. This will be important for your joining with the King."

Stepping into the water, Finola was pleased with its warmth. One of the women, a raven-haired beauty, removed her own clothing and joined her. Her breasts were nearly as large as Finola's and floated near the top of the water as she sank into its depth. Never before had she seen another woman naked. Blushing, she turned away from the sight, and surveyed the room of her confinement.

Something felt incongruous. Glancing around nervously, Finola asked, "Where are the others?" She hastily added, "The other women the King has taken as wife?"

Konoko laughed, a pleasant sound that echoed softly off the chamber walls. "The King finds husbands for those who no longer wish to be at his beck and call once he has finished with them. They have not come to an untimely demise."

Her brows furrowed. "Then why do you remain when you could have your..."

"Freedom?" Konoko interrupted. "We stay because our men are not available. They serve as leaders of the King's army."

Warmth stole over Finola as she considered Konoko's words. Perhaps the King wasn't as vile as the stories she'd heard. In the concubines' chamber she was safe.

Her training would no doubt take days. Days in which she could reflect on both Broadsword and Calder and the part each played in her life. Perhaps the women could help her discover the truth of her experiences with the two men. One of the two had to be false, had to be using her, had to be a traitor. Her heart

told her it was not Broadsword, but her mind would not accept it was Calder who used her.

"Now, your first lesson today will be about touch. Touch is important in fulfilling the needs of all lovers. It is important to know first one's own desires in order to anticipate that of another." The dark haired beauty in the water ran a hand over her own breast and pinched her nipple while Konoko continued, "Have you touched yourself, there?"

Finola nodded, fascinated by how Raven sluiced the water over her chest. Behind her, she felt another woman enter the large pool. It was Konoko. "Sit, Finola. There are shelves built in so we do not need to stand."

Sitting, Finola watched Raven come nearer. Konoko sat behind Finola and extended her legs into the pool. Cleansed of hair they were shapely, muscular, and beautiful. Across from her, Raven's breasts were no less fantastic.

"Touch what you will," Konoko ordered.

She didn't dare reach out to touch Raven. Women did not pleasure other women. The water had hardened Raven's nipples into something resembling large stones. She came nearer and Finola was able to view them even closer. Curiosity washed through her. Was that how her breasts looked to Broadsword?

"It is allowable for you to touch me, Princess." The woman came closer and placed Finola's hands on her chest.

Finola trembled not from fear, but from embarrassment. Her face heated. A man should be touching this woman, not her.

Meanwhile, Konoko fastened her hands around Finola's breasts. "What you do to her, I do to you. You will find it pleasurable or painful depending on your state of arousal, need, and physical condition. This knowledge you will then apply to the King, knowing his state of being, and what his body will require of you."

Finola hesitantly played with the woman's breasts. Soft and silky they overfilled her hands, the nipples rolling between her thumbs and fingers. Her

breasts were fondled likewise. The sensations sent waves of desire darting between Finola's legs. "I think it's time I got out now," she said breathlessly.

"Yes, I think it time for your massage. Philippa, come, pour the oils on the Princess and give her your best massage. We must go slowly with her. There is much for her to experience and learn before she goes to the King's bed. I will stay in the pool with Liona."

Dripping water across the floor, Finola went to the flat couch Konoko pointed out. A solid piece of dark wood faced the warm pool. In the water, she saw the raven-haired beauty, Liona, suckle Konoko's breasts. She tried to avert her eyes from the scene, but could not. She blushed. The women were enjoying one another, if their moans were an indication. Was this what a woman needed to do when there was no man to mate with?

Would the massage she experienced at Phillipa's hands give her such pleasure? Did she want it?

The couch was a bit higher than those she'd used in her father's palace, yet was comfortable. Philippa opened a hidden door to remove pillows. Silk-clad cushions, placed on the wood padded her legs and stomach. She lay flat, her breasts crushed against the cool material. Warm oil poured onto her back, scented with jasmine and cinnamon. The unusual combination was heady. Finola relaxed.

Perhaps the women would be able to teach her more of the sensual arts that seduced a man. But, not just any man; not even the King. She wanted to entice Broadsword.

Oil was trailed down her spine, ending in the hollow between her cheeks. Chills broke out on Finola's back. A woman had never touched her like this before. Philippa's strong hands kneaded her shoulder, at first gently, then increasing in pressure following the curve of her back to the small indentation above her buttocks. Finola tensed. Philippa's hands returned to grip her

shoulders and manipulate the tender muscles, her motions retracing the earlier path.

Those hands rolled back up her spine and began their descent once again, this time delving deeper into her cleft, making Finola intensely aware of how sensitive her backside could be. These women seemed to be keenly fascinated by the task of discovering and revealing Finola's sexual nature.

So much was new. Knowledge kept from her while she lived in her father's fortress. Wanton responses flooded her awakening body, overcoming the aches of her earlier fall. In the safety of these rooms, she could explore those delicious sensations that made her body shudder in rapture. Truly, they would teach her to satisfy, not only the King, but Broadsword – let alone herself.

"Oh," she exclaimed when Philippa hit a particularly sensitive spot. "Just today I sustained an injury in that area."

"I shall beware, Princess. I have some special oils that will aid the healing." A moment later, another fragrant oil, like that of mint, scented the air.

"I do believe you to have most talented hands, Phillipa," Finola muttered, finally relaxed again, her eyes closing.

Chapter Eleven

For the first time in days, Finola acquiesced to her environment. These women made her feel safe, cherished. She didn't seem to go to sleep, nor was she fully aware. Life existed for her somewhere between those two realms. Turning her head, even the room had the mystical quality of a dream-like state. Across the area, she could see two of the women dancing. Honeysuckle scented the air as the subtle clanging of hand cymbals kept time to their undulations.

"How are you feeling, Princess Finola?"

"Relaxed. I could lie here forever," she replied to Konoko. "But I feel my muscles stiffening."

"Your fall bruised you over a large portion of your buttocks and back yesterday."

"Yesterday?"

"You fell asleep and we thought it wise to let your body rest. Sleep is often the best healer. We shall continue your course of healing oils and massages."

A trickle of something warm and wet meandered down Finola's back. A delightful scent reached her nose. "What is it?"

"Honeysuckle is the primary ingredient, mixed with mint and a few other herbs to help heal your injuries."

"It smells heavenly. The healers at home use the most foul smelling potions."

Konoko laughed. "Are your healers men?"

"Yes."

"They feel it must stink in order to do any good. I believe it only makes the patient yearn to get away from their practices faster."

Finola laughed. "Perhaps that is why they profess such a high success rate."

Konoko joined her laughter.

"Our women don't dance like that either."

"I sense there is much you do not know about the ways of a woman, much less the women of Hamre."

"My father wished I were a son. My mother died when I was a babe and I missed the teachings she would have shared regarding the secrets of women." Finola paused taking a moment to gaze upon the dancers moving to the music of their hands. "I know enough of a man's world to survive, and next to nothing of a woman's."

Konoko's small hands began rubbing the oil into Finola's back. Gently, she worked on the bruised areas. The scent of lavender drifted to Finola's nose. "Applying lavender oil with cold compresses will help your bruises heal."

Amicable silence followed for several minutes. Finola's journey of two days felt as if it had occurred months ago. Here in this place she felt a sense of connection with the women. They were of one sensual spirit. She relaxed and let Konoko minister to her aches and pains.

"During your time of confinement I shall teach you as much as I am able regarding the wiles of a woman. Then you shall be able to please your king."

"Is he not your king as well?"

"Once he put me away from him I belonged to no one. Not the King, not myself, nor any other man in this fortress. My heart is with a warrior who is

constantly gone. He won't settle within these walls and claim me as his. Until his heart changes, my life is here with my sisters, the other women the King has finished with."

Finola looked over her shoulder at Konoko. "I should die to be left alone here after knowing the touch of a man. Does the King make provision for your needs?"

"Occasionally he gifts us to a night of pleasure with a knight in whom he is well pleased. At least that is what we choose to believe. Truthfully, we know we are the gift to the knight." She giggled. "With such men we practice our arts of seduction and satisfaction. When these times arrive, we realize their value and rarity, as will you."

Resting her head back upon her arms, Finola reflected on Konoko's words. Truly the King was a barbarian if he used his former wives as his own private brothel. Sarcasm tainted her next words. "Is it long between these 'giftings'?"

"Much depends on the King's diplomatic and military activity. Sometimes several long seasons pass before he calls upon us for our skills."

"What do you do while you wait?"

There was a lengthy silence before Konoko answered. "There are ways to assuage the fires that burn within, sister. And there are the eunuchs."

"I was told that there are members of the court who are privileged to visit these chambers."

"Yes." Konoko's hands moved up Finola's back. Each grasped a shoulder, the muscles pinched by strong fingers. The aromatic unguent soaked into her skin. "They do not often visit."

"Why not?"

"They are afraid we will ensnare them with our potions."

Finola laughed this time. "It makes you sound as if you are witches."

"Outsiders who do not understand our ways have labeled us such." Konoko's hands continued to knead her aching muscles, working below Finola's

shoulders toward the small of her back. She let her arms dangle over the edge of the wooden table, utterly relaxed.

The chance to ask about Broadsword arrived. Could she pry from Konoko information about the man's true character? "What of the King's brother? Surely he is not afraid of your spells."

"No, Blaire is not. Our efforts on his behalf have brought no long lasting results."

Blaire! She now knew his name. It spoke of responsibility, seriousness, and stability. It was a name a friend could count on, one that would take any oath deep to heart. "Why do your efforts fail on his behalf? He looked to me a virile man."

"That he is. He would well satisfy any woman with his attributes especially with that huge cock of his, but..." Konoko paused.

"What?" Finola's curiosity was getting the better of her. Didn't Blaire visit these women to release his seed?

"He visits us, but more to maintain a certain reputation among his men than for any need on his part. He has not used one of us for his pleasure."

"Is he insane then? I have heard that potent men who do not use a woman for release lose their minds."

"A fool's tale spread by the men of Talone. Blaire does not use us because he has no desire. Long ago, he gave his heart to a woman. Her life ended tragically and Blaire did not overcome her loss. No amount of womanly arts can heal such an injury until the male wishes to be healed."

The dancing women came closer. Finola's breathing quickened. Their moves, the music, and the very scent of their bodies were erotic. "Will I learn to dance like that?"

"If you so desire."

Seducing Blaire was her new vocation. Konoko had echoed his story, at least the part about his wife. There was no further reason to doubt the rest of his tale. Calder was vilified completely in her mind.

Finola would win Blaire to her, conquer his heart. She would learn every nuance of flirting until she drove him mad with need for her. "I do."

"Then feast your eyes on their movements. Try to feel what they feel as they dance. When you are ready, you will recreate those very motions and achieve what they have. Concentrate while I finish your massage."

Finola turned on her side to better watch the women. Now that they were closer, she could see the women were Liona and Phillipa.

Konoko's hands ran down Finola's arm, rubbing the shoulder, the elbow, and the forearm that rested against her belly. Her hands ran back up her arm and down again to the hollow between her ribs and hips, her fingers extending to massage her abdomen. Finola's nipples hardened as Konoko's hand extended lower.

In front of her, the women danced closer together. Liona, the taller of the two, rubbed seductively up against Phillipa, her breasts pushing into her back. Her arms went around Phillipa's waist, dipping down toward a small patch of hair between the woman's legs. For her part, Phillipa pushed back against Liona, tipping her head back to look into Liona's eyes.

Now a hand caressed Phillipa's breast while Liona's other hand rubbed the juncture. Finola felt herself moisten at the sight of the two women dancing. Shyness gripped her and she turned away from the sight, her heart pounding in an erratic staccato.

A moment later, Finola felt her wetness tested by Konoko's fingers stroking her folds, rubbing the nub that brought her pleasure. No words passed between them, and Finola didn't resist. Excitement replaced her bashfulness. Aroused, she turned back to watch the erotic dance of the women.

The speed of Konoko's rubbing increased and Finola found it hard to concentrate on the dancing. A finger slid down her slit and teased her opening. "You are very wet."

"I am aroused."

"Touch your breasts," Konoko commanded with a husky voice.

Finola rolled onto her back and did as requested, pulling her nipples into hard peaks. Konoko left her for a moment while Finola continued touching, her hands acting instinctively. Tiny spasms began to build in her reminiscent of what Blaire had done for her.

"This is an item we use for our pleasure." She showed Finola a leather belt with a piece of shiny wood attached. The wood was smooth and dark, about the size of a large cock. You asked earlier what we do to satisfy our needs. Now is the time for you to learn."

"Stand, dance with me as you see Liona and Phillipa do."

Finola stared at the two still dancing and touching one another.

"Let your instincts take over, your only thoughts of how you would please me with your body. This is what you will do for the men the King sends your way."

"You shall be the man," Konoko announced, strapping the leather around Finola's waist. "In this dance, I am the woman. Think like a man, one who thinks with his cock. By thinking like a man, you will know more of how to please one."

Konoko pushed her body against Finola, cupping her breasts. "Play with my nipples, Finola."

She did as she was told and watched as Konoko's body responded to her touch. Konoko leaned forward and whispered in her ear. "You see, it is not so difficult to be a man." The words tickled her ear and she felt the cleft between her thighs heat.

How would a man think? He would try to satisfy his longings as quickly as possible, then come back for more if his body would allow. When he visited her late in the night, Calder released himself onto her more than once.

Grinding her pelvis into that of Konoko, the wooden rod pressed against the other woman's pussy. Finola whispered into Konoko's ear, "A man would want to come as often as time and need allowed, correct? So I must become an expert at keeping his rod hard."

A moan came from the other woman. Finola twisted her nipple.

"Yes, that is right. Keeping his rod stiff will benefit you as well. Oh, that feels good," Konoko whispered, as she guided her toward a backless couch. The back of Finola's knees struck the edge of the seat, and she fell back upon it. "Now, spread your legs and rub yourself."

The hot sensations began anew as moisture flooded between her thighs. Finola held the smooth wood away from her pussy and began to caress the tiny circle at the top of her slit.

"If you were no longer a virgin, I would use this wood," Konoko rubbed the piece Finola held in her hand, "to remind your body of what it is like to hold a man inside you."

Konoko knelt on the cushions between Finola's legs. "Today, I shall use my tongue on you." Her head dipped near her core and she grasped Finola's ass, spreading her legs wide. The woman's tongue, hard and wet, lapped at Finola's hot cream. Finola squirmed, trying not to clamp her legs around Konoko's head. Each flick sent liquid fire throughout Finola's body. Konoko suckled harder drawing Finola's bud between her soft lips.

