



Queen Brat

By

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Chapter 1

Elissia woke easily and completely, finally feeling rested after so long a sleep. Yesterday afternoon, after the savage had spanked her, she'd made up the bed in the cabin's back room and her husband had made glorious love to her. After that they'd fallen asleep in each other's arms, and it had been so long since Elissia had had a decent, uninterrupted night's sleep that even two missed mealtimes hadn't wakened her.

Her cheeks warmed as she suddenly remembered a dream she'd had. In the dream she was entirely naked, and the savage held her hand as he led her to a chair. He sat down in the chair and took her over his lap, then put that horrible insertion into her bottom again. The thing immediately made Elissia burn for the savage, but when she tried to reach behind and pull it out again she found she couldn't do it. She wanted to remove the vile thing, but for some reason couldn't do it.

Then the savage's hand moved over her bottom in a long, slow caress, which let her know exactly what would happen next. The first smack of his hand on her seat made her choke, but by the time the second and third smacks came she was able to howl. She desperately wanted to put her hand back to protect herself, but again she couldn't do it. All she could do was lie across his knees, howling as his hand came down again and again in the hardest spanking she'd ever had from him.

Many long minutes had gone by while the ache in her seat grew higher and higher, almost as high as the burning in her blood. She'd squirmed and cried shamelessly as a hand that felt like wood kept striking her bottom, and even as various strangers walked in and out of the room she could do nothing to stop the punishment she was being given. She'd been horrified when her father and brother came in to watch for a while, but she'd forced herself to beg them to stop the savage. They'd simply shrugged to show that they couldn't stop him either, and the spanking had gone on and on.

Finally, after a very long time, the spanking ended. Elissia had decided that the savage had probably found out the real reason she'd been by the pond, and that's why he'd punished her so thoroughly. She hadn't wanted him to know, but he'd found out anyway and had reacted just the way she'd known he would. He lifted her off his knees,

but didn't give her a chance to even try to rub her hot and aching bottom. He took her hand again and led her to the bed, then made her lie down.

She'd howled when her bottom touched the bedcovers, but the savage hadn't paid any attention. He'd put his big body between her raised knees, and then had begun to lick her all over as if she needed encouragement to want him. He didn't come to her until he had her screaming and begging, but then he gave her everything she needed and wanted. His lovemaking was marvelous, perfect, and she'd actually fallen asleep in his arms in the dream, but now she was wide awake and feeling deliciously satisfied and rested.

But jumping up to open the shutters and let in what looked like the light of a new day wouldn't have been a very good idea. There wasn't much of an ache left from the hard spanking she'd really been given, but she could hear the savage's soft breathing on the other side of the bed. He was obviously still asleep, and being awakened by blinding morning light would have been poor repayment for the pleasure he'd given her. Maybe, if she used a few soft kisses instead, he might be coaxed into repeating the performance...

Feeling downright wicked to be planning another campaign against her husband so soon, Elissia turned in the scratchy linen and moved closer to the man who claimed to love her. Elissia hadn't been able to speak about her own love for him, not yet, but if he'd told the truth about his feelings then the time would come. She put a gentle hand to the warmth of his beautifully muscled arm

And instead of warmth found heat, the heat of fever. He wasn't quite burning up, but fever of any kind wasn't a good sign.

"Derand?" she said, using his name for what was probably the first time. "Derand, we need to get you to a doctor as soon as possible. Derand, wake up."

The big man moved just a little and mumbled something, but even after all the sleep he'd had he didn't wake. That had to mean he wasn't really sleeping, not the way he should be. A clutch of cold appeared around Elissia's heart and she quickly got out of bed to find her clothes. Those clothes went well beyond rank by now, but they were all she had with her...

It must have taken no more than seconds for Elissia to dress, and then she went to the window. Opening the shutter took another handful of seconds, but then she was able to see better as she hurried back to the bed. With the shutter down the room had been really dim, but now...

Now Elissia was able to see that the bandages around the savage's body were stained with blood. She hadn't been able to see that yesterday after they went to bed, not with rain and clouds turning the day almost as dark as night, but she was willing to bet that if she had been able to see the man clearly she would also have seen the blood.

"Oh, you fool!" Elissia breathed at the unmoving body, fear turning her throat tight and making all of her tremble. "And I'm a double fool for having believed you were all right."

If the savage had been healthy and on his feet in front of her, she probably would have hit him with something hard. Doing something this stupid...! How was she supposed to get him back to Ramsond and into the care of a doctor? Carry him to his horse? Even if she could get him out of the cabin and across his saddle, the trip would probably do him even more damage. She could ride to the city herself and bring help back, but that would mean leaving him all alone and unprotected. So how

"Elissia, you're a triple fool!" she growled at herself, briefly wondering how any woman who claimed to be able to think could be so thickheaded. The savage was never left unprotected because he never went anywhere alone, a fact she'd used to poke at him with at one point. That should mean his men were around somewhere, and all she had to do was find them...

"All," Elissia muttered as she headed for the door of the room. "If those idiots are still trying to stay out of sight and hearing - ! How can they do that when their king's life could well be in danger?"

Distantly Elissia knew she was being unreasonable, but also being worried sick meant that reason went out the window. She strode to the front door, pulled it open, then hurried outside. Small patches of mud still dotted the ground here and there, remnants of the rain that hadn't had time to dry up. The rain... Had the savage's men really spent a cold, wet night in the open instead of going back to the city and a warm barracks...?

"Help!" Elissia called, desperately banishing all thoughts of men returning to comfort when they would be so badly needed. "If anyone can hear me, I need help!"