She stole a glance at Liona and Phillipa. Liona wore a belt similar to Konoko's and was using it to enter Phillipa's body. Phillipa had her legs wrapped around Liona's waist and with her hands on Liona's hips was urging her deeper into her body, grunts and groans of pleasure coming from both women.

At that moment, Konoko entered a finger into Finola's pussy as she continued to lick and nibble at her delicate folds. The woman looked up at Finola, but she was too caught up in the pleasure Konoko's mouth gave her to acknowledge her gaze. Impatiently, she pushed Konoko's head down, back into Finola's eager slit.

Soon her hips began to buck. Konoko's fingers stroked her to a fevered pitch, entering and exiting rapidly, as her mouth continued to lave Finola's soaked folds.

It was more than she could take. Her body shuddered then trembled violently as she lost her sense of self beneath the other woman's tongue. A cry tore from her throat, "Ahhh! Oh, oh!" The quivering slowed, and Finola opened her eyes to see Konoko raising her head from between her legs.

"Your body responds well to tonguing. Make me come."

Finola stood while Konoko positioned herself on the wide couch, her legs spread, her glistening cunt ready to be toyed with. "Touch me, Finola, all of me. Work your way down to my pussy. Use the rod, think as a man."

Finola adjusted the belt, and then rubbed the wood as she had seen men do to their shafts.

Konoko reached out to Finola, grabbing her by her tits. "Bring these to my mouth then work mine over with your hands and tongue. Make me forget who and where I am, Finola. Be a man mounting his woman."

Finola crawled between Konoko's legs. She couldn't get her breasts up to Konoko's mouth and had to straddle the woman's hips in order to accomplish her goal. Konoko lifted up to suckle her tits while Finola slid a hand into the other woman's private patch. Konoko dripped with desire. Finola wiggled to gain a better position, the head of the stick poised to enter her tutor.

Slowly, she pulled her tits from Konoko's mouth and began to suck on Konoko's. Once the nipples hardened, Finola moved lower, her hand reaching up to continually play with first one of Konoko's nipples then the other, while

her other hand sought the wet warmth between the woman's legs. Finola held the rod and, not wishing to injure the woman beneath her, slowly sank the shaft into Konoko's well of pleasure.

Konoko moaned, then lifted her legs and laced them around Finola's waist. "Bring it out, then drive in again," she said breathlessly.

The wood came out of her snatch, covered with white cream. "Faster, Finola, faster."

Over and over, Finola rammed the stick into the other woman's cunt as she had been ordered. She picked up the pace, sweat trailing between her breasts. Konoko gasped, then screamed, pinching her own nipples in her ecstasy. Slowly, Finola withdrew the tool.

"Now, Finola. Lick me as I did you."

Finola crawled between the woman's legs and inhaled her scent. Suddenly, she was ravenous for Blaire's cock. All she had was Konoko's cunt. It would have to be enough for the time being.

Chapter Twelve

The time of Finola's confinement wore on Blaire. He'd been patient, but his brother's lack of trust and even more, his willingness to believe Calder's accusations, put him in a less than civil mood. According to the women, Finola's time of bleeding had come and passed. Surely his brother would call her to his bed at any time. Blaire prepared for an attack by Calder, soon.

If only he could catch the cad in a situation of betrayal that would leave no question in the King's mind of where Calder's loyalties lay. He knew, even if his brother didn't, that Calder would do only what advanced his own agenda and nothing more. His sweet, serpent's tongue had given the King just enough truth, just enough accurate information that Calder had become a respected confidant. Blaire could not fathom the depth of half-truths and lies that had come to poison his brother's ears.

To pass the time, Blaire honed his fighting skills. His strength grew as he continued to improve with the broadsword and his heavy lance. Many mornings, he went to the fields and attacked the scarecrows, envisioning Calder's bloodied torso receiving his strikes, praying that the cur would make some mistake, some error he could turn to his advantage. Every evening, he returned to his home, battered from sparing with one of his men, but stronger.

Every night, visions of Finola crept into his sleep. She would be in his bed, hands on her tits, playing with herself. He would instantly harden, get his breeches off, and mount her. More often than not, he would find his hands around his rod, stroking wildly until hot cum shot out of the purple head. He needed her in his bed!

When would his brother call her to the wedding chamber? When would he be done with her? Blaire needed to bury himself within Finola to ease his pain. No other would suffice. It had to be her. He had to have her.

Blaire relied on the women of the palace to keep their ears open. He was grateful they agreed to do so. He, no doubt, was being paid back for having treated them with the respect they deserved. A good woman could do much to support her husband emotionally, economically, and diplomatically. Blaire provided a communication channel for the men beneath him that these women loved. The ladies could get word to him quickly should a plan be afoot to harm to Finola. He counted on it.

He continued to practice slaying Calder with his lance. A thrust here, a quick pull followed by another jab. He poured his energies into destroying the image of the man who'd destroyed his life, and who would threaten the last vestige of happiness he might be able to obtain. Finola held the key to his future.

The rapid pounding of hooves caused him to turn from his preparations. A rider, headed toward him at breakneck speed, reined his horse to a halt and jumped from its back. "My Lord," he said breathlessly. "Word has come, Calder moves tonight to take the lady as his."

Blaire knew what that meant. Finola was to be raped by Calder and thus discredit both of them, a move that could cost them their lives if they did not stop him. "Where is Calder now, is he with the King?"

"No, my Lord, he is not with the King, but we do not know where he is either."

"Search him out then have him followed. I will go to my brother and see if I can talk sense to him."

"As you will, Sir."

The messenger remounted his horse and took off, galloping toward the palace, a trail of dust in his wake. The dust would taste better than the words he feared he might have to eat should his information be in error.

* * * *

When he was announced at their chambers, with the eunuch accompanying him, Blaire was greeted with a chorus of happy shouts.

"Why have you been gone so long from us?" Liona trilled.

"Have you not been in need of one of my special massages?" Phillipa inquired.

Konoko laughed. "Ladies, let us give our honored guest a seat. We shouldn't assail him thus the moment he comes to our rooms."

Blaire attempted to observe Finola's location. From the shadows, she hesitantly moved forward, her long hair concealing her face. He couldn't keep his heart from hammering as he spoke. "Finola."

She peeked through the curtain of her hair and rewarded Blaire with a tiny smile. His feet moved of their own volition, and he neared her, wanting to take her into his arms, forcing himself to keep an arms length from her. "Are you well?"

"Aye, Blaire. The ladies have done much to increase my ability to perform my duties to the King."

His stomach twisted and he took a step back. "I see, Princess." He had to think of something to say, before the others realized his feelings. "May you find your duties pleasant to fulfill."

That snapped her head up, and she met his gaze with a scrutiny he didn't comprehend. "My duties are why you brought me here, are they not?"

"I would walk with you in the gardens." Yes, a stroke of cunning. On the terrace and out into the gardens he could tell her...tell her what? How he pined for her every night to be in his bed? That would rouse her ire without doubt.

"If this is allowed," she directed her comment to Konoko.

"Your safety with Blaire is guaranteed," the elegant lady replied with a mischievous smile. "Go, knowing all of us would prefer to be in your stead."

He extended his arm to Finola, grateful she accepted it. Her gentle touch soothed his nerves. It had been a long time since he'd wanted to be around a woman for more than a quick assignation. Today, he wanted to fill his senses with Finola's scent and sound. He needed to have her touch, see her beauty, assure himself that she was not only real, but desired him, too.

Outdoors, he guided her to a bench. Goddess, how he wanted to frame her face in his hands and kiss her senseless. All he managed to do was gawk.

"Blaire, why did you come to me?"

Was that a note of excitement he heard in her voice? "I needed to see you. Those last few hours, before we passed through the castle gates, they were..." words failed him.

Her speech was softer than a summer breeze on a bright day. "Wonderful, were they not?"

A single leaf fluttered through the air. He reached out and lifted it, examining its intricacy as he sought an answer. His reply was gruff, but truthful. "Yes."

"What is it, Blaire? Is this bad?"

"I told you of my wife. For several weeks now, I've been consumed by thoughts of you. I had to see you, had to know without doubt, with my own eyes, that you were safe."

"I don't understand, what does your wife have to do with me?"

"Failure is not something I tolerate well. I was unable to stop the horror that befell her. Continually, I worry that I will fail you as well."

There, the thought that tormented him was out. Would she see him as a weakling?

"Blair, oh, Blair. You care for me." She grinned, the sign of happiness bringing a special light to her eyes.

"Aye. I confess. No other woman has been this important to me since Nikko. I implore you, do what you must until I can come for you."

Finola grasped his hand, and his pulse reacted with an increased staccato. "I know not what our future holds," he managed to say. "Only that I want you by my side, where I would never lose sight of you."

"I'm not going anywhere, Blair."

The conviction in her words convinced him. She would do nothing foolish.

* * * *

The marble of the great hall retained the cold temperature of the night. It would be some time before the chill would be gone from the enclosure, as well as Blair's soul. Calder had been responsible for the ice he running in his veins, Finola for melting it.

He couldn't allow himself to love the spitfire, it would be a dishonor to his wife's memory, but Finola made him laugh and smile, something he hadn't done in many seasons. Perhaps, when Calder's duplicity was revealed, he could come to some agreement with his brother regarding her status. Hopefully by then he could precisely sort out his feelings for the Princess of Talone.

Blair didn't envy his brother his lofty state. Unlike his brother, he had no heart or mind for political matters. The unctuous manner of the ambassadors was enough to make him retch. He'd much rather deal with soldiers in the field

of battle where certain rules of conduct and engagement were followed honorably.

Not that war itself was pleasant. The sounds of his men dying and those of his foes would remain a heavy burden on his soul until the day he died. Nothing would ever take those sounds away. But then there were the traitors like Calder, loyal to no one. Men like Calder wreaked havoc in the lives of dutiful soldiers like Blaire. How many lives had been lost due to Calder's deceitfulness?

At long last, the King entered the room. Blaire bowed low. There were days it was difficult to pay such obeisance to the King, but it was a small price, especially if it brought about a favorable ear.

"What is it you seek, brother?" The King seated himself on his royal chair with a flourish of deep purple robes billowing behind him. He looked weary.

"Are you well?"

"A long night of drinking and politicking will tire one. Now, what is it you wish to say?"

"My King," he began, using his brother's rank to keep him pacified. "Word has come to me that there is to be an attack against one of your women, in her chambers tonight."

"What! Which one? Is this a prearranged assignation?"

"To my knowledge, it is not contracted by the lady involved."

"Which of the women?" The King's face was red with fury, as Blaire had known it would be.

"The Princess of Talone, my King."

"Is this not the woman Calder has accused you of taking?"

Blaire knew the question would come. There was no point in avoiding connection with Calder's accusations regarding himself and Finola. "She is."

"How do I know that this is not some ploy to discredit Calder?"

"Calder will discredit himself when you see him attempt to take her. He will convict himself, my Lord. You only have to hear his words and see his actions to believe." Blaire looked into his brother's eyes. "My Lord, I've done naught to betray you in any matter. I would not do so in this either. Have you spoken with the women? Have you found her to be with child?"

The king tented his fingers as he stared at Blaire. "Her time has come." He paused. "You have a grievance with this man."

"Aye, and my hatred for him runs deep. Until he is dead I will ever hold him responsible for Nikko's death."

"Yes, Nikko's death. A tragedy."

It was time for his brother to know the truth about the man he trusted for political advice. "Calder's men subdued me and forced me to watch him abuse her. Honor forces me to ask you that he not abuse the Princess of Talone."

"Why was I not told? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm a soldier, unable to keep my woman safe. How would that look to those under my command, to my liege? I have kept it in silence many years now, my Lord."

"But, I am your brother, Blaire. Could you not have told me in confidence?"

"You forget, when you were a young prince, you had *interest* in Nikko, the woman who became my wife. To confess my failure at protecting the woman you wanted..."

"Brother, have I been so affected by my rank that you could not trust me with this?"

Blaire couldn't meet the King's compassionate gaze. "I did not want to give you a single reason for believing I would not protect you with my life," he said, head bowed.

"You suffered needlessly." The King paced the width of the throne room before standing in front of Blaire once again. "We shall lie in wait together this

night. If Calder does as you say, and attempts to attack the Princess, I will deal with his treachery harshly."

"My Lord, there is more you should know."

The King quirked an eyebrow in Blaire's direction. "What else?"

"The woman has had dealings with Calder before. He was a frequent visitor to her father's bastion. Calder will still lay an accusation against Princess Finola that cannot be proven by any but you."

"I see the quandary. However, if Calder is as perfidious as you say, I see no reason to believe him further. All shall be considered a falsehood should it issue from his mouth or that of any of his henchmen."

Blaire bowed his head once more. "Thank you, my Lord."

The King extended his hand. "My brother, we shall see if and how he attempts to discredit you and the woman."

* * * *

The lofty windows would provide no entrance for Calder, Blaire realized as he searched the empty women's quarters for a hint as to how Calder would attempt to take Finola. Nothing came to him. There was only one exit in and out of the rooms set aside for the former wives of his brother.

There was also no place to hide within the chambers. No place to seclude himself so Blaire could protect the Princess. He needed to find such a location soon. The women would be back from their journey to the hot springs before the evening meal and he must be concealed before then.

There was, however, one bright spot in the gloom of the imminent attack. Midway up a far wall, under the edge of one of the tapestries, the King had a secret chamber where he watched the activities of the women. No one knew about the room except the King who'd told Blaire about its existence reluctantly. Those who'd built the room had disappeared.

It came as a shock when Blaire was initially told of this room. He'd known of a lower level viewing room, which the King and others used for their private amusements as they watched the women with one another or with selected warriors. This was just one of the ways the King blackmailed visitors to his court.

But a private room? Surely there was some illness his brother concealed that he would need to watch the activities of the women for his pleasure, rather than take one to bed. For now, the King's weakness would aid him in proving both his and Finola's innocence. Calder would make sure the gathering room was clear of potential witnesses, but he would not know of this secret location.

What if Calder intended to use the communal room as the place of his attempt to seduce Finola? Surely it would be a rape. She would never agree to bed the fiend now that she knew what he'd done.

Yet, the two had enjoyed a past liaison. He'd seen the bastard rut with her like a dog. Could Calder convince Finola to give up her maidenhead, give it to the man she once professed to desire above all others?

Blaire ran his hand down a cold marble column in the room. The temperature of the stone was nearly that of his blood. Calder was a fast talker, and from what he'd been able to see, Finola had once trusted him completely. He knew Calder could manipulate words to get Finola to do his will. Would she be able to see through Calder's lies?