For a long, terrifying moment there was no response, and Elissia was about to call again when a man in black leather suddenly appeared out of the woods.

"May I be of service, Your Majesty?" the man called over as he paused just beyond the trees. "Your breakfast and the king's will be brought in just a - "

"Never mind breakfast!" Elissia interrupted, ignoring the fact that her insides did feel very hollow. "Your king isn't asleep he's unconscious, and we have to get him back to the city as quickly as possible. Do you have a wagon or something like - "

Elissia's words broke off when there was no longer a man to speak them to. The man in black leather had turned and run into the woods, hopefully to go for more help. With that in mind, Elissia returned to the cabin's bedroom and sat down next to Derand to wait for that help to arrive.

No more than ten minutes passed before a large number of black-clad men appeared. One of them came close to the bed, gently moved Elissia out of the way, then bent to look at his king. Derand moaned a little when the newcomer touched him here and there, but other than that there was no response.

"You're right, Your Majesty, the king is unconscious rather than sleeping," the man said after straightening again. "I'm good enough to take care of battlefield wounds, but what the king needs is a real doctor. We'll have to get him back to Ramsond."

"How are you going to do that?" Elissia demanded at once, not about to let anyone cause more difficulty for the man she loved. "He can't sit a saddle, and draping him over one will - "

"Please don't worry, Your Majesty," the man interrupted with gentle strength. "Some of the men are right now putting a litter together, and we'll get the king back to Ramsond that way. He's a strong man, Your Majesty, and I'm certain he'll be fine once he's had some bed rest."

"Bed rest he should have been getting instead of riding after me," Elissia muttered as she turned away, so furious with herself that she wished the savage had spanked her even harder last night. Or done something worse, something bad enough to equal the way she'd put his life in danger. But how could she have known that he really did love her? Assuming he'd been telling the truth...

Elissia's thoughts went around and around, but she wasn't left to their untender mercies for long. In a much shorter time than she'd expected, a group of men appeared and started to gently put the savage into his clothes. That suggested the litter was ready, so Elissia went out to look at the thing.

The litter was no more than two long saplings trimmed down to poles with two blankets tied to them. The tops of the poles were also tied to the stirrups of a horse, with a second horse standing near the bottoms of the poles. Under other conditions the bottoms of the poles would be dragged along the ground, but Elissia thought that this time the litter would be suspended between the two horses. Dragging the litter would give its occupant much too

rough a ride.

The small clearing near the cabin was filled with mounted men in black leather, and one of those men held the reins of the savage's stallion. Seeing that made Elissia look around for her own horse, and only then did she notice that her mount had been saddled and brought out of the shed.

As Elissia walked to her horse and got ready to mount, she tried to decide why she felt faintly annoyed. She had been raised as a princess, which meant she was more than used to having people do things for her. It just seemed that there ought to be a limit to having things done for you, if for no other reason than to let you learn how to do those things on your own. Being helpless was never a benefit at any time, but these people didn't seem to care. And they probably thought that her being a woman meant she was helpless most of the time...

Sitting on the hard saddle gave Elissia a distant reminder of what had been done to her last night, but the sight of Derand being carried out of the cabin banished all other thoughts. He lay so still and helpless-looking in the arms of the four men that Elissia felt the urge to hold him tight and protect him from everything in the world. Every man in sight was larger and better armed and trained than she, but Elissia knew she could do a better job of protecting Derand. And from now on she would...

The trip back to Ramsond was neither fast nor pleasant. At one point one of the riders handed her a package, and Elissia opened the package to find bread and cheese and meat inside. The food must have come from the inn they'd passed, an inn Elissia had ignored through worry about Derand. But the savage's men hadn't ignored their queen's needs, and Elissia bolted down the food even while she wished she didn't have to. She hated to feel helpless, but right now she was able to feel nothing else.

It was afternoon before they rode through the gates of Ramsond, and they went directly to the palace. By now Elissia was more angry with Derand than with herself, since coming after her had been the savage's decision when he knew full well how badly he'd been hurt. And he hadn't even taken it easy once he found her! Did the man have no sense at all? No wonder all those men trailed after him so doggedly. They knew that if they didn't look after him, he'd certainly never do the job properly himself.

"El, what happened to Derand?" Elissia heard as she dismounted, the worry-filled words coming from Gardal as he hurried up. "We got word when you came through the gates, but no one said anything about - "

"Anything about your friend being a giant fool?" Elissia interrupted as she turned to her brother. "Well, he is a fool, and that's why he's unconscious now. He pushed himself much too hard and far, and now he's paying for the stupidity."

"If you want to discuss stupidity, let's do that," Gardal countered, looking at her with less than brotherly tenderness. "If you hadn't taken off on your own to go the gods only know where, Derand wouldn't have had to ride after you. If what happened to him is anyone's fault, it's yours."

"No it isn't!" Elissia returned hotly, refusing to let her brother get away with accusing her of things even if those things were true. "Where I go and what I do is my business and no one else's! I'm not a child who has to account for her doings, and I'm not a slave who needs someone's permission to do anything but obey orders. If you were the one who had ridden off, would that savage have gone chasing after you instead of staying in bed?"

"No, he wouldn't have chased after if I'd been the one riding off, but there are two reasons for that," Gardal returned after folding his arms as he stared down at her. "The first is that I'm a reasonable man, able to take care of myself and considerate enough to tell people where I'm going before I leave. The second reason is that Derand isn't in love with me the way he is with you, and you don't just let people you love ride away from you without a word of explanation."

"Why not?" Elissia asked, suddenly in the midst of a different discussion altogether. "Does loving someone give

you the right to run the life of the person you love? Does your loving them mean they have to do things only in ways you approve of? And if you think you do have that right, what about the person who might love you? Do they have the same right to run your life, or does that particular right work only in one direction?"