Thinking of her willing flesh in Blaire's hands made his heart race. Someday, he would know her in the manner of a real man. Their pleasure would be completed with his cock sheathed between the valley of her legs. When she was big and round with his child, their joy would be complete. Gods, how he desired her, how she provided his miserable life with a shard of light.

Nearly growling, Blaire realized he couldn't bear the thought of Finola being in the same room with Calder. He knew Calder would do anything to

have her, even commit rape. She was Blaire's, damn it, and he would kill Calder if it were the only way to stop him.

This night he would circumvent that serpent's plans and take what rightfully belonged to him, Finola.

He paced the viewing room, staggered by the passionate feelings he'd just experienced. Finola meant more to him than he'd realized. Protecting her went beyond the duty of doing what was right by the King. It was penance for having failed before, and an opportunity to set his soul right by loving again. This was a chance he could not squander.

In the corner was a reclining couch, another facing it. All told there were a half dozen pieces of furniture on which a woman's virginity could easily be taken. "The couches," he called to a servant, whose tongue had been removed for some offense long ago, "need to be cleansed. See that it happens before sunset and they are returned by tomorrow evening."

The servant nodded his understanding while Blaire continued his perusal. "The tables with mugs for wine. Remove them as well. Take away all the furniture of this room, and see that this room is washed completely with boiling water and the strongest of your soaps." There would be no drugging of hapless victims here either.

The cleansing would take time to accomplish, and prevent the use of the room by Calder, Blaire thought. He shuddered. The history of this room was partially known to him. He was sure there were violent acts committed here of which he was unaware. Tonight, would see the end of those activities, at least those sponsored by Calder.

His brother would take more time, but he would find the cause of his need for visual stimulation and the reason for taking virgins to his bed. Blaire would also see that the private activities of men and women remained that way. What went on behind the doors of a man and his woman were not to be a public spectacle for assuaging a man's desire to spill his seed.

While the problem of the spare room was solved, the question of where he could hide remained. Calder was no fool. He would check everything that could possibly hide Blaire or his associates.

Perhaps even now, Calder planned out how he would make Blaire the scapegoat. This would be much more than a test of minds; it would be a test of wills, and of infinite patience. All Blaire had to do was wait for Calder to convict himself with his own mouth within the King's hearing, and then Blaire could act. In the meantime, just where would he hide?

Chapter Thirteen

The baths in the women's quarters were a luxury Finola enjoyed immensely. She loved relaxing in the warmth of the waters, as had her aching muscles. Her body recovered nicely from her riding adventure and now the bath was a symbol of the wealth of Hamre.

Yet, the bath also reminded her of her confinement. Imprisonment really. She was not free to travel about as she desired, and was always in the company of one of the women. Phillipa especially stayed close to her. Had it been one of the other women, she may have felt trapped. Phillipa shared with her an extensive store of knowledge regarding the history of Hamre and its current monarch.

Today was a treat, an illusion of freedom as the concubines traveled outside the palace walls, the eunuchs as guards.

"I was an innocent when I was traded to Lacombe," she told Finola. "I knew nothing of the ways of men, or of their desires. I too, went through a period of confinement, but there was only an old woman that laughed hysterically whenever I was near. She frightened me terribly. There were no sisters to revel with or to assuage my fears."

Finola put an arm around the woman who had become her friend as they walked toward the soaking pool formed by the springs. "This sounds as if it were a difficult time for you."

"It was, but I don't tell you this to elicit your sympathy. Rather, I would have you know that we are here for you, no matter what trial you endure. All of us," she waved her hand in a circle at the women on the grassy shores of the springs, "have our own stories to tell. Our cumulative experiences will someday allow us retribution and gain us true freedom."

"In my father's kingdom this would not be tolerated. While the women have no rights, they aren't sold or given to a knight solely for his pleasure, either."

"Your father has vision. Women are not mental or emotional weaklings as the King of Hamre believes."

Playing with a blade of grass Finola sighed, thinking of why she had run from the castle. "He may have a better vision than most when it comes to a woman's body, but he does not yet apply it equally." Bitterness crept into her voice and she yanked the grass viciously from the ground. "He traded me to the King to make a truce between our kingdoms."

Phillipa embraced her, and Finola finally let fall the tears she'd locked away. For several minutes she cried and the tears proved therapeutic. "Normally, I am much more controlled than this."

"Sister, don't worry that your tears would offend anyone here, or make any of us think less of you. All of us have shed them at one time or another, whether out of frustration, rage, or heartbreak."

It was time to change their topic of discussion. Finola didn't want to talk of heartbreak. The cruelty of Calder and the aching sense of loss for Blaire caused enough pain on their own. To think of what the others had endured, especially at the King's hand would be too much.

"Phillipa, why are we here today? Why not before?"

"You mean other than using the magical restorative powers of the water?" she replied mockingly.

Finola nodded. She sensed Phillipa was playing with her in that irreverent tone. "Yes. I feel there is another reason for this visit."

"It is quite simple. The soaking pool is being cleansed. Today it is drained. Tomorrow it will be filled." Phillipa moved once more toward the shallow pond warmed by the springs, bringing Finola with her. "The King isn't entirely cruel. He knows that the pool is one of the gifts we have that give us some contentment."

A serpent slithered across their trail. Phillipa cried, "Be careful!" as she pulled Finola from its path.

Finola took a deep breath, her heart pounding from fright. "What was it?"

"The green adder. It is very poisonous. If you are bitten by it and not treated immediately, death is within a day. It takes several days to fully recover from its effects if you don't die."

"How is one saved from its venom?"

"The healers have the remedy. Although, some say the cure is as bad as the pain caused by the strike. Beware, the adder is known to swim in the waters."

Finola kept quiet, reflecting on the danger they had unwittingly encountered. The beauty of their surroundings was marred with hidden peril.

Nearing the pond she asked Phillipa another question. "Why don't you seize this time outside the palace walls to escape?"

"The eunuchs are here for two purposes, to protect us from any who would steal us away, and to keep us from fleeing." Phillipa stealthily looked around. "There is talk of an attempt to do as you suggest. But it is hard to find someone to take a message to those who would attempt such a bold feat. The cost of getting caught is high."

They reached the large pond. It was clear, and centuries of water pounding into the area had made the rock that formed it smooth. Natural outcroppings served as seating and each woman found one and sank into the warmth. "Ah," sighed Finola as small fish tickled her toes.

"Yes, it is delightful."

"It would be a true gift if the pool in the chambers were cleansed more often."

"Once a month, at the time of the full moon is the only time we enjoy these waters."

Information. Finola put it into her mind like a jewel placed into a velvet box. Who knew when such knowledge would come in handy?

"Is there someone you wish to come for you?" she gently asked.

Philippa smiled knowingly, and Finola realized she was thinking of her would-be rescuer. "Why does he tarry?"

"The time is not propitious. When he comes for me, he will come for us all, and that will take some doing."

"All?"

"We fear that any left behind will suffer more terrible abuse than what we've endured."

"Who is he?"

"A captain of the guard, an excellent archer."

"A man with some skill. That's good. I do not know when I will see my beloved again. He too is a man of skill."

"And he is?"

"A man of high authority in the King's court."

"Perhaps they will cross paths and discover their commonalties."

Finola splashed warm water at her friend. "Perhaps, release from our cage is nearer at hand than we know."

Kicking away from the stone, Phillipa called over her shoulder, "Perhaps, Sister, perhaps."

* * * *

Blaire couldn't believe the fortune that befallen him. With the viewing room unavailable for use, he'd prevented one place of attack. Now the Goddess blessed him. The pool nearby the lecher's room was being cleansed as well. Once Calder inspected the room, Blaire could get into the dry pool and hide, and then spring when Calder was busy attending to his lust and treachery.

When he shared his plans with the King, Blaire was surprised as well. King Lacombe had been planning some strategy of his own.

"I've been thinking," said the King, "that should your fears regarding Calder be well founded, and he would strike at one of the women under my protection, that I should announce the Princess has met my approval and that we will enjoy our nuptials on the morrow. This should force his hand if he is going to dishonor us. If he is not, then we shall have a quiet night."

His brother had a sound idea. An announcement of this sort would take away a random attack of opportunity and show Calder for the traitor he was. "I shall be the first to congratulate you when your plan succeeds, Nolan. I believe that your announcement will show us the truth."

The King rubbed his hands together. "Good, make your preparations. I shall call the scribe to announce my marriage to Princess Finola of Talone."

A few hours later, Blaire heard the palace trumpet. Long ago, a king had issued a decree that when the palace horn blew, all were to stop and listen for the King's word. Around him, the work and words of the people came to a standstill. Utter quiet reigned as heads looked to the announcement parapet.

"Here ye, all who have ears. King Lacombe hereby announces he will wed Princess Finola of Talone on the morrow. This liaison will bring additional peace to our kingdom. May the Goddess bless their union! Long live the King!"

The people responded, "May the Goddess bless their union! Long live the King!"

Slowly those gathered returned to their places of work. Blaire was unable to join in the blessing spoken by the people. The thought of any other man's babe growing within Finola made him wild with jealousy. No, far better to return to his work. It was time to make sure all was ready if he were to rescue the Princess.

* * * *

Around Finola the women were beginning to prepare for their return to the palace. The day had been full of sun, laughter and the impression of freedom. The day's leisure ended far too soon. The company had frolicked nude in the waters. When they wearied, Finola lounged with Phillipa near the pool and let the sun kiss every inch of her skin as she touched herself in practice of the lessons she'd been given. It was easy for her to come when she thought of the man she wanted in her bed.

Reaching for her silken robes, Finola didn't see the green adder that had hidden underneath her garments until it struck her. Its fangs sunk deep into the meat of her calf. "Ah! Help!" she screamed, recoiling from the hissing serpent. She backed away from the snake afraid it would strike her again if she turned her back.

Phillipa joined with her shouts. "Help, help! A serpent has attacked Finola! Guards! Help!"

Two burley men ran to the women. One grabbed Finola and slung her over his shoulder like a sack of grain for the barn animals. The other followed the snake slithering away from the noise and commotion.

"Stay calm," Phillipa told her as the man began to jog. "Slow your breathing, don't panic."

It was easy for Phillipa to tell her not to panic. She wasn't the one poisoned and who knew her life was ebbing away. Suddenly, the castle seemed a full day gone. This man would never get her to the healer in time to save her life.

The eunuch guard abruptly stopped. For a moment the trail, the trees, the grasses all spun at a dizzying rate. Finola fought to stay awake. She was about to ask why they'd stopped when she was laid onto a seat in a coach and covered with a silken blanket.

The carriage! She'd forgotten they'd arrived in two open-air conveyances, each pulled by four large horses. From the corner of her eye she saw the guard jump into the driver's seat, and pick up the reins. A heartbeat later they were off.

Fog crept into the edges of her vision. The sound of the wheels changed from a dull roar to a dreadful racket as they left the dirt trail and hit cobblestone. Although she held on tightly to the seat, she could feel her grip loosen. She was tired, oh so very tired.

* * * *

The tumult at the portcullis brought the King's soldiers running for their arms. Blaire grabbed his broadsword prepared to battle for his King, his brother, and ran toward the gate that had just closed. "Let us in," a voice commanded. "The King's intended has been bitten by a serpent. Warn the healers!"

A guard looked through the pigeonhole in the wood. A wave of his hand and the screeching of the gear lifting the gate began. Whom had the green adder

struck? Suddenly the eunuch's words made sense. There was only one Princess in the king's bevy awaiting marriage. Finola.

He broke into an all out run, his sword clanking behind him. All his plans for their future would be naught if she died. Fear gripped him. She tried to die once before, rather than give herself to the King. Was this another attempt to take her life rather than be joined with a man she thought of as a monster?

He arrived at the healer's home just as the eunuch carried her through the large wooden door. The man had wasted little time getting Finola to help. His horses were lathered in a foamy sweat the likes of which he hadn't seen in many moons.

Blaire raced in front of him and cleared the nearest table with a violent sweep of his arm. "Lay her here."

The eunuch did as Blaire commanded.

"How long has it been since the bite?"

"No more than half the passing of the sand. I've never driven as hard or fast."

Blaire reached into his tunic and pulled out a leather pouch. "A coin for your efforts on the lady's behalf. Another if she lives."

The man bowed. "Thank you, Sir. I will pray to the Goddess that she recover. She has become a favorite among us."

Scowling, Blaire responded, "A favorite?"

"Sir, has treated us with kindness and dignity. Every man set to guard these ladies has benefited from the respect the Princess has shown us."

"I see. Entreat all your associates to give their prayers to the Goddess. And see to it the King knows what has befallen his intended, if he does not know already."

"Yes, Sir."

The man departed quickly as Blaire examined Finola. Her skin had taken on an ashen hue that did not bode well.

"Leave this room at once," a voice screeched at him.

"I will not. I am her bodyguard."

"Some bodyguard you are if you allowed the adder to strike her." This time Blaire could see the body attached to the high-pitched sounds. A wizened old man carrying cloths, his hair a snowy white, approached Finola.

"Bodyguard, where are her clothes?"

The inquiry was full of innuendo. "She was bathing at the Hot Springs pool. Her clothes are with the other women." At least that is what Blaire believed. The other wives and concubines would return soon to their chambers.

"Cover her."

Blaire looked around. Finola lay on top of the carriage's blanket. The healer had nothing readily available to cover Finola. He removed his cape and placed it over her now fiery red body. "What is wrong now?" he worriedly asked.

"Her body is fighting the poison by trying to burn it out." The little man soaked the material in a bowl of water, wrung the cloth out and placed it on Finola's forehead before he moved to a small chest atop a sideboard. Carefully, he opened the box and removed a small blue vial, opened it, and brought it to Finola's lips.

"What is that?" Blaire could no longer keep the fear out of his speech.

"Dolt! This lessens the effects of the poison. It will aid her body in its fight." He put the vial to Finola's lips and dribbled a few drops into her mouth. Then he placed his hand under her chin and gently stroked the skin under her jaw.

"Now what are you doing?"

"I am going to forcibly remove you from my house if you raise your voice one more time," the little man replied.

Blaire quieted. Losing his calm at a time like this would only cause him more worry. "What did you do," he asked again in a mere whisper.

"I helped her swallow." The healer released her chin and spoke again. "In the cupboard, get the green container. Then go fetch a pitcher of fresh water."

Blair hastened to do the little man's bidding. On his return, the man was examining Finola's swollen leg.

"This is an exceptionally deep bite of the green adder." He took the powder from the green jar and poured some into an earthen bowl. Adding water, it wasn't long before the healer made a golden colored paste that he applied to the site of her bite. "Now all we can do is wait and see."

"See what?"

"See if she lives."

Chapter Fourteen

The arrival of the King a short time later did nothing to improve Blaire's pessimistic mood. Finola lay dying and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. The healer repeatedly soaked the strips of cloth, and then reapplied them to her face. Finola's fever didn't seem to abate.

Damn Calder. If it hadn't been for his traitorous interfering, Finola wouldn't be in the healer's abode now. She'd be married to the King, and Blaire would never have met her as a maiden. It irked him, too, that Calder had known Finola intimately for a lengthy period of time. Long enough to win her trust and have her fall in love with him. Damn Calder!.

"Blaire, stop pacing immediately."

He abruptly stopped. It wasn't often his brother gave him an order regarding his actions. "Yes, Lord."

"I think you need a task. Something to keep your mind off the woman within." He rubbed his chin. "The ladies will naturally be concerned about the Princess's well being. Assign them each to a member of my council or an officer in the army to seek comfort. Once that assignment is complete, find the High Priestess and bring her to me here. Then make plans to convey Princess Finola to her chambers at the palace. She is sure to find more comfort in the familiar when she awakens."

Blaire bowed his head. "As you will, my Lord." If only he could see Finola once more. The last time he'd glimpsed her she was so pale she looked dead. He moved toward the room where she lay.

"Go!" the King shouted. "I command it."

Blaire had no choice but to carry out the orders he'd been given. He backed out of the room. It was grating to not be there and know what was going on, but his brother was right. He needed something to be occupied with while the healer did his work.

Upon arrival at the women's chambers he found what the King feared. He could hear them talking in hushed voices about what had befallen Finola. A servant announced his arrival. Immediately he was mobbed by Konoko, Liona and Phillipa, all talking and asking questions at the same time.

He held up his hand, feigning more confidence than he felt. "Ladies, I know you are concerned about Princess Finola. Have no fear she is with the healer as we speak. He has already administered a potion to combat the adder's poison. The drink was administered to her quickly. We have hope."

He did not relay how he'd seen her break into tremors, or how her body convulsed, and sweat poured from her brow. These were signs that alarmed him greatly. They did not need to have his fears added to their existing ones.

"I have orders from the King. He doesn't want you to stay here the night. To that end, he would like me to assign you to a member of the court that you might be comforted. Have you any requests?"

The talking began again in earnest. "Liona, Sir. If it is convenient, I should like to go to the home of Aerobleu."

"And you, Lady Konoko, who would you choose to stay with?"

"I would choose Lord Wyndham. He has often been kind to me."

"So be it," Blaire responded. "And you Phillipa? In whose arms would you seek comfort tonight?"

"The High Archer, Tynan, if that can be done, Lord."

"Have no doubt it will be as you wish." He looked around at the women. Their moods definitely had lifted, although they were still somewhat subdued. "I shall see that your escorts arrive promptly."

He left their chambers to search for the High Priestess. No doubt his brother would want to wed Finola before she died so he could lay claim to her father's kingdom should the man someday pass without a male heir. The marriage would give his brother the same rights as a son born of his enemy's loins.

The warm afternoon had given way to dusk. Servants scurried throughout the castle to light sconces that cast eerie shadows on the cool marble floors. Would the chill of the air benefit or harm Finola? If her fever didn't decline, perhaps she would do better in her quarters as the King had suggested.

Blaire came to the main entryway and walked into the deepening night, pausing along the way to give orders to a servant to fetch the men the ladies selected. Their suggestions were interesting, and Blaire had no doubt that their attraction to the gentlemen went more than skin deep.

Did the King know? Perhaps, once he talked some sense into his brother, they would be free to find men who would act as real husbands to them. It was a shame such beautiful and talented women were holed up in the palace like something to be collected.

Scented smoke wafted from the incense burners at the temple. Long marbled columns led into a small, empty courtyard. At the far end was the dormitory of the priestesses. His wife had been confined there before her death.

Strange, but the pain of her passing had lessened. It wasn't just time healing his wounds, she'd been gone nearly twenty seasons. No, something else was afoot that would make thinking of her and her final trials easier to tolerate. He stood in the dark, contemplating this new revelation.

A movement to the right caught his attention. Emerging from the shadows and into the candlelight was a tall woman, clad in bright white. The

hem of her garment reached her sandal-less feet, her toes adorned with tiny golden rings. "Lord Lacombe, what brings you to this refuge? You've not been here in some time."

Bowing, he replied, "The King has need of your services this night. The Princess Finola lies gravely ill in the home of the healer. He summons you, though he did not tell me his purpose in doing so."

A gentle breeze blew the dark, waist length hair of the High Priestess from her shoulders revealing creamy alabaster skin. The woman reminded him of Finola. "I shall go to him immediately. What of you, will you accompany me?"

"Nay, Lady. I've a task to finish before I can join you."

She nodded, then clapped a small finger tambourine. A novice quickly came to her. "See that my coach is made ready." The girl disappeared as quickly as she had arrived.

"Blaire," the woman called softly. "Come out of the shadows."

Reluctantly Blaire moved closer, stepping into a small puddle of light. "Yes, Lady."

"Let me look at your eyes, come closer."

He did as she requested.

"Still hiding beneath your mask," she chided. "There is something more here I think. You appear worried. Why does the King need me at this hour?"

"The Princess Finola was struck by a green adder today and even now is ill unto death."

She paused, and Blaire watched the moths fly toward the flames of the candles.

"There is more. Speak it that I would be able to offer my prayers to the Goddess in honesty, completely."

"I, er, we, feel that the well-being of the Princess has been in jeopardy for some time."

"Blaire. This "we" is not many, but one. You. You are concerned for the woman?"

He could feel blood rising in his face and was thankful for the mask he wore. The High Priestess couldn't see his embarrassment through the black silk.

"Aye, High Priestess, I am. The Princess is a spirited woman whose company would be sorely missed by many."

"Would you miss her company, Blaire?" she gently prodded.

"Aye."

"Do you love this woman?"

"I don't know. She has become someone special to me. I care for her well-being." He stopped. Could he love Finola? "I have only known her a short time. It is impossible for me to love her. Besides, she will be the wife of my brother once she has recovered from her accident. I cannot love her."

"Even you know that the will of the Goddess cannot be subjugated by the King. It is she that allows him his position. We cannot expect to know all her designs for us in this life. I will consult the runes and see what the Goddess wills in this matter, once I've returned. Now, be off. Finish your tasks so that you may join me in prayers for this "special" woman."

* * * *

It had taken longer than he'd hoped for Aerobleu, Wyndham, and Tynan to arrive at the palace. He escorted them directly to the women's chamber. "Gentlemen, I would have you comfort each of these ladies as you know best. Liona, and Konoko, each of you will be attended by one of the palace servants. Phillipa, if you have need of a girl to serve you..."

She quickly interrupted. "Oh no, Sir. I am sure that Tynan can see to my needs." A blush rushed up her cheeks. "I mean,..."

Blaire attempted to ease her discomfort. "As you will, Phillipa. You only need ask, should you require more help." The young woman curtsied, hiding her face, her action revealing ample cleavage.

Phillipa approached him, his shredded tunic in her hands. "Blaire, take this to Finola. She has often been comforted by it. Perhaps it will bring her peace."

Swallowing hard, he tried to speak. "Your kindness...won't be forgotten."

Konoko approached. "She will have need of this as well." She handed him Finola's red silk robe.

"Thank you, Konoko. Gentlemen, I leave you to your tasks. Only see that a guard is posted at the entrance to these rooms once you leave. I want nothing disturbed while the ladies are away."

Each gallant nodded, then bowed to Blaire. As he exited the rooms he took a quick glance over his shoulder. The gentlemen already had the women in their arms. The ladies would be very well taken care of indeed.

With the High Priestess on her way to the healer, there only remained preparing to bring Finola back to these rooms, Blaire thought, as he strode down the hall, full of purpose. With his knowledge of the secret rooms, there would be no one to prevent him from keeping an eagle eye on her.

Reaching the stables, servants rushed to prepare the carriage as he requested, filling it with fine blankets and pillows for her comfort. Quickly, four handsome Percherons graced the traces of the conveyance and Blaire leapt to the seat and dashed away to the healer's residence.

Inside, Blaire could see Finola had been moved from the table to a private room. Through the open door the High Priestess and the King stood next to Finola's divan. The stately woman had a grave air about her, and the King held Finola's hand.

Moving closer Blaire heard the words he knew he would eventually have to face. His stomach heaved at their meaning. The High Priestess spoke, “King Lacombe, take this woman, Princess Finola, as your wife. May the Goddess grant you many children.”

Chapter Fifteen

Blaire did not want to think of the reality of his brother bedding the woman he'd become enamored with. He knew the sort of activities the King practiced on his wedding night, and truth be told he didn't want Finola to be a part of it. The way Nolan bedded his women, forcing himself on them while they were helplessly tied as if they were to be drawn and quartered amounted to rape in Blaire's eyes. Deflowering the virgins seemed to make his brother feel especially virile. He'd heard Nolan's boasts given in detail once he recovered from his days and nights of debauchery with whatever woman he'd plied his special brand of attention to.

As wickedly wanton as Finola was, she was still a trusting innocent, too.

It was her delightful contradictions that bound him to her, he thought. Her lush curves and sassy mouth combined with wide-eyed wonder made him want to teach her personally about the satisfactions that could transpire between the two of them. Now that was not going to happen. If she survived, his brother would be the first to sheath himself in her hot depths. She had to survive if light was going to reenter his life. He sighed. Better the King first have her, than Calder.

That very name settled Blaire's stomach. It gave him a purpose yet in serving the maiden whose body and soul he wanted to protect with his life. Calder still had the opportunity to ruin both of them. He cleared his throat.

The King turned his head. "Brother, good, you are here. The High Priestess has concluded the nuptials. Let's get my new wife to her chambers where she may rest securely."

The healer removed the blanket from her body and Blaire moved to Finola's settee, scooping her into his trembling arms. "Help me place this on her," he whispered to no one in particular.

The alabaster arms of the High Priestess unfolded the silk as Blaire continued to hold his love, then placed the garment over Finola's head. A moment later the High Priestess had gotten Finola's arms through the proper openings, too.

Covered still with his cloak, she would have been as nude as she had been when she was brought to this house without the thoughtfulness of Konoko. He gathered Finola closer to him, willing his own heartbeat to give her additional strength.

The eye of the High Priestess met his own. "I have yet to cast the runes for all involved. The Goddess's will shall be done in this matter, as in all others."

Blaire nodded. Outside Finola surviving the poison, the will of the Goddess was his last shard of hope. He carried the Princess to the carriage, the King right behind.

An uncomfortable silence cloaked them as they raced back to the palace and Blaire sought a way to break it. "The ladies have vacated the chambers for the Princess."

"Good."

"It is yet possible that Calder will make an attempt on the Princess tonight. He may not know of her injury, which would only leave him with the knowledge that he must despoil her tonight."

The King rubbed his chin. "I see your concern, Blaire. This woman, she means something to you?"

This question was similar, yet different from the one he'd asked at the original time of her confinement. He sighed. "Aye, she means much to me, especially in her vulnerable state. I would not see her follow the path of Nikko."

"I know her loss has been hard on you."

"There was nothing you could have done to have eased the sorrow and sadness from Nikko. The Princess has in her own way helped me to accept that Nikko is gone. While my desire for revenge for her death remains strong, I see other possibilities for my life."

"Princess Finola again?"

"Aye." They stopped talking for a long while. "Nolan," Blaire continued, "I can assure you of two things. The woman is still a maiden, and," he swallowed hard, "when you are done with her I will do my best to see to her safety and happiness."

The King clasped Blaire on the shoulder as the coach pulled up to the palace. "I believe you will, brother. Now, shall we get the lady into her rooms?"

Blaire picked Finola up as easily as one would lift a child. His cloak slipped, taking a corner of her silken robe with it, the smooth material sliding off her shoulder. A perfectly formed breast was revealed, the nipple pebbling in the night air. Quickly, he moved to recover her.

"A pity," said the King looking at her.

"Lord?"

"She is rather well-endowed."

"Aye."

"The cleansing rites need to be performed again."

"I shall see to it."

"Good." They neared the chambers. "Put her in her bed, then perform the ceremony."

At the doorway to the chambers they went their separate ways. Blaire entered, placed Finola on her divan, and prepared to complete the ablutions. Once finished he would then say good-bye to the woman he'd come to love.

* * * *

Just in case Calder was informed of Finola's poisoning, Blaire had a guard positioned nearby. The guise was simple. The man was merely to report on any significant change in the Princess's health. He wouldn't know that they were waiting for Calder to make his move against the Finola.

The subterfuge was beneficial no matter what. If her condition changed, he would know immediately. Should Calder discover the news regarding the adder and still go through with his intended attack, the precautions of having the women removed and a man in the chamber would make sense.

At the very least, another witness would be able to testify against Calder regarding his evil intentions. At best? Blaire would have another man to raise his sword in defense of the Princess.

As he waited in the cold stone pool, he wondered if Calder would really be so bold as to strike at the very heart of the King's palace. Just the thought of Calder removing Finola's clothing in order to deflower her sent Blaire's blood pulsing in white-hot anger.

If anyone should have that privilege it should be he, damn it. He'd gone through the agony of bringing her to Hamre. He'd rescued her from the raging waters. It was his warning of the potential rape that was keeping her safe right now. And it was his stomach clenched tighter than his fist as he battled the worry of whether or not she'd live through the adder's poison.

Besides, Blaire reasoned, he loved her. Calder was just using her for his own nefarious purposes and when he was done with her would see that she was unable to relay any tales.

A small noise, like the scrabbling of a climber on loose rocks, seized his attention. He ducked lower into the bowels of the pool.

"Who goes there?" The voice of the guard sounded appropriately menacing.

"His Lordship's advisor, Calder. I heard his bride had taken ill."

"Yes, sir. She was bitten by a green adder this afternoon."

"Why are there no healers here?"

"They have done all that is possible. The potion they gave her induces a sleep to stop the tremors as well as fight the poison. Some of the healing arts reside within me and they thought it wise I should sit with her."

"Yes, I see," said Calder.

Blaire's heart sank. Calder sounded far too thoughtful, as if he expected something was afoot.

"What say you to a drink then, to pass the time while you wait by her bedside? As you said, there is little that can be done at this point."

There was a moment of silence, then the sound of several chests, wardrobes and other containers being opened and closed. Blaire would wager a gold coin on it. Calder was searching for hidden surprises.

"Ah, here we go. The ladies seem quite fond of this particular wine."