Gardal had parted his lips to answer in the way you do when you're in the midst of an argument, but instead of words coming forth there was only silence. His stare had changed to one filled with disturbance and his arms were no longer folded, and those two things were answer enough. Elissia began to move around her brother to follow the men carrying the savage into the palace, but Gardal's hand on her arm stopped her.

"El, those are questions you need to discuss with Derand," he said with a sigh. "If you care about someone - really care - it isn't possible for you to stand by while they do things that might cause them harm. If you'd been here and it was someone else Derand meant to ride out after, wouldn't you have tried to keep him from going?"

"I might have wanted to, but I don't know if I would have actually tried," Elissia responded after a moment, the answer faintly startling. "If someone really needs to do something, how much concern are you showing for them if you stop them from doing that something? Is it really them you're thinking about - or only yourself?"

Gardal's hand left her arm as silence descended again, so Elissia continued on into the palace. A heavy disturbance had taken the place of the worry she'd been feeling, and as she followed the men carefully carrying their king she couldn't decide which emotion was worse. Or which was actually better...

The savage was carried to a suite and through the sitting room to a large bed chamber, where he was gently deposited on the bed. Listan already waited there with another man, and as soon as Derand was put down the other man moved to the side of the unconscious king. Listan looked drawn with worry, and he watched closely as the other man lifted Derand's shirt to examine the wounds.

"It's an infection that's causing the fever, but the infection isn't as bad as it might be," the man, obviously a doctor, said after a few minutes. "I have poultices that can be applied, which will help to bring him back to consciousness. Once he's conscious, however, I'll give him a sleeping draught to settle him down again. A few days bed rest will make him as good as new."

Listan nodded with obvious relief as the doctor turned to a hovering servant and began to give the girl instructions. Elissia also felt a good deal of relief, so much so that she moved out into the sitting room through the groups of black-clad men who hovered around the open bedchamber door. She felt more tired than she thought she'd be, and now she had the added job of deciding where to go and what to do

"Your Majesty, I'm delighted to see you," Listan said as he came up to her, looking as though he were ready to catch her if she suddenly tried to run. "I know it's probably an imposition, but I'd like to ask the favor of your assistance once you've had a chance to bathe and change your clothes."

"Assistance with what?" Elissia asked, not about to commit herself to something without knowing what it was. And maybe not even then...

"Things are in a great turmoil here in Ramsond, most especially since there's no one currently in charge," Listan explained at once, still looking anxious. "I'd expected my king to return and straighten things out, but my king won't be fit to leave his bed for some days. I have no idea who he meant to put in charge of this city, and very frankly I don't have the authority to put someone of my own choice in charge. If you take charge, though, you'll be acting for my king and no one else will have to be chosen."

"Me? In charge?" Elissia knew perfectly well that her voice had risen an octave or two, but shock tended to do that to her. "Listan, you can't be serious!"

"I'm not only serious I'm desperate," Listan returned with a sound of scorn. "Even if I had the authority to do the

necessary, I don't happen to know what the necessary is. I have no doubt that you'll know exactly what has to be done, just as you did with the rescue of my king. Please don't say no."

"But - What about ... your king," Elissia protested again, still not up to believing that this was really happening. "When he wakes up and finds me in charge - "

"He'll be delighted that you were here and able to take over while he recovered," Listan interrupted, finishing Elissia's sentence in his own way. "I know his opinion of you, an opinion I share without reservation, so will you please say yes?"

Elissia was almost beyond saying anything at all, but a sudden thought had come to her. She'd always been sure in her own mind that she could do the job of ruling as well as any man, only there hadn't been much chance that she would be given the opportunity to prove the contention. Now she was being given the chance, so it was time to put actions where only thoughts had been.

"All right, Listan, I'll do as you ask," Elissia said after only a very brief hesitation. "But don't start feeling too happy and relieved. If your king wakes up and decides that this wasn't a very good idea after all, it won't be me taking the blame for it."

"I have faith in my king's good sense, so I'll happily take credit for the idea," Listan said, his grin wide and full of the relief Elissia had warned him against. "Let me show you to another apartment where you can rest until a bath and clean clothes are made ready, and once you're refreshed I'll explain as much of the muddle as I've been able to determine."

Considering the number of people hanging around and doing things in the savage's apartment, another apartment wasn't a bad idea. Elissia followed Listan when he turned right up the corridor, but they didn't go far. Listan opened one of the doors of the very next apartment, then stood aside as he gestured Elissia in first.

"As soon as I heard that my king was unconscious, I knew that you'd need a place of your own," Listan said as he followed Elissia into the sitting room where two girls waited. "I also arranged for maids, and asked them to look around for clothing as well as to prepare a bath. You girls: have you found clothing that will fit the queen?"

"Yes, my lord, we have," one of the girls answered as both of them curtsied. "And Her Majesty's bath is ready and waiting."

"Excellent," Listan said to the girls, then turned to murmur to Elissia: "We've been welcomed with open arms by the staff in this palace. They're so grateful to us for taking down Waysten that they can't do enough for us. I'll leave you to your privacy now, and when you're ready you have only to send for me."

Listan bowed before turning to the door and striding out, and Elissia wasn't unhappy to see him go. Considering how badly she needed both the bath and clean clothes, the thought of those things was quickly turning into an obsession.

"Your bathing room is this way, Your Majesty," the same girl said with a smile, gesturing with one arm. "We consider it a privilege to serve you."

"You may change your mind when you see how filthy I am," Elissia said with a rueful smile as she walked toward the indicated door. "Because of that, I'll want to soak for a while."