The gurgle of the wine being poured into mugs alerted Blaire to Calder's current actions. No doubt he would try to get the man drunk. There was a clinking of the mugs, loud chugging, and the sound of pouring once again.

"What think you of the King?" Calder's voice was oily smooth.

"He is a fine man."

"Have you not heard what he intends to do with this woman?"

Blaire could imagine the man shaking his head. Only a small contingent knew how his brother liked to bed his women.

"Man, he will tie her legs apart so that he can fuck her. A woman in her right mind would not bed him. The rumor is that the King has a disease that has

made his balls shrivel and that pocks his cock.” Calder giggled at his rhyme. “Any woman taken by him will get the disease and be unable to bear children.”

“No,” the guard responded, awed.

“It is true, I swear it. Have you seen any child begotten on his wives? Have you not heard how he’ll only take virgins?”

“I’ve not heard it.”

“There,” Calder replied. “You now know the reason. More wine?”

“I better not.”

“Just a touch more. I won’t report you. After all, you’d just tell the King you were drinking with me and that wouldn’t do either of us any good.”

In his guts, Blaire could sense that Calder was close to springing his surprise. He wondered what the King thought of Calder’s bedding tale and if he now believed the Princess was in danger.

Again, Blaire heard the sound of a liquid being poured. “Well, since you’ve poured it,” the man slurred. The mugs clanked together.

“She has fine tits you know.”

The guard’s reply was a grunt.

“And the sweetest ass to fuck.”

The grunt was much softer this time.

Blaire heard the wine container being set down, then nothing but silence. It was so quiet he was sure Calder could hear the beating of his heart.

“Finola, you do have marvelous tits. How I’d love coming between them and squirting onto your face while you suck my cock.”

Blaire peeked over the edge of the pool. The man he’d placed on watch was fast asleep. Blaire was certain Calder had found a way to slip an herb into the wine.

Calder removed the robe from Finola’s shoulder and was stroking her breast with one hand. With the other he rubbed himself through his breeches. By the Goddess, he really was going to take her.

The man bent his head and took her nipple into his mouth. Finola made a small groan but did not waken.

"Such a pity I have to fuck you while you sleep. I so wanted to enjoy taking your maidenhead and hearing your cries for mercy. Poor Blaire, he will get the blame for this, especially when they find your blood on his cloak." He moved to put a hand between her legs.

The past returned with a vengeance. No longer was it Calder raping Finola. The animal was once again attacking his wife. It was more than Blaire could take and he leapt from the empty pool, drawing his sword. "Take your hands off her!"

"Blaire, I should have known," Calder responded coolly, unsheathing his sword. "Didn't you learn your lesson with Nikko. You can't save anyone."

"You son of a three-titted whore." Blaire moved forward and swung at Calder.

Calder's sword flashed in the light of the candle near Finola's bed, before it clanged hard against Blaire's blade in a powerful block. Blaire backed away, drawing Calder from Finola and the drugged guard.

The clashing of their swords echoed in the rooms. Calder feinted, then stabbed at Blaire. Blaire countered his opponent and lured Calder further away from Finola. If he could only get Calder near the empty pool! A false step and he'd fall and break his neck.

Calder spun, changing directions. A lunge, then a quick thrust. Blaire parried the strikes easily and countered with one of his own. They eluded one another, then came within range once again, an odd dance of death.

A noise at the door distracted Blaire. It was his brother, coming to join the fray. Calder used the moment to disarm his opponent. Blaire's sword went flying into the empty bath, striking the rock ledge with a resounding clang, not once, but twice. Blaire dropped to his knees and rolled as Calder lunged for him. Calder's sword hit the floor.

Blaire saw him raise the weapon again, but rather than striking at him, Calder turned to face the threat of the King. It was long enough for Blaire to grab the short sword the guard had carried.

Together, the two would be able to threaten Calder's superior swordsmanship. Finola stirred, then groaned as if in great pain. The sound caught the King off guard, and Calder used the moment to thrust home his sword. The King gave a startled gasp, then fell to the floor, his blood pouring from his chest.

Calder pulled the weapon from the King and wiped the blood onto the King's tunic. "You should have practiced more."

Blaire felt his eyes widen. The wound his brother received was grievous. Once again he lunged forward at his nemesis. Calder backed up, close to Finola once again. Bile rose in Blaire's throat. What was Calder going to do now?

The answer was quick in arriving. He pulled a dagger from his boot. Then the dog grabbed Finola by the hair and hauled her to her feet. "Come nearer and I'll slice her throat open."

In the palace, Blaire could hear soldiers making their way toward the residential chambers. Calder was running out of time.

"Back away." Calder pressed the blade harder against her throat.

Blaire complied. He could see Calder was desperate. If Blaire could buy Finola more time, he'd back as far away as Calder wanted. Calder edged near the door with a dazed Finola.

Blaire could see she had difficulty standing. He tried to reason with Calder. "She can't walk. Let her go!"

Sudden awareness appeared in Calder's countenance. "You're in love with her? This, slut is your choice? I'll take her back to her father, and make her mine there. I assure you, the Princess will be a very willing party to our joining."

Holding tight to her waist, Calder placed her in front of him as a shield and backed out the only entrance or exit of the ladies chamber. "Come near and

she dies." He pushed the harder against her throat, a small trickle of blood appearing. "Once again, Blaire, you have proved your ineptitude at protecting that which you believe you love. Finola will be mine in more ways that your puny mind can imagine."

The sounds of the King's men running through the hall grew louder. Within the chambers Blaire heard his brother moan.

"If you follow me, one or the other of them will die. Who will it be, Blaire?"

Chapter Sixteen

Somehow Finola's mind registered the words being spoken. She tried to move, but couldn't. Her head wouldn't even move so she could see the men having the argument. Their voices sounded familiar to her and she didn't understand why they were at an impasse.

A chill caressed her. The facts were slow in returning. Her legs, usually strong seemed to be as weak as peasant's bread soaked in water. What was wrong with her?

"Calder, release her." Yes, she knew that voice, but whose?

"Blair, tend to your brother, I'll take care of Finola. She's belonged to me for a long time now. It's only right I take what's mine."

The laugh she heard near her ear made her want to cringe. If only she could remember.

Calder? Blair? The two names buzzed around in her mind like angry hornets. It would take a lot of concentration, but she was sure she'd be able to figure it all out.

Suddenly her worldview changed from that of the hallway to that of the black and white stone floor. The pattern moved at a rapid rate, like a ship at sea, as the voices ceased their argument. She heard rather than felt, a hand slap her butt.

"I can't wait to fuck you, my dear. Now isn't the time. I'm afraid your lover is going to be right behind us, and won't like it one bit."

The comment spurred her mind into more insistent activity. Clarity was arriving, but at a pace far too slow and exhausting for Finola. She closed her eyes.

* * * *

The dagger at Finola's throat did more to thwart Blaire than any thrusts the man had made with his sword during their fight. With his brother, the King, lying within the concubine's chambers bleeding and Calder in control of the situation, Blaire had no choice. He backed into the rooms, watching Calder escape with his woman. Another woman he'd failed to protect.

Disgust with himself burrowed like a worm into his stomach. How could Calder make him so impotent? "Guards!" he shouted as he knelt next to his brother. "Guards!"

Lifting his brother's head into the crook of his arms, he examined the King's injuries. The sword thrust had gone deep, a cut into the upper belly that bled profusely. Few men survived such a wound.

"Blaire," the King choked, lifting a hand and clutching Blaire's tunic.

"I'm here, Nolan." Soldiers poured into the room and stood around them. "Someone, fetch a healer, immediately."

"The woman. You, ...you were right. She is innocent." He coughed and blood dribbled from his lips. "Calder is...a traitor,...as you said."

"Save your strength," Blaire whispered.

"Find him... kill," the King gasped, "him."

"Please, I beg you, save your breath. The healer will be here soon."

"Your word, Blaire," the King weakly requested.

"It shall be so." Around him Blaire heard a shifting of feet. "Where is the healer?"

"Here."

Blaire turned to see the same man who'd held Finola's life in his hands earlier. The wizened little man knelt next to the King, moving the cloth away from the injuries. "The King, he's been wounded in battle."

"Blaire," the King whispered, the blood bubbling from his mouth now. "My wives...they...are...yours." He drew a raspy breath, then closed his eyes.

"Nolan!" Blaire cried. "Don't give up!"

"It's time...to...let me..."

He never finished the sentence. The King's hand loosened its grip on his tunic and fell away, lifeless.

Tears burned silent paths down Blaire's cheeks. His brother had given him yet another reason to go after Calder. Around him the swords of the remaining guards clanked. The men bowed.

* * * *

The pounding of the horse's hooves upon the dry grasslands that separated Talone from Hamre woke Finola. Strong arms, like bands of iron, gripped her tightly. Her body ached but she couldn't remember why. She shifted.

"So, you are awake."

"Calder?" Why was she riding with him? Cool air passed over her body. The crisp fall air continued to caress her. "Why am I in my lounging clothes?"

"I saved you from the clutches of King Lacombe."

Memory, in pieces, like a broken looking glass, cut through the haze. Tonelessly she said, "I was to marry him."

"You did, Finola."

She gasped. "I did? Did he...?"

"He did not. I saved you from his lecherous ways."

Her body collapsed against Calder. He'd come to her rescue after all. "I thought,..."

"I know, my dear. Blaire nearly had you convinced I was some sort of traitor. Ever and always, I've tried to protect you to the best of my abilities, even if they are somewhat untimely."

"We are headed home?"

"I will make your father see sense. He must allow me to wed you. I know you will be happy in no other man's arms." He stroked her breast in emphasis. "Surely he has to care about you enough to see to your happiness."

The waving grass gave way to a farmer's clearing. They'd be back at her father's castle shortly, a good thing, since the fingers playing with her breasts were sending impulses to her core while the saddle rubbed her intimately in time with the horse's gait. "He used me as a token in his politics. Why should I expect different from him now?"

Calder laughed, and it felt a little strange to her. His laugh was not the natural spur-of-the-moment laugh she'd shared with him in the past. Her instinct to run warred with the arousal her body experienced. What was wrong?

"Can we stop a moment so I can be covered properly? I'd rather not have my father see me like this."

"No, I can't risk it."

"Risk it? What is there to risk?"

Calder looked over his shoulder then kicked the bay in the flanks hard. "Blaire is following us."

Cautiously, she looked behind them and saw a thin wisp of dust marring the air. "Why?"

"He is smitten with you, thinks you belong to him. He will forcibly return you to Hamre."

This didn't sound correct. "If I am married to the King, then how can he think this?"

"Because he is the King's brother, and the King is now dead."

"Dead? How?"

"I killed him."

She shook her head, trying to make sense of what Calder said. Blaire was the King's brother. She was married to the King, and he was dead, never having taken her to bed. "Is that why you are followed and have armed men with you?"

"Yes. I cannot keep you safe with Blaire's hoard after me." Clenching his teeth he continued, "Surely your father will reward me with your hand now that I have dispensed with his enemy. He will see that I've returned you in virginal condition and be forced to gift me with you."

Calder's words struck a responsive cord within her and all her memory came rushing back. How she'd run from her father, been captured and taken to Hamre, the King's proclamation that she be confined. Abruptly she halted her train of thought. Dear Goddess, Calder told King Lacombe he'd seen Blaire take her maidenhead. She stiffened. Calder was the enemy, not Blaire.

Without thinking she tried to ram her elbow into Calder's ribs. The arm holding her tightened, threatening to squeeze the very air from her lungs. "You've remembered, haven't you?"

"Yes," she ground out, squirming in the saddle. "I remember how you turned your traitorous heart against me in the throne room of Hamre."

The gate of the castle opened. "A pity, I'm going to have to put you in the dungeon. I can't have you complaining to your father."

He reined the horse toward the far end of the building. Calder knew as many ways in and out of the keep as she did. He leapt from the horse, dragging her with him. The other horses skidded to a dusty stop. "Secure the throne room. I'll be there shortly, once I've taken care of this wench."

Calder's motley group sauntered off and he headed toward the back passage to the dungeon. How well she knew this way. She'd used it often to sneak out of the palace and meet Calder secretly. The stone was cold and damp as she braced a hand against the wall to keep her balance.

Down the stairs he dragged her, twisting first one direction then another. The cold seeped into her bones, and still they continued their journey to the bowels of the palace. The smell of damp earth mingled with other odors of decay.

He reached a rusty iron gate, and pulled it open. "Calder, stop!"

A large rack was attached to rings in the stone wall. Roughly he pulled her arms over her head. Finola screamed, "Help!" as the full import of what he was doing to her sunk in.

"Scream all you want, Finola. Only my men will hear you. They've been here over a week awaiting my arrival."

Cold iron clamped around first one wrist, then another. She spat. "Bastard! Now I know why my father refused his blessing on our union."

He slapped her with a dusty leather glove and she tasted blood in her mouth. "Blair will stop you."

"Blair, Blair, Blair. I sicken of his name. He won't save you. He couldn't save his brother from my sword or his former wife from my potent cock. I'll be fucking your brains out before sunrise."

"You won't take me without a fight."

"Still the hellcat aren't you? It won't matter one wit. You are easily controlled by your own lusts."

With a booted foot he kicked her leg to the side then flipped the weighted manacle shut around her ankle, holding it in place with his foot. He repeated his actions on the other leg placing a lock on it. Once that foot was secure, he locked the other.

“I’m going to so enjoy the show you put on later, love. Willing or not.” He rubbed his chin, then laughed maniacally. “Actually, I think it will be much more enjoyable if it’s not.”

His hand reached under her garb and grazed her dry pussy. “What, not hot for me? I’ll change that, don’t you fret.”

The cell door clanged shut. Finola fought for control as she hung helpless on the old wooden rack.

Chapter Seventeen

Blaire and company neared the castle in secrecy, the sun having set long before. He prayed they weren't too late to stop whatever plan Calder had set in motion. On the far side of the castle, the grass grew high. They could search there for a possible weakness to the fortress and perhaps find a way in.

Quietly they maneuvered through the grass, drawing up to the wall as close as they could. "It's odd isn't it," he whispered to the men, "that there is no one on the battlements?"

Aerobleu replied, "Aye, it is. Something foul is afoot."

"Tynan, if we attach a hook to a rope, could you loft an arrow over the top of the embrasure?"

"I can," the High Archer replied, kneeling and attaching the hook and silk coil to his arrow. He stood, and took aim. There was a soft thwang. The arrow flew silent over the stone wall. He pulled on the cord, the metal of the hook scratching along the wall until it jerked to a stop. "It will hold."

Without a sound Blaire scaled the wall, signaling the men to follow. "Stay hidden. We'll meet at the interior gatehouse when the moon reaches its zenith to formulate our plan once we've seen what we are dealing with." He pointed them each in a different direction. "It's imperative we find Finola before Calder harms

her. If you can take him captive, do so, but do not risk your life fighting him. He and I have matters to settle between us.”

Each man nodded, then scurried away, daggers and swords drawn. They were good men, loyal men who had come to his aid upon hearing of the King’s death.

The lack of security about the walls and grounds made Blaire uneasy. The hair on the back of his hands and neck stood on end as if on alert. If the King of Talone was this careless with his property, it was no wonder his brother had thought he could take the kingdom through force or a political marriage.

Subdued moonlight lit the walkway in faint tooth-like segments. It was easy to stay in the shadow, ease down the stairs and into the outer ward. Blaire glanced to his left, then his right. Still no guards or soldiers. He crossed the soundless area warily, and reached the inner curtain without incident.

Here and there mortar littered the ground near the wall. The castle had been ill kept, the work of the tradesmen shoddy or incomplete. Poor lighting made it difficult to determine if the mortar was fresh from repairs or simply had deteriorated from between the stones. Keeping close to the wall, he skirted a rounded tower, nearly tripping on the loose gravel under it.

The inner gatehouse came into view. He approached it, ready to battle. There, also, he met no resistance. He peered into an arrow loop. Within the chamber, on the floor a guard lay motionless, a dried pool of blood around his neck. The poor man had received his fatal injury before he’d had opportunity to draw a weapon. Treachery had taken place. Most probably a trusted ally for this man proved to be his enemy.

Once within the inner ward Blaire easily spotted the great hall. Not far away a horse nickered, the first sound he’d heard since leaving the wall walk. He hurried toward the door of the hall staying within the darker shadows of the building.

The massive wooden door was ajar.

The cause? A man's foot blocked the door.

How many others were dead? His thoughts turned to Finola. If Calder had gotten what he wanted, she could very well be among the victims. He edged into the large open room.

The scene of chaos was past anything he'd yet seen in warfare. Bodies were strewn across the tables, both those of men and women. Blood slicked the floor in a dark stain; the odor overwhelmed his nostrils.

Fear for Finola hastened his footsteps. If not even the women in this room were spared, her life was certainly in peril. The throne room lay off the corner of the great hall, sconces still burning brightly within. He hastened to the open door, stepping quietly into the room.

Cold steel pressed against his throat. Then Calder stepped out from behind the door. "So Blaire, come for the wench, have you?"

Blaire thought quickly then moved faster, jabbing his elbow into Calder's stomach, and swinging out with his leg. He held his sword in front of his chest defensively to parry any move his enemy might make.

Calder grunted and spun away like a drunken pirate. He regained his balance better than arm's length away from Blaire. Squatting, more cautious this time, Blaire watched Calder approach.

"Yes, I've come for my wife." The certainty of his statement filled Blaire with additional strength. He thrust toward Calder, who easily parried the strike. Undaunted, he lunged once again. Metal on metal sang through the air.

They continued their macabre dance, the room spinning around Blaire as he tried to find some advantage over his enemy. None came. Blaire jumped onto a table and Calder followed, their swords continuing to strike at one another. Calder swung high, and Blaire dodged the strike and ducked low, returning to the floor.

He leapt over bodies, realizing these people had been stricken down without weapons to fight back with. Calder charged toward him, and he jumped

onto the throne, covered in blood beginning to congeal. A head lay on the floor nearby, no doubt the King's.

In this precarious position, Calder moved yet again, and as Blaire dodged, his footing left him and he fell to the floor, his weapon clattering on the flagstone. Calder was on him in an instant, like a fly on dung, the same dagger he used on Finola now at Blaire's throat.

"I should have killed you, once I was done with Nikko," Calder taunted before he hit him full in the face with his fist.

"But you didn't." Blood from loosened teeth tainted Blaire's mouth.

"An error in judgment on my part. I won't make the same mistake twice."

"Captain, bring some men!" Calder shouted.

Outside the door, Blaire heard the sound of steel booted feet. A moment later, three burly men entered.

"Lord Lacombe has come for Princess Finola. See that he joins her immediately. I have a little surprise for them both."

Sadistically he was hauled to his feet; his arms pinned painfully behind his back.

* * * *

The silence surrounding Finola was broken by the clamor of men on the stairs. From the sound of it they had another prisoner. Three of Calder's men surrounded a fourth. She barely recognized Blaire through the blood, cuts, and bruises on his face.

"Blaire!" she cried out as she watched two men tie him by the wrists between two strips of leather suspended from the ceiling by chains in the middle of the room. "Goddess, no, don't let them do this!"

On a far wall, one of the men retrieved a cat-of-nine-tails, snapping it viciously. Dread filled her. Would she be forced to watch Blaire whipped to death?

Calder entered the room. "Is he ready? Make sure his bonds are tight, I want no escapes tonight."

A man yanked on each of the fastenings. "They are, sir."

"Good. Now, let's have some fun, shall we?"

Finola watched as Calder took the whip from one of his lackeys, tested it, and stroked the small pieces of metal knotted into the leather in something akin to a lover's touch. He cocked back his arm and let the whip fly. Finola flinched as the whip bit into Blaire's back.

Flecks of blood appeared on his back within angry red welts. Somehow, Blaire kept from crying out. Again, Calder flung the whip at Blaire's back. The welts crossed one another. A third, then a fourth time and still her love remained silent. Tears sprang to her eyes as Calder struck a fifth, then a sixth time. Blood ran freely down portions of Blaire's back where the leather had torn the skin and muscle repeatedly.

By the twentieth strike she was screaming. "Stop, please stop it." Somehow Blaire had managed to remove himself from the pain Calder caused. Miraculously Calder halted.

"Release his bonds and chain him to the wall."

Blaire collapsed in a heap on the cold, dirt floor of the dungeon.

"Why are you doing this, Calder?"

He walked toward her and for the first time Finola saw the ugliness of his soul. His lip curled back in a snarl like a dog. "He tried to take you from me."

"He didn't try. He succeeded." It was simple and heartfelt. Long ago she'd become Blaire's and only waited to consummate the longing of her heart.

A wild look entered Calder's eyes. "You've been mine from the beginning. All of this was for you." He took a deep breath. "I was foolish to

think I could ever win over your father with education and loyalty. I should have taken you to bed when I first had the opportunity. You were willing then to throw yourself on my cock."

"I have no such desire now," she retorted.

"What!" he yelled. "Has that mouse fucked you?" He paced back and fourth like a caged animal. "If you've been unfaithful to me, I shall visit upon you the most heinous punishment I can imagine."

Her stomach turned. The Calder she knew was long gone, replaced by a crazed madman. He stopped for a moment, then looked her in the eye. "I know what to do. By the Goddess you will be begging me to fuck you again by the time I am done." An odd smile curved his lips. "Yes, you will beg for me like you did before."

Calder moved to the rack to which she was coupled and turned the long wooden handle that moved the gears. Her stance changed, as her arms were forced tighter above her head while her legs were pulled downward. Pulling his dagger from his sheath he rent her clothing from top to bottom. "Once I'm inside you, I'll know."

"You." He pointed to one of his men. "And you." His finger wagged at another. Play with her. Get her ready for me."

Wisely, they stayed away from her mouth. She would have bit them had they tried to kiss her. Each man took a breast in hand and began to fondle her. She spat at them. One took her nipple into his mouth and bit it. His teeth dug into her tender flesh and didn't let go until she cried out. "I'll bite right through, bitch, if you try that or anything like it again."

She glanced at Blaire whose beaten face gazed upon her. Sorrow seemed to fill his eyes. So great was her shame she couldn't look at him any longer.

One of the attackers was between her legs. As he licked and sucked her, she felt her pussy prepare for what was sure to be a brutal onslaught, taking

from her that which she did not want to give. His finger entered her while his thumb rubbed her delicate folds roughly. "Don't do this," she begged.

"I am going to do this," Calder replied. "I've wanted to fuck you for too long, you little slut."

He came near and pushed the men out of the way, glancing into their faces. Her juices glistened on the man who'd been between her legs. "I think you're ready for me."

Leaning heavily into her pussy he inhaled. "Mmm. I haven't been here in some time." His tongue snaked out and whipped her sensitive folds. His hands grabbed her by the ass and lifted her more fully into his face. He bit and licked then took a hand and fingered her holes.

"Please Calder, please stop."

He looked up at her, then smiled wickedly. "I'll stop all right, once you come to your senses and willingly join with me."

"I'd rather die."

"Then I'll just have to fuck you until that happens." He jammed a finger into her ass. "Remember how much you wanted this?"

She tried to hold perfectly still as Blaire had done while being whipped. She could remove her mind from this, as he had done during his torture.

"Gentlemen," Calder called. "Move this vixen to the long straps where we can have at her at will. And be sure he," he nodded toward Blaire, "can see it all."

The brutes moved toward her, unlocking the shackles around her ankles and wrists. One grabbed her legs, the other her arms and lifted her off the wood. She jerked like a fish flopping in a net. Once again, she felt bonds tighten around her wrist.

"Move the chair in front of her so we can bend her over and use her properly."

Fear knotted her stomach. This was not how she wanted to die, being used to the point of death while Blaire watched. The larger of the two underlings moved in front of her face, and grabbed her by the hair. He loosened his breeches and his cock popped out. "Bite me and I'll make sure you get fucked by the entire army." He positioned himself against her lips, then rammed into her mouth.

Behind her someone pushed down on her back, moved the shredded silk over her ass and bent her full over the chair. Her cheeks were spread and she knew whoever it was, was going to take her at the same time her mouth was being taken. She felt the man's shaft poised to enter.

Chapter Eighteen

Not again, Blaire thought as he watched Calder and his men. I can't let him do this to her, to me again. He pulled hard at the chains holding him to the wall. A light smattering of mortar dust covered him. He lifted his head to where the chains were moored to the wall. If he had enough time he could work them loose.

Then they tied Finola into the straps and pushed a chair against her ribs. There was no more time. It was going to happen at any moment. They were going to rape her as they had Nikko, and again he was powerless to stop it.

Anger burned hot in his heart and mind. They would not do this again. His taut muscles began to tremble from unused strength trapped within them. "No!" he roared. With a mighty heave, he pulled the base of the chain from the wall.

The men turned, shocked by the noise of the chains and Blaire's bellow. Blaire advanced toward them, as a man possessed. He snapped the links at the man ready to fuck Finola like an animal. His enemy's arm broke with a loud snap and he fell to his feet writhing.

Behind him Blaire heard more men enter the room. With two he stood a chance of freeing his woman, saving her from the fate Calder had decided to

mete out. With reinforcements arriving, he wouldn't be able to hold out long. So be it. If he had to die trying, he would.

Blaire glanced over his shoulder relieved to see Aerobleu, Wyndham, and Tynan joining the fray. The first two went after the man forcing Finola to suck his dick. Tynan went to the man Blaire had downed, who, seeing the newest threat, had regained his feet and found an old mace for a weapon.

Spinning, Blaire turned to meet Calder once and for all. This time he was determined that only one of them would survive. "I am going to kill you, Calder. Get you out of my life once and for all."

"You've never been able to kill me." Calder laughed. "What makes you think you'll succeed this time."

Blaire ignored the taunt, concentrating on the man who'd scarred him over and again. He flicked his wrist and sent the iron chain flying at Calder's face. The metal hit with a sickening thud, gashing Calder's cheek with staggering energy. Calder quickly recovered and pulled out his long sword.

The only weapons Blaire had were the chains attached to his wrists. If he could get to the back wall of the dungeon, he could pull one of the sheriff's flails from its mooring. He tried to make his way to the wall, knocking into the man Wyndham was beating. The accident sent Calder's minion into Aerobleu's blade, the tip of the sword going through his back.

Wyndham and Aerobleu joined Tynan against the mace-wielding pervert. Tynan had little skill with the sword, his forte the bow. He'd need all the help they could give him.

With one enemy down, and another well occupied by his three companions, that left Blaire to deal with Calder unencumbered. Whether Blaire lived or died, Calder would not escape, the numbers too overpowering against him.

Calder must have realized the desperate odds. He turned and fled the confines of the dungeon. Blaire followed quickly on his heels, intent on not

allowing his adversary to escape. Calder arrived at the stairs of the inner curtain, turned and hurled a dagger at Blaire. It hit the wall near his ear before falling to the ground.

Despite his injuries, Blaire, fueled by bloodlust, jealousy, and other emotions, sprang after his enemy. The light of the moon was waning. Soon the night would be at its darkest and Calder would have his greatest opportunity to hide or escape. As long as the man lived he'd always be a threat. He could never allow Calder the chance to hurt Finola again.

A cloud covered the last of the light emanating from the moon. Blaire paused, listening for Calder. There were no footsteps, no sounds of labored breathing. He moved carefully forward then hastily stopped when he realized he had no weapon.

Calder would know this keep far better than Blaire. Would Calder use the knowledge to hide, or lay in wait to strike? Blaire raised a hand to his forehead and groaned. Without a weapon he had little chance of bringing Calder down.

Dejectedly he headed back to the tower housing the dungeon. At least he'd kept the bastard from hurting Finola. Finola! He hoped the men had cut her down from the shackles Calder was going to use against her. He hurried his footsteps and found them releasing her.

Aerobleu covered the rags of her robe with his cloak. Wyndham was drawing the chair forward for her to sit. "Finola!" He couldn't keep the relief and happiness from his voice.

She looked up, and Blaire couldn't have envisioned anyone lovelier despite her surroundings, abuse, and attire.

"Blaire!" She rose and ran to him, and at that moment he felt as if he'd been given the entire world on a platter.

Encircling her in his arms, he kissed the top of her dark hair, moved to her forehead, then her cheeks. "Sweetling," he sighed against the soft skin of her face. "I'd thought all was lost."

"When he beat you with that whip..."

Blaire felt her shudder at the memory. "There was much here tonight that you should never have been a party to. I will that he won't ever bother us again."

"He is dead then?" She looked at him with large hazel eyes.

"No, Sweetling. Calder escaped. Have no fear, we will track him down as the dog he is, and deal with him accordingly."

"Then it is not over." She clung to him more tightly.

Winching, he put her away from him, looking directly into his eyes. "I swear to you, I will die protecting you from him."

"Aye, so will I." It was Wyndham.

"As will I," echoed Tynan.

"My sword will always be at your beck and call," Aerobleu responded.

"There now, with such fine men to protect you, you shall have nothing to fear." He pulled her close and stroked her hair in a comforting gesture. It was silky, soft, and he longed to have it envelop him.

"Gentlemen, might I have some privacy with my wife?"