The door was opened by one of the girls, and Elissia walked in to see a much larger bathing room than the one she'd had in her father's palace. The bath was large enough to hold four people, the sanitary facilities were situated behind a wide screen, and there were even tables to lie on while someone with magical hands provided a massage.

"Everything looks perfect," Elissia said to the girls. "I'll be with you in a moment."

Using the sanitary facilities took only a little longer than the mentioned moment, and then Elissia was finally able to take off and throw aside the clothing that had long since gone beyond well worn. The water in the bathing pool was deliciously hot, and Elissia settled into it with a sigh of delight. There were "seats" fashioned into the corners of the pool, and Elissia used one to do her soaking.

When the water began to lose its warmth, the girls came close to help Elissia wash. They held the soap while she cleaned her body, and then one of them washed her hair. When the accumulated grime was finally gone, the girls held two towels for her body and hair which they used with gentle efficiency. When she was almost dry they heard the sound of chiming, and one of the girls went to see who was at the door. The girl was back in a pair of moments, her expression uncertain.

"The lord Listan apparently arranged for a meal to be brought to you, Your Majesty," the girl said after closing the bathing room door behind her. "Would you like me to tell them to take it back while you have a massage, and bring a fresh meal later?"

"I think I'm more in need of food than a massage right now," Elissia said as soon as she became aware of the new hollowness inside her, an awareness brought about by the mention of food. "Please have them set the food out, and I'll be there to do the meal justice as soon as I'm dressed."

The girl who had gone to the door curtsied and went back to pass on Elissia's orders, while the second girl went to a small ... storage box, the thing looked like. She lifted the lid and pulled out what was in the box, and Elissia found it all she could do not to stare open-mouthed.

"It wasn't as difficult to find trousers and tunics in your size as we thought it might be, Your Majesty," the girl said, holding out the items mentioned along with a pair of plain cotton drawers. "Those gentlemen who owned the clothing were more than happy to donate parts of their wardrobes to their new queen, and now that you're back to be measured our seamstresses will have outfits done up for you as soon as you have the time to choose the material."

About to protest that she usually wore gowns rather than tunics and trousers, Elissia swallowed down the words. Gowns were awkward and unhandy to wear, not to mention usually uncomfortable. She was much happier wearing trousers, and now it looked like she would be able to continue the practice. And as far as being their new queen went, that was a subject best left for another time.

By the time Elissia came out of the bathing room, her meal had been put out on a table in the sitting room. The two girls continued to hover in case their help was needed, but Elissia was too hungry to wait for someone to serve her. She shamelessly helped herself to the best food she'd had since the last meal Renni had prepared, and even poured a cup of the hot, fresh tea provided with the food.

The end of the meal brought Elissia a surprise. She'd meant to check on the savage and then send for Listan as he was expecting her to do, but being clean and happily filled had produced a sleepiness that she couldn't seem to shake off. She sipped tea while trying to wake up a bit, but it was no use.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to take a nap," Elissia told the girls - whose names she still didn't know - as she forced herself to stand up. "Please send word to Lord Listan that I'll let him know once I'm awake enough to follow what he has to say."

The girls agreed that they would send the message, then they helped her to a really nice bedchamber where they also helped her to get out of her new clothing and into a nightgown. It seemed like forever since the last time Elissia had worn a nightgown, but she was much too sleepy to fuss. She got into bed, and was asleep as soon as her head touched the pillow.

Lord Listan of Arvin listened to the messenger as he stood beside his king's bed, and when the messenger left the doctor turned to him.

"Being taken by sudden sleepiness doesn't sound quite natural," the doctor said, a frown of concern on his face. "Your king is now deeply asleep, so if you'd like me to have a look at the queen I'll be happy to do so."

"No need, doctor," Listan answered with quiet satisfaction. "I need the queen's help with this city, but not until she's completely rested. I arranged to have a gentle sleep draught put into her tea, so she ought to sleep until tomorrow morning - without insisting on spending her time sitting at her husband's bedside."

The doctor nodded his approval of the idea and turned back to his original patient, seeing nothing of the relief Listan also felt. Now he would be able to get a good night's sleep, without worrying that the queen would decide to leave again. He'd assigned guards to her door, but hadn't been able to get past the idea that guards would be useless if the queen wanted to leave. Now there was no chance of her leaving today, and tomorrow she would be available to help with his problems...

Elissia awoke feeling well rested, but this time there was no sunshine to show the arrival of a new day. Heavy rain poured against the windows of her bedchamber, making her glad for the presence of the quilts she lay beneath. She snuggled down, thinking about going back to sleep, but her mind had apparently been working on a question and now was able to give her the answer.

"That rotten, miserable - !" Elissia tried to think of something vile enough to call Listan as she sat up quickly. She hadn't taken a nap, she'd slept through the rest of the day yesterday and all of the night. That meant she must have been drugged, and only one man had the authority to order that done to her. The next time she saw Listan she'd give him a piece of her mind he would not soon forget!

Getting out of bed and going to the large wardrobe let Elissia discover where her "new" clothes had been put. She pulled out a pair of black trousers and a blue tunic, then found underthings in the drawer beneath the wardrobe doors. Her boots had been put on the bottom of the wardrobe floor next to a pair of short, light boots that looked to be her size, so she'd taken out the short boots to try them. If they fit they would be far more comfortable to wear than heavy riding boots.

Getting dressed took only a little while, and the short boots fit as though made for her. That raised Elissia's spirits a bit as she opened the door to her bedchamber -only to find the culprit she'd been thinking about relaxing in her sitting room. Listan rose to his feet when he saw her, but she gave him no time to comment.

"How dare you do that to me?" she demanded at once as she stalked toward the man. "I know you're responsible for whatever it was that put me to sleep, so don't try to deny it!"

"What I can't deny is my duty toward my king and his queen," Listan replied without the least trace of guilt showing. "You were almost as badly in need of rest as my king was, but you made no attempt to tell me to wait until today to explain the problems I had. That response showed me what my course of action had to be, and I followed that course. If you believe the decision to be wrong, speak to my king once he's up and about again and he'll see to my punishment."

"Your decision was wrong because you took it upon yourself to decide what was best for me," Elissia said in immediate rebuttal, not in the least fooled by the selfless attitude Listan now showed. "I will speak to your king when he's back to himself, but if he does nothing to punish you then it will be my job to see to. If you ever do something like that again, I won't wait."

Listan's expression changed to one of faint worry, as the man obviously knew a solemn promise when he heard one. Elissia turned away from him to find a table already set with breakfast, but rather than going directly to the

chair also waiting for her she turned back to the savage's man.

"Tell me now if there's anything on that table I ought to leave alone," she said, letting the man know that what happened to him would be his fault alone if he lied. "I really want a cup of tea, but if - "

"No, no, there's nothing wrong with anything there," Listan said at once, holding up one hand. "I've been waiting for you to wake up so I can tell you about the help I need. If you fall asleep again it won't be my doing and it certainly won't be to my benefit."

"But it certainly will be your neck on the block," Elissia couldn't help adding as she went to the table. "Do you want a cup of tea to wet your throat while you tell me about all those problems?"

"Yes, thank you, I'd enjoy a cup of tea," Listan answered as he followed her to the table. "But I have a question I'd like to put before I talk about the problems. I ... had the impression that you'd be dressed in gowns again now that the city is ours. Do you anticipate more difficulty that you continue to wear men's clothing?"

"There's a good chance there will be more difficulty, but that's not the reason I'm dressed as I am," Elissia replied as she poured two cups of tea and passed one to Listan. "I've discovered that I'm more comfortable in trousers, so I've decided to stick with them for a time."

"What ... sort of difficulty are you picturing when you say there's a good chance we'll have more?" Listan asked, obviously having been distracted from the subject of her wardrobe. Which was a good thing, since Elissia wasn't about to get her new maids in trouble for not providing more proper gowns. "Is one of Ramsond's neighboring kingdoms likely to take advantage of the confusion and invade, do you think?"

"That's always possible, but not very likely," Elissia answered with a headshake while she helped herself to the meal. "I'm sure the three kingdoms neighboring this one know by now that it was your king who took the city, and they would expect him to have scouts out near their own major cities. If any of them start to put an army together the scouts who see it would be under orders to ride at once to fetch more fighters from Arvin, and that's the last thing they would want. Even if you're greedy you don't also have to be stupid."

Elissia glanced at Listan to see how the man was taking what she'd said, and she was surprised to see what that reaction turned out to be. Listan looked ... chagrined, might be the best word, as though he'd suddenly remembered he hadn't done something vital.

"Excuse me for a moment, Your Majesty," the man said after a very brief hesitation, rising from his chair. "I'll be back as soon as I see to ... something."

Elissia watched Listan hurry out of the apartment, wondering if she was supposed to be ignorant of the reason for his hurry. It was fairly obvious that Listan wasn't the savage's tactician, otherwise those scouts would already have been dispatched.

Since that was obviously what Listan now meant to do, at least his common sense couldn't be faulted.

By the time Listan returned, Elissia was just about through with her breakfast. The big man took his chair again, sipped from his cup of tea, then took up the discussion from where it had been left off.

"So... What other difficulty do you think we might have?" he said, just as though the question were idle. "We have all the fighting men in this city taken care of, so what other danger can there be?"

"Every city has people who grew rich under the old regime and therefore hate to see the time end," I explained, working to keep the ideas as basic as possible. "Every city also has a certain number of men who are easy to talk into things and those who can be paid to do anything. If those groups get together, you won't find your fighters being attacked out in the open, only from the shadows. They'll wait until your patrols have settled down into a

routine, which will make your men less alert, and then the disaffected will strike."

"So how do we keep that from happening?" Listan asked, now as open as straightforward as he'd been when he'd asked for Elissia's help in freeing his king. "We can't just arrest all the wealthy men in this city, not without a really good reason. The innocent would become our enemies right along with the guilty."

"What you need is a small core of men and women who are natives here and therefore know what's going on," Elissia answered after finishing the tea in her cup. "They'll tell you who prospered under Waysten and who would like to see him returned to power, and they can also help set up a watch on those people. As soon as one of the wealthy starts to deal with those of the lower class on more than an occasional basis, you'll know who to arrest and lock up."

"How about those people who helped you rescue your brother and later leave the city?" Listan asked, clearly taking her suggestion seriously. "Do you think those men would be willing to help?"

"You'll have to ask them, but that would be a good place to start," Elissia agreed. "If they do find men for you, make sure you let them know that they'll also need to find some women to include in their group. If the person being watched has a shop, for instance, and they want to know if the patrons of the shop are there just to buy something, it will be easier for a woman to walk in and find out. Women are usually ignored in places where a man would set off all sorts of alarms."

"That's a very good point," Listan said with a frown, part of his thoughts clearly elsewhere. "Until now, I wouldn't have thought that a woman could - Yes, I'll have to make sure to pass on the idea."

And then the man actually got ready to leave - before Elissia could find out what else he wanted her to do...

Chapter 2

"Would you like to take a minute before you go to tell me what else you might need my help for?" Elissia said at once when Listan rose to his feet. "If there is something else, I could work on the matter while you're busy with other things."