* * * *

Wife, the word was a balm to her heart. Blaire was hers, as she was his. Snaking her hands into his blonde hair she pulled his lips close to hers. Passion flared when they kissed, and she wished her saviors would disappear so she could have this luscious man all to herself.

Moving her hands down his back she stifled a cry when she felt the injuries he'd sustained. How could she have been so careless to forget? She looked into his face and saw him grimace. "We must take care of your injuries. Get the chains off your wrists."

A soft cough interrupted them. "We won't be able to do that sir, until we find the sheriff, or Calder."

Blaire shrugged. "My wife would tend my wounds. Get her what she needs."

"That won't be necessary, my love. I will take you to my chambers where I have everything I will need."

She took him by the hand and gently led him from the dungeon. As far as Finola was concerned, this dungeon had outlived its usefulness. It would better serve her as a storeroom.

The winding stairs of the tower twisted through the stone walls. On the third level she paused, opening the door and leading him into her family's apartments. Her father's chamber empty, she prayed he'd escaped Calder's treachery. "I am this way," she whispered. She opened a door, and there, as if she had never left, lay her bedchamber.

Blaire yanked her arm and turned her toward him. "I would take you to bed tonight." He pushed the last of her silk coverings from her.

"You've promised many things over the course of our acquaintance. I'd begin to experience them tonight as well."

He leaned forward and took a breast into his mouth as he caressed the other. Her heart hammered in her chest, and she swallowed the lump that formed in her throat. She'd nearly lost her virginity to Calder by a brutal rape. She needed Blaire to make love to her and erase the images of the scene she'd been a part of, make her truly his – just as he seemed to need to do it as well.

"To the bed," he groaned, releasing her nipple. He swung her into his arms and carried her to the bower, laying her on the middle of the coverlet.

Again his mouth claimed her breast. "I remember someone saying they could get sustenance here if they suckled long enough." He gently pulled her nipple. "I would much rather drink your sweet nectar." Blaire trailed kisses down her neck, breasts, moving to her core.

He cupped her cheeks with his hands, the cold steel of his chains caressed her as he lifted her ass and brought her nether regions to his lips. "Since the first day I saw you with him, I've wanted this."

His lips pulled on her clit, as a finger entered her opening. "Yes, you are ready for me." His thumb stroked the little button between her folds, sending pleasurable shocks to her center.

"Stretch me, so that all of you can enter me fully," she whimpered. Never again would she worry about Calder taking her maidenhead. Adrenaline surged through her as she forced her thoughts from her enemy's ugliness and concentrated on the beautiful sensations Blaire sent rushing through her.

He responded by inserting two more fingers into her. It felt good to be thus filled, and she writhed against his mouth and fingers as he stroked her. "Take me please," she begged. He let her ass fall back to the bed.

"Look upon me, and know what you ask for, Finola. I'd not have you begging me for release because of what we've endured. Rather, that you want me as husband and all that entails."

She did as he asked. He was thick, long, and appeared harder than the wood she'd used to pleasure Konoko. She drew her feet up to her ass, and let them fall apart. Her hands spread her folds apart, as she invited him into her portal. He climbed over her and poised himself at her hot entrance. "It will hurt, but only for a moment."

Grabbing his dick, she pulled it to her opening. "Am I pleasuring myself or are you going to do it?"

He leaned over her and put the head of his giant cock at her tiny entrance. Gradually, he slid in, stretching her around him until he reached the barrier. He moved back out, then in again, making sure she could handle his girth. "I take you, Blaire. In every way that matters to a man and his wife."

With agonizing slowness, he penetrated her. "Let me feel you pierce me, now!" Her begging was also a command fueled by her lust for him. She thrust

her hips toward him and he drove fully into her. It felt as if he'd split her in two. "Ah," she cried against his chest.

"Shh, shh, Sweetling. It will take but a moment, then all will be well." She lay there gathered into his arms. He began to pull out of her.

"No, stay." She pushed onto him again, his length sliding higher inside. Over and over, she repeated lifting her hips until she'd become accustomed to the feel of him within her.

"Now Blaire, now. Take me like you wanted to when you had me tied to that tree."

In accord with her wishes he pushed into her. "No, harder. I know you wanted to make me feel you fully." She reached around his ass and pulled him deeper into her, a small moan escaping her lips.

The motion seemed to drive him over the edge. His cock began a deliberate pounding of her pussy that picked up speed and strength as her body had accommodated him. His cock head grazed the button at the top of her clit when he withdrew; his balls slapped her when he plunged her depths. "Oh yes, Blaire, this is what I want."

"You talk too much," he said as he covered her mouth with his lips. Then he entered her in earnest, driving as deeply as he could. Faster and faster he filled her, his hands holding her ass. He tipped her a little and he plunged into her cunt more deeply.

She gasped for breath as the sensations he gave her intensified. Finola matched his pace, lifting her hips into him when he began to withdraw. Closer and closer she came to a precipice she knew she wanted to hurl herself from. When the time arrived, she threw herself into the heavenly oblivion given her by Blaire.

Still Blaire pounded into her. Stroke after stroke, as if he was trying to compensate for all the times they'd wanted to do this and weren't able. Sweat

formed on his brow and his forehead furrowed in concentration. With a mighty thrust, he rammed into her, hot liquid spilling into her as he bellowed, "Finola!"

He collapsed onto her chest, "Finally, you are mine."

Chapter Nineteen

"Get off me you, you, you oaf!" Finola pushed at the man on her chest, her lover, and her savior, Blaire. Right now though he was none of those. He was just another man intent on owning her.

"What's wrong, Sweetling." He pushed off her, confusion on his face. "What have I done?" The chains of his manacles dangled from his wrists.

"I willingly shared my body with you. That doesn't mean you own me!"

"Own you?"

"You think that makes me your property? I think not! Being chattel was why I left Talone in the first place. I am not a thing to be used as bargaining material."

She slid out from under him, nearly weakening in her resolve when she saw the lashes on his back. She wagged her finger at him instead. "When I come back, I want you out of my bed!"

Blaire's features turned hard. "As you wish. There is much to be done here if this keep is to be a usable fortress." He sat back, then swung his legs over the bed.

Finola watched as he searched for his breeches then put them on. He stormed from the room.

Her wardrobe along the far wall would have fresh clothing in it. She grabbed a gown, jerked it over her head, and headed toward the garderobe to empty her bladder. The nerve of that man to talk to her as if she was a prize to be won!

In the early morning light, Finola saw more of what had occurred before Calder had brought her back to the castle. The few men who'd put up a resistance had been slain, their bodies left to rot where they fell.

Along the walk she saw broken bows, shattered pikes, and other weapons made useless in the course of the fighting. Not that it had been very intense. Her father had few soldiers left to defend the keep once the winter months were at hand. It did no one any good at all to fight in the cold, snowy weather, and to keep the soldiers here, far from their families only created more headaches.

She found the flag of Talone trampled on the walk. Picking it up she searched for the rings that held the banner aloft and slid it in. It snapped furiously in the gale force wind. Further down, she found the signal trumpet, placed it to her lips and blew with all her might. The pennant and the trumpet would signal those who had escaped to return, knowing it was safe to do so.

The sun was bright, although the clear sky promised cold carried by the wind. Finola's long dark hair whipped at her face. "Goddess, could this carnage have been avoided somehow?"

There was no answer, nor did she expect one. There was work to be done, the first of which was cataloguing the dead and building their pyre. At this time, the survivors couldn't afford to be exposed to any sort of pestilence.

Her heart heavy, she descended the stairs to the outer ward. At the foot of the stairs lay the blacksmith, a large man who'd told many tall tales at the pub. She grabbed his hands and began to drag him to the center of the ward in front of the gatehouse. Any entering would know who perished and that they were being taken care of according to custom.

Anger gave her strength, protected her from the cold. Lilly Weaver, the seamstress joined her, as did two other women. Together they labored hours to bring the dead to their final rest.

"Know ye these men?"

The women nodded reverently. "Memorize their names, that their memory and service to Talone would not be forgotten. When we have a scribe we will tell him these that their names would live forever."

Finola climbed to the room above the portcullis and looked out once again on the lands her father had so carelessly risked. Most of the farmer's fields, touched by the waning light, had survived with their crops intact, a good thing with the coming of winter. Calder had taken his battle directly to the inner ward and great hall thereby sparing the loss of food stores.

There had been no word from her father, or any of his council. . A sick feeling of dread filled her stomach. Surely, if her father had survived he would have returned to his throne by now. Lowering the gate, she doubted they survived Calder's traitorous assault. But what had that black hearted bastard done with their bodies? Sinking to her knees she returned to gazing out the arrow loop. How had he done it, how had he been so thorough in his destruction?

From the stairway she heard heavy footsteps. Who would be so bold as to disturb her? She could sense a large man behind her.

"Finola, tis time."

"Time for what, Blaire?"

"The pyre is ready, and the people who've returned look for their Queen to accompany their King."

She turned to him, and her breath caught in her chest. He was devastatingly handsome in a loose white linen tunic and black breeches. But it was the mask that snared her attention. It was missing. The scar near his eye looked more like that of one growing older and wiser with the years. The scar

down his face proved he had done his share of suffering. Never before had her brown-eyed hero looked so good. "Where is your mask?"

"I no longer have need of it."

"Why? What has changed?"

He took two steps toward her and cupped her face in his hands. "There is someone in my life, not afraid to look upon the markings made by a monster. Someone who can see past the skin to the man within."

"Blaire, I..."

"Don't speak Finola, feel. Let your heart convince you of the fact that you and I were meant to be."

"I can't be owned, Blaire."

"Sweetling, it was not my intention to imply you were a piece of property to be granted me as a reward. You are far too strong-willed to be owned by anyone." He pulled her into his arms and pressed his lips to hers.

The fire of their passion erupted in her and he continued. "You are mine only in the way that I am yours, tied to your heart."

"I was oversensitive, I'm sorry, Blaire. My father saw me as nothing but a means to an end. I couldn't live that way with you."

"I've sworn to you my life. What more can I give you?"

"Nothing, Blaire. You've given me all I shall need or want by your very presence."

"Then my lady, let us go to the surviving remnant of our people and put those slain to rest." He looped her arm through his and escorted her down the stairs. Behind them the portcullis was drawn, all that was left to secure the ward was the barring of the doors. For a moment he left her, only to push the matching doors shut with his great strength. Hefting the drawbar, he pushed it into place through the holes of the wall meant for holding the massive piece of lumber.

Again he took her arm and together they walked to the pile. Finola was surprised by the number of people gathered there, waiting for the memorial to begin. A small scaffold had been placed near the stacked bodies allowing them to speak to the crowd and be seen.

"We are here to honor these fallen. Men, women, and even children from all ranks of life. A traitor taken into your midst and given respect and honor by you, stole their lives. This," Blaire pointed at the pyre, "is how your loyalty was repaid, by the murder of innocents. They will not be forgotten. Calder will die for his treachery!"

The gathering erupted in a cacophony of cheers. Blaire held up his hand again his chains dangling, and they quieted. "These chains the traitor placed upon me. Tomorrow we ride. We will not return until we have him! The chains will not come off until the dog is ours!"

There was another explosion of cheers, louder than the first. Again, Blaire held up his hand for silence. "My wife, the Princess Finola, now your Queen, will send these fallen to their final rest." He handed her a torch.

The wood burst into flame at the touch of the light. The setting sun gave way to a dark night that howled its acceptance of their offering as the wind stoked each pyre to frightening heights. The dead would not soon be forgotten.

The fires eventually died down and smoldered throughout the night; plumes of smoke tainted the air with the smell of burning bodies. Blaire did not sleep. The promise he'd made her and her people weighed heavily on him. He knew none of them would rest easy while Calder lived. The sooner he found and dealt with the traitor, the sooner they would all be able to rebuild their lives and live in peace. He leaned over and kissed her on the forehead as the morning light kissed the horizon. He'd not return to her and enjoy her favors until his job was complete.

Wyndham, Tynan, and Aerobleu waited for him in the courtyard. The morning was cold, and the horses whinnied as if they wanted to be back in their

warmer stalls. Around him other men had returned to the sanctuary of the castle, instructed by his trusted captains to begin the necessary preparations for defense of the keep, and repair of its walls. Another group had been charged to bring in as much of the harvest as they could, before the frost came. Should Calder wish to lay siege to this place he would not find it as easy to take as before.

Calmly they rode away, the hooves of their horses unnaturally loud in the early morning.

Noon arrived, the sun muted behind flat clouds that warned of poor weather to come. "Tynan, Aerobleu, go ahead to Hamre. See that the fortifications are in order and the basements filled with foodstuffs. Send half the army to Talone. Keep the rest prepared to fight at a moment's notice. Wyndham go back to Talone and see to the training of the men there. I am going after Calder alone."

"Are you sure this is wise?" Lord Wyndham asked.

"It isn't. But I must face the dog alone or I will never be a real man again."

Each man nodded. Blaire took their acquiescence as understanding. Each of the three would no doubt do as he'd done and face their own demons alone.

Calder left little evidence of where he'd gone, but it was still enough for Blaire. The man's path took him into a small hamlet between Talone and Hamre. A small thatched house proclaimed itself an inn. With enough coin, Blaire would buy a room and prepare for Calder's attack.

Blaire stepped inside and immediately felt the warmth of a roaring fire. He hadn't realized how cold he'd become. Spying a small table at the rear of the room, he sat facing the door. A few patrons stopped talking long enough to look him over, then returned to their conversations.

The barkeep hurried over. "What will you have?"

"Ale and a plate of whatever it is you are serving."

Setting the ale and a plate of steaming stew in front of him, the bartender spoke again. "Will there be anything else?"

"A room if you have it."

"I do."

Blaire tossed him a coin, careful to keep his chains concealed beneath his cape. "Enough to cover my expenses?"

"That and more," the fat man replied.

"More?" Blaire tried to appear nonchalant, thoughtful. "Have a seat, join me. It's been a while since I've engaged in interesting conversation."

The barkeep looked around. "Seeing how it isn't busy, I'll join you for a mug. What would you like to know?"

"Your berg is rather out of the way. Do you get many guests at your inn?"

"This is the time of year we see very few visit our little village. It is different in the summer when the city dwellers seek escape from the heat." The man rubbed a towel over his hands then used them both to lift the mug to his mouth and drink deeply. "But, we have had another visitor here, just last night in fact." He leaned closer to Blaire. "Oily sort if you ask me. Haughty attitude though he rode in alone with no man to attend him. Looked to be hiding something, though I couldn't tell what."

"Is he lodging with you yet?" It was obvious to Blaire that Calder had been here.