"And there's another good suggestion," Listan said, his smile showing he no longer had most of his attention aimed elsewhere, but then the smile disappeared. "We found King Limond here in the palace, along with Princess Tellita, Waysten's sister. I left them both where they were found, but something needs to be done about them. Is there a chance you would be willing to see about that something?"

"A something that involves more than just leaving them where they are," Elissia said with a nod as she rose to her own feet. "Well, it's got to be done so I might as well be the one to do it. Can you take the time to show me where they are?"

"The leader of the escort I've arranged for you knows where they are, so you don't really need me," Listan answered. "But before you start that, you might want to take a look at the people we released from the dungeons. We had to call in just about every doctor in the city, but a good number of those former prisoners still won't survive. For those who do survive, though, I have no idea what to do with them."

"Capturing a city is the easy part, isn't it?" Elissia said as the revelation came. "I would never have believed that before getting involved in all this, but now... Do you think I can be trusted to take a quick glance at your king before I start all the jobs you've given me?"

"Of course," Listan answered, at least having the decency to look a bit shamefaced. "I wasn't really trying to keep you from him... There wasn't anything you could do for him, and I knew he'd want your needs seen to... I'll take you in."

Elissia simply nodded when Listen ran out of words, then followed him out of her

apartment. It had been perfectly obvious that she wasn't wanted or needed in the savage's apartment, otherwise someone would have been by to say otherwise. But for her own peace of mind she needed to know that Derand really was all right, and then she could take care of whatever required her attention.

There were three servants and twenty men in black leather in the savage's bedchamber, but the man they all hovered around had no idea all those people were here. Derand lay sound asleep in his bed, and he'd even turned to one side rather than simply lie on his back. That point was more reassuring than any words Listen or the doctor could have spoken, letting Elissia lead the way out again just as quietly as they'd arrived.

"Even asleep he looks better," Elissia said to Listen once they were back out into the hall. "How long do you intend to keep him like that?"

"Another day at the very least," Listen answered, his rueful smile showing he hadn't expected her to know what the plan was. "As soon as he wakes up he'll insist on being back in charge whether or not it's good for him. If we keep him asleep most of the time, let him wake up enough to eat something light before putting him back to sleep, he might actually be in good enough shape to take over again. This is easier than trying to talk him into taking it slow."

Because if Derand refused to be reasonable, there was nothing any of his men could do to countermand his decision. Elissia nodded again to show she understood, then she took a deep breath.

"Your king might be able to lie around sleeping, but we have things to do," she said to a Listen who seemed ready to sprint away as soon as he could. "Go ahead and get on with your tasks and I'll see you later."

"I'll let you know what arrangements have been made as soon as they're done," Listen promised as he bowed.

"Squad Leader Yarrow here is in charge of your escort, and if you need something he'll see that you get it. Until later, Your Majesty."

And then Listen disappeared, almost in a cloud of dust, and as soon as he was gone Squad Leader Yarrow moved closer. Yarrow was a large man with light hair and eyes and an oddly easygoing manner.

"Where to first, Your Majesty?" Yarrow asked after bowing. "Lord Listen said that the decision would be yours."

"I think I'll take Lord Listen's advice and look at the people who were in the dungeons first," Elissia decided aloud. "Are they really in such terrible condition?"

"Terrible isn't the word," Yarrow said as he began to lead the way back up the hall. "I'm a fighter and I've done my share of killing, but there's no way I'd have the stomach to do to people what was done to the ones we found. My squad was one of those who helped to clear out the dungeons, and I didn't wonder why some of the men threw their guts up. If I'd had anything to eat before we went down there I would have done just the same."

Hearing a solid fighting man talk like that made Elissia uneasy, but she refrained from commenting as they passed her apartment and continued some distance up the hall. They finally came to a wide and open area that had probably been meant as a gathering place for the retainers of visiting dignitaries. Cots had been set up on both sides of the area, and there were quite a few doctors and servants moving around near the cots.

"We meant to put them in one or two of the apartments, but when we tried to take the first of them inside they started to scream," Yarrow said from beside Elissia to her right. "The cells they came from were really tiny, so I guess they can't handle the idea of being inside anywhere. This area is inside, but it doesn't have doors that can be closed and maybe locked."

Elissia heard what Yarrow said, but she was too upset to make any comments of her own. There were something

like forty or fifty occupied cots, with a small number set up over to the right. There wasn't much movement among the people lying to the right, but one woman was moaning in a low, pain-filled voice. She also seemed to be crying softly, and when Elissia noticed that the woman's wrists were bandaged - and her hands were gone from the wrists down - Elissia quickly turned away.

"All the bones in the woman's hands and fingers were broken," Yarrow said, obviously knowing what Elissia had been looking at. "One of the servants said that the woman was hired to play the harp for Prince Waysten, but the prince didn't like what she played so he had both of her hands broken before she was thrown into a cell. The doctors had to cut the hands off to save her life, but they don't expect her to live anyway. They can't get her to eat anything and they can't get her to stop moaning and crying."

And that wasn't the worst of it, Elissia realized. Most of the people on the cots to the left were stick thin as well as being covered with scars and welts, as though they'd been starved in addition to being beaten and savaged. Some few lay curled

up in a ball, but many more trembled or shuddered or just cried softly. They were the strong ones, the ones who couldn't retreat into a fantasy world until they died, proving that strong isn't always the best thing to be.

"I think I'm ready to visit King Limond now," Elissia said as she turned away from a sight that she wasn't able to look at any longer. "Which way do we go?"

"Back this way, Your Majesty," Yarrow said, gesturing in the direction they'd come from. "And you have our thanks for not deciding to stay longer. If you'd stayed, we would have had to do the same."

"That's one of the benefits in being a woman, Squad Leader," Elissia answered with as much of a smile as she could produce. "I have no need to prove how brave and manly I am. There are times when I feel really sorry for men."

Yarrow produced the same kind of smile Elissia had shown, but added nothing in words. They continued back up the hall to a cross corridor where they turned right, and a few minutes later Yarrow stopped in front of guarded double doors.

"This is King Limond's apartment," Yarrow said with a gesture for the two guards outside the doors. "Would you prefer to see him alone, Your Majesty?"

"Let's start out with you and your men accompanying me, Squad Leader," Elissia decided aloud after a brief moment. "If I decide I need privacy to speak with King Limond I'll say so."

Yarrow bowed his acknowledgment of Elissia's orders while the two door guards opened the doors with bows of their own. Elissia had wondered why Yarrow was suddenly calling her "Your Majesty," but the reaction of the door guards had answered the question. The two had all but dismissed her presence when she and Yarrow had first arrived, but now the two men were falling all over themselves to serve their queen. Yarrow had accomplished his aim of getting her deference without putting the men - or her - on the spot, which showed how really good a leader the man was.

The king's public sitting room was overbearingly opulent, with lots of gold and silver knickknacks and decorations. There were also half a dozen servants hovering around where the king sat with a jeweled cup in his hands, the men and women ready to run for anything the king might want. The servants paid little or no attention to the new arrivals, following the example of their king.

Limond himself sat sprawled in a chair, his very expensive clothing looking

slightly rumpled even though the clothes were obviously fresh. Elissia hadn't seen the man in years, but the last

time she had seen him she'd made certain to stay out of his reach. King Limond had the habit of ... touching any females who came within reach, laughing while he did it as if he were joking. Elissia's father had made sure to have only male servants attend Limond while he was a guest, and the king hadn't stayed a guest for long.

Now... Now Limond looked ... blurry, was the only way Elissia could describe him, as though the man were out of focus in some way. When Limond gestured with his jeweled cup and a servant hurried over to refill it with wine, Elissia finally understood why the king looked as he did.

"Why am I not surprised that you're drinking wine in the middle of the morning," Elissia said with all the disgust she felt, tired of being ignored. "If I were responsible for bringing something like Waysten into this world I'd probably drink too."

"How dare you!" Limond snapped as he turned his head to glare, showing that he'd been aware of Elissia's presence all along. "How dare you speak of your betters in such a slighting way? Guards! Take this trollop out and have her whipped!"

"My betters?" Elissia echoed with a deliberate laugh, seeing Limond's anger grow when the guardsmen ignored his command. "You're no better than any other drunk, you just have a more comfortable gutter to lie in. Many of us thought that Waysten had taken over without your permission, but that isn't true, is it? You not only knew exactly what Waysten was doing, you also approved of his actions."

"My son, Prince Waysten, is doing exactly as he's supposed to, realizing his destiny and bringing glory to both of us!" Limond snarled the words after swallowing half the wine in his cup, then he put the cup aside to wipe his mouth with the back of his hand as he staggered to his feet. "As those useless louts of guardsmen won't do their duty and have you beaten, I'll happily see to the matter myself. I despise sluts who think themselves the equal of men, and I've made sure that this kingdom treats them as they deserve to be - No! How dare you? Release me at once!"

Two of Yarrow's men had intercepted the drunk before he reached Elissia, and now held Limond's arms as he struggled ineffectively to free himself. Listan had said that something had to be done about Limond, and now Elissia knew what that something should be.

"Have this drunk taken down to the dungeon and locked up," she said to Yarrow, still showing her disgust. "Put him in a cell next to his son, where the two of them can share the same destiny. You can't refuse to give people what they beg for."

"As you command, Your Majesty," Yarrow said with a bow before turning to the former door guards and gesturing to Limond. The door guards came over and took Limond from Yarrow's men, then began to drag Limond toward the door.

"No, you can't do this to me!" Limond screamed as he was dragged out of the room. "I am the king, and no one can treat - "

"If he thinks he's unhappy now, wait until he sobers up enough to realize his true position," Elissia said to Yarrow once the small procession was gone up the hall. "After what he's done he doesn't deserve to have a soft wall between him and reality, so make sure he isn't given anything to drink from now on but water."

"Since nothing but water is being given to Prince Waysten, he'll be given the same," Yarrow responded, looking at Elissia with curiosity. "But Your Majesty... Do you mind if I ask what you think the king has done? It was his son who tried to harm so many people, wasn't it?"

"What Limond did was encourage his son to do that harm," Elissia explained, understanding that Yarrow really needed the explanation. "He spoiled Waysten completely by giving him everything he wanted, making no effort to

teach Waysten any values of decency. Then, when Waysten was old enough to take over, Limond stepped aside even though he knew how many people Waysten would hurt. It's bad enough when ordinary people ruin their children. When you're responsible for the safety of the people under you, there's no excuse good enough to let you get away with not paying for your mistake. Now let's take a look at Waysten's sister Tellita."

Yarrow bowed again with that faint smile he kept showing, and Elissia was led out of the king's sitting room. This time their destination was only a few doors away, and again there were two guardsmen in front of the double doors. These new door guards straightened to attention when they saw Elissia, so Yarrow just gestured them into opening the doors.

The apartment they walked into was almost as opulent as the former king's, but this time there was no one sitting in a chair drinking. In point of fact there was only a single female servant dusting and straightening, and the girl jumped with a low exclamation when Elissia and her escort appeared.