"Aye. He paid with gold coin for a fortnight of room and board. He went out early this morning. I haven't seen him return."

It would do no good to dwell on the man visiting the inn, so Blaire changed the course of the discussion. "You must get complimented on your stew often. It is good, and hearty."

"I run a fair business, sir, and make sure my customers are well taken care of with generous portions. That sort of thing spreads you know. The summer people, they know they will not starve under this roof."

Blaire pretended to yawn. "I've been on the road many hours, I'm rather tired. Could you show me to my room, good man?"

The bartender stood. "Just this way," and he led Blaire up a set of stairs and to the back of the inn. "It's quieter here over the kitchen. The lodge room can sometimes get loud." The man opened a door and showed Blaire into the room.

It was simple - a straw bed, a dressing table, and a chair. "Thank you, I am sure all will be fine."

The bartender backed away, and Blaire closed the door. It wouldn't take Calder long to find out Blaire was at the inn. He placed the chair behind the hinged side of the door, then moved to stuff the bed.

Chapter Twenty

Blaire fell asleep. If it hadn't been for the heavy footsteps in the hall he might have died that way. Instead, he woke up in time to watch the door to his room open ever so slightly. With his sword at his side, drawn, Blaire was ready to fight his adversary.

An arrowhead followed by its shaft filled the narrow opening. Thwang! The arrow sank deeply into the straw Blaire had piled under the covers. The archer entered, still as death. Blaire holding his sword jumped and rammed the door against the assassin.

The man pushed back, shoving Blaire into a wall. Blaire stifled the groan ready to leave his mouth. He'd not give his enemy the satisfaction of knowing the whipping still caused pain.

Calder entered the room, sword ready. "You always have to make things more difficult don't you?"

"I'm not so slow as to hand you an opportunity to slay me." Blaire got into his fighting stance.

Calder scowled. "Yes, well, you've become quite the thorn in my flesh. Tell me, have you bedded the slut?"

"Finola is my wife, my queen. When you speak of her show proper respect."

Calder raised his sword. "For a woman that has been satisfied by every stable hand in two kingdoms? No."

"Your liar's tongue will end your life."

"Come now, Blaire, you can't possibly mean you will end it. How many chances have you squandered in the past two months?" Calder swung his sword.

Blaire parried the swing and countered with one of his own. The chains on his wrist rattled.

"You still have your jewelry?"

"I kept them for you." Blaire shook them menacingly.

Their swords clanged over the straw bed. First an upper thrust, then a strike toward the ribs. Calder blocked them all, backing out of the room.

"Coward! Why are you running away again?"

Calder responded, "I'm not running, just giving myself more room to swing." His sword arced over his head and came toward Blaire with astonishing speed and strength. Blaire jumped to the side and the weapon hit the floor.

The force jarred the sword from Calder's hand and it clattered to a rest behind Blaire. The loss of the weapon didn't stop Calder. He pulled a dagger from his hardened leather boot.

Blaire swung his broadsword with near-maniacal strength. Calder sidestepped the blade, then leapt down the stairs two at a time. Blaire followed close behind, trying to find an opportunity to take his opponent down.

In the open, Calder threw his dagger at Blaire's sword hand, and struck the flesh. Blaire was unable to keep control of his sword. Calder laughed. "You are such a weakling."

Blaire circled closer, avoiding the smattering of tables in the inn. Neither had a weapon, just fists. Calder swung and hit Blaire under his chin, jarring his teeth. Blaire countered with a punch to Calder's midsection, the chains on his arms landing blows on Calder's ribs.

The combined power drove Calder over a table, into a chair, and onto the planked floor of the inn. Blaire raced to him intent on finishing him off.

Blaire moved to grab Calder's skull, but Calder grabbed Blaire by the chains, trying to loop one around Blaire's neck. They wrestled on the floor, toppling tables and chairs with abandon.

Calder ended up on top of Blaire. Around them the patrons moved away from the fight, some shouting encouragement to Blaire. Reaching behind him, Calder grabbed an earthenware tankard from a nearby table and swung at Blaire.

Using his chains as a shield, Blaire blocked the blow, shattering the mug. The loss of the weapon didn't stop Calder from finding something else. A moment later he had a shard of the tankard in his grip preparing to drive it into Blaire's chest.

Blaire swung at Calder and the chain on his wrist wrapped around Calder's neck. He grabbed the other end and pulled with all his might, crushing the air from Calder's throat. Blaire heard a sickening crack and Calder's eyes widened in shock, as he dropped the pottery, then fell on top of Blaire, dead.

"Find me a blacksmith," was the last thing he groaned as he pushed Calder off him.

* * * *

Blaire threw Calder's body over the back of the horse and trudged back to the Talone castle. He could let the guilt of Nikko's death go. Avenging Nikko had taken far too long, but it was finished. He was free to keep his vow to Finola.

He heard the wooden gate door open and watched the portcullis rise. A moment later, Finola was running toward him, arms outstretched. As she neared he saw the tears streaming down her cheeks.

Flinging herself into his arms she kissed him repeatedly. "Here, here, woman, what's this about?"

"It's over, it's finally over."

He sighed, "Nay, I've one task left to complete before I am rid of his evil memory." He slid a hand over her breast. "I need to be buried in you, make your entire body mine."

Frantically, he looked around for a place he could take her. He had to do this now, or he would never be free. "Come with me, to the room above the portcullis."

She didn't move fast enough and he swung her into his arms and carried her to the room, dismissing the guards on duty. He slid a hand under her skirt. "You are wet with desire."

"For you," she simply replied.

He rubbed his cock against her. "I cannot get the image of you being taken by him out of my mind." His hands fumbled at her bodice, trying to loosen the breasts he loved to suckle.

He felt her rub his shaft, then her nimble fingers untying his breeches. She stroked him, running a drop of his come around the top of his dick. "Turn around and lean over, Finola, I would take you from behind."

* * * *

With great fanfare she turned around. There was only the cog of the gate for her to lean upon. Languidly she drew her skirt up over her ass. Blaire gasped, as she'd known he would. Underneath she wore nothing.

"You've been gone too long, and I need to be filled by your member."

"I'll fill you all right, wench."

Over her shoulder she watched him approach, his cock swinging large and hard like a tree branch in the wind. She shivered with eagerness when the

shaft rubbed her slit. Still tight, she knew his member would stretch her to take him as it had done before.

Blaire leaned over her back, his breath warm against her neck. His large hand reached for her tits, and frustrated they were still covered, he ripped the cloth to set them free. He fingered her pussy. "You drip with need."

"Aye, my Lord. I ache to be taken."

He pushed against her opening, slid in, pushing deeper and deeper until his huge length was buried in her so deep his sac slapped against her. She loved the sensation. "Oh, yes, Blaire, yes." She leaned over as far as she could against the large gatehouse gear.

"You are so tight, Finola. Are you sure I don't hurt you?"

"You hurt me by not taking me as hard as you are able."

His hand snaked between the front of her legs and caressed the nub he felt there. He withdrew from her heat a little then went fully back in to her.

"Mmm, Blaire, oh this is so good." She writhed against him as he continued to rub her slickness around her folds. Her muscles clamped around him as she moaned loudly.

She felt him withdraw, leaving her on the edge of pleasure. "Finola, I have yet to possess you totally." There was a hint of sadness in his eyes. "I have to take you like he did, when I first saw you, if you will allow it. I need to remove the last memories of Calder in my life."

She grabbed Blaire's cloak as she dropped to her knees. She needed this as much as he. If Blaire filled her there, the memories of Calder's touching would be replaced. She reached behind her and grabbed Blaire's cock. The enormity of it amazed her.

While she stroked it, Blaire played with her tight portal, driving a long finger in and out while using his other hand to rub her pussy once more. She exhaled. Blaire was learning how to make her body respond to his every touch.

"Finola, will you give this to me, freely?"

What a silly question. He had all of her for the taking. "Yes."

The head of his cock pushed against her tight bud. His fingers stretched her open for him. She swallowed hard. They had to do this. They had to erase Calder's ghost from their lives. Taking a deep breath she pushed against Blaire's cock and prepared to swallow back the pain she would feel on its entry. Instead, he slipped into her feminine core, keeping very still, allowing her to become accustomed to his size.

"Are you okay, my love?"

Finola nodded, realizing the gift he'd just given her. "Why did you not take me as you wished?"

"There will be a time when we are both truly ready. It is enough to know you would allow it."

He withdrew, then penetrated her. She could feel him throb with need. This time when he began to pull out of her, she pushed back onto his wide rod.

Together they entered a measured pattern and as she grew used to him and relaxed, was able to take more of his length into her. Unexpectedly, his hand rubbed her clit again as he moved within her. She felt encompassed by his cock even though she knew it was the other way. Faster he entered and withdrew, mixing the pleasures of his cock with the delights of his fingers.

Deep within her core she could feel the vibrations of her orgasm build. She squeezed her thighs tightly around Blaire, matching the tempo of her own wave. He grabbed her hips and picked up the pace, crying out her name as his seed shot deep within her. She shuddered around him.

When the trembling had subsided, she pulled off him. Blaire sat back on his haunches and she straddled his legs, clutching him tightly to her. She stroked his face surprised to find it wet.

"What is it, what's wrong?" she whispered against his damp cheek.

"You have released me," he said simply, emotion choking his words.

"Nay. You rescued me from Calder, from myself."

With passion he kissed her. "You have given me hope again. Gifted me with the ability to dream when all I had left were nightmares. I'm finally free, Finola. Thanks to you."

"As am I," she quietly replied.

* * * *

With the winter nearly over, and the much-needed repairs made to the outer and inner curtain walls of the castle, it was time to return to Hamre. There was much that needed doing there if the reports of Aerobleu and Wyndham were correct.

This time Finola could go to the King without fear or worry. She'd enjoy the time spent in the royal bedchamber with this King as she had in her own castle. Blaire had shown her much about the pleasures of the flesh, but she'd shown him a thing or two as well.

As they walked their horses through the woods Finola brought up a subject dear to her heart. "Blaire, what of Konoko, Liona and Phillipa? You inherited them as well as me as your wives."

"I think," he said, pausing, "I should like to bed them as I have you."

Finola gasped. "Surely you don't mean to carry on as your brother did?"

He laughed and Finola realized then that he teased her. "How can I have anyone else but you? You lusty tart. I can barely keep up with your needs as it is. You'd want me to take on another sex-starved wife?"

"No, but what of them? You have no idea how they suffer to be kept from their men indefinitely. They need their release as much as you."

"So little hellcat, you are not jealous of my cock pleasing them?"

Finola paused, wondering what would be the correct answer. "I should be all that you need warming your bed."

Again he laughed, "Aye, wench, you are all that I need. We shall marry them off."

"Marry them off? Without a say in the matter? Please don't think of them as chattel property."

Blaire reined his horse to a halt and grabbed the halter of Finola's horse. "Sweetling, I am not blind. I see how Liona pants after Aerobleu, how Konoko kisses Wyndham. And your Phillipa would be satisfied with no other man than Tynan. We shall ask them, but I am sure these matches are to their approval."

"I would want Hamre to be as enlightened in this regard as Talone." She paused. "Moreso."

"Agreed."

He grasped her waist and pulled her from her horse. "The High Priestess shall perform the ceremony with their approval, and then we shall have her intone blessings on our union." Looking deeply into her eyes he continued. "I have no need of more than one woman. I shall not continue the practices of my brother."

Taking her hand, they walked together in the spring woods. New life appeared on the branches of the trees, a bright green of unfurling leaves. "Does this look familiar to you?"

She shook her head. There was something recognizable in the place, but she didn't know what. Blaire walked her to a tree.

"This tree is significant. Know you why?"

A blush crept into her face. She was pretty sure she knew the place now. She leaned against the tree, and untied her bodice.

"Isn't this where the captive had her first release by your hands?"

He nodded then ravaged her lips with his mouth and tongue. "You wanted me for all the wrong reasons then." His mouth grazed her nipple, then tugged on it gently.

She took his hand and placed it between her legs, under her skirt. "Perhaps, but you knew, even then that only you would be able to properly satisfy me."

They sank to the ground carpeted with pine needles. He laid his cloak behind her before he gently laid her atop it. He unlaced his breeches and took his hardened member from its confines.

"Please, make me come, I'm in a sorry state," she moaned.

"No sorrier than mine," he replied before he spread her legs and buried himself deeply within her.

The End

Lucynda Storey is a prolific author living in the beautiful state of Colorado. You can see Lucynda's other stories by visiting her web site at www.lucyndastorey.com.

Her other releases at Aspen Mountain Press include:

Things That Go Bump in the Night, a werewolf story in the anthology,
Creatures of the Night, Creatures of Delight,

Reynardine, a werewolf story set in southwestern Ireland

Bet Me, a Plain Brown Wrapper ultra short story.

Read an excerpt from *Reynardine*:

Mist snaked over the island, coiling low across the beach. The waning moonlight, muted by thick clouds, gave them the perfect cover. If only it would continue. The Atlantic fog might last an hour, or a few days. The beginning of fall heralded unpredictable weather, brought longer, deeper nights of darkness. Tonight, luck was with him. The thick mist blanketed sound and movement. It would take a strong torch to illuminate their activities.

The tide lapped at the shore, the ebb of the water slapping against its own waves. The sound was steady, lulling. Perfect for concealing the soft cries that mingled with the dull thrum of boat engines.

To the north lay the Cliffs of Mohr, to the south, Kilkee Bay, and the road between blissfully empty. The tourists were gone. There would be no witnesses to tonight's activities. He loved this off-season, when the community fought closing down for winter, trying to grasp every last Euro. He could purchase the goods and services he needed, at a fraction of their cost. Throwing a few extra coins into the captain's hands guaranteed the silence of the crew carrying his precious cargo.

"Sean," he whispered. "Have you the sacks?"

"Aye."

"Chloroform?"

"Aye. Would you relax?"

"I'd rather be uptight than risk a mistake. There is a boatload of money to be made, I tell ya, as long as we are well-positioned."

He turned his back on Sean to face the shrouded sea. To the north, the clouds thinned. Damn, the weather wasn't going to hold. It would be a race against time to receive the delivery before the moonlight illuminated their activities. The engines' rumble faded while he peered into the eerie clouds. A low whistle knifed the mist-laden air.

He'd win this race after all. Smiling, he motioned for Sean, and they headed toward the sound.

The pleasure of his victory didn't last. A mournful howl cut through the silence and chilled his blood. He'd heard *that* sound before. No longer concerned about being revealed by the advancing moonlight, he stepped into the mist, his heart pounding erratically. They really didn't have much time left at all.