"We're looking for Princess Tellita, girl," Yarrow said to the servant in a soothing voice. "Tell her Queen Elissia of Arvin wants to see her."

"Of course, sir, I'll certainly tell the princess that the queen wants to see her," the girl answered in a very shaky voice, her fingers toying nervously with the duster she held. "I'll pass on the message as soon as the princess is available."

"What do you mean, as soon as Tellita is available?" Elissia asked before Yarrow could respond. "Is she still sleeping, or has she gone somewhere?"

"Oh, no, ma'am, the princess isn't still sleeping," the girl answered at once, obviously growing even more nervous. "She is here in her apartment, but she's ... occupied."

"Occupied with what, girl?" Yarrow put, his tone now showing a touch of impatience. "And you address the queen as Your Majesty, not ma'am."

"Oh! I didn't realize...!" The girl's protest trailed off into silence as she belatedly curtsied to Elissia, but Yarrow wasn't fooled. Elissia heard him take a deep breath as if to calm his rising temper, and then he tried again.

"You're going to have to tell us what the princess is doing eventually, girl, so it might as well be now," Yarrow said gently but firmly. "If you're worried about what might happen to you, don't be. The princess's father and brother are no longer in command here, so any power the princess had before now will never be hers again."

"I - I can't speak of it, sir, really I can't!" the girl all but wailed, having dropped the duster to wring her hands. "Please, the princess is in one of the back bedchambers, but please don't ask me to show you which one! I couldn't bear to see - Please, sir, please let me leave!"

"Let her go, Yarrow," Elissia said with a hand to the man's arm, her curiosity suddenly piqued. "We can find Tellita by ourselves."

"As you command, Your Majesty," Yarrow acknowledged, then gestured for the servant to leave. The girl grabbed up the dropped duster and actually ran out of the apartment, and as soon as she was gone Yarrow shook his head. "I have the feeling we're going to have to question more of the servants to find out about everything going on in this palace. But right now it might be best, Your Majesty, if you wait here until we locate Princess Tellita."

"I ... think I'm going to disagree with that, Squad Leader," Elissia answered slowly while considering the situation. "If I'm going to be responsible for deciding what Tellita's disposition should be, I need to find out just what she's involved in. Before someone cleans up the scene or smoothes it over."

Having made the decision, Elissia wasted no more time in talk. She led the way to the door behind which lay the hall of the apartment, then followed the hall to the area of the back bedchambers. Most of the back bedchambers were meant for the use of servants and were therefore on the small side, but all the small bedchambers they checked were empty. One of the rooms was also emptied of all furniture but still showed signs of use, and Elissia didn't know why that would be until she reached one of the larger bedchambers. A sudden scream came from beyond the door, and when Elissia threw that door open she stopped short at what she saw.

"Hit him again, and harder!" a woman ordered the naked man holding a light whip who was standing near another naked man chained to the back wall. The back of the man in chains was bleeding, obviously from the whip that had been used on him. "He has to learn that he's nothing but a slave and I'm his mistress, which means he has to do everything he's told without question. Just as you and the others have to do. Whip him harder, slave, and don't tell me again that you think he's learned his lesson or you'll get the same as he's getting!"

"Put that whip down," Elissia said at once as she moved farther into the room. There was another naked man kneeling to the right of the man being whipped, but the kneeling man had his arms wrapped around himself and did nothing more than shake. The kneeling man had obviously been broken, which made looking at him as hard for Elissia as looking at the man who was being whipped.

"How dare you disgusting interlopers barge in here?" Tellita screamed as she shot out of the chair she'd been lounging in, outrage clear in every line of her body. She was dressed in an expensive red sleep ensemble, lounging robe over a sheer nightdress. "I don't know what fool guest of my brother's you belong to, but as soon as I speak to my brother you'll be answering to me! Every one of you will be whipped even harder than my servant there, and you can be sure I'll watch every stroke and laugh!"

"You really ought to keep in closer touch with what's happening in the world beyond your apartment, Tellita," Elissia said as she strolled nearer to the angry woman. "Your brother isn't in charge here any longer, and your father is on his way to a cell in the dungeons. And what was that you said about slaves? All the kingdoms on this continent agreed that slavery would be illegal."

"Elissia," Tellita growled, finally recognizing the leader of her visitors. "You must have come because of that idiot brother of yours, typically thinking that you'd be able to find him when no one else could. Well, you won't find Gardal the lame, and telling me fairytales won't keep me from commenting on your lack of proper clothing. You look ridiculous enough in gowns, Elissia. Changing into boy's clothing won't - "

"Yarrow, have some of your men get that poor creature out of those chains and taken to the doctors," Elissia said, riding over Tellita's sleek nastiness as though the other woman hadn't said a word. "That kneeling man needs to be taken there as well, and possibly even the third...?"

"No, ma'am, I'm not hurt that badly, and my name is Jael Farange," the man with the whip said when Elissia turned her attention to him, at the same time throwing away the bloodied whip. "But she does have my sister locked up somewhere, which is why I had no choice about doing as she said. She - "

"Silence!" Tellita screamed, whirling on the speaking man and glaring venom at him. "Adding lies to what this slut put forward won't do either of you any good, and you'll pay for trying to betray me. My brother can't be out of power, not when her father's kingdom couldn't scrape up enough fighting men to put down so much as a troop of children! Your sister will pay for your betrayal just as her brother will do the same when he's found, so - Get away from that servant, you men, get away!"

"It's over, Tellita," Elissia said, fighting to hold onto her temper. "I did find my brother and free him, but not with my father's fighters. Waysten was stupid enough to try making people think that the high king of Arvin was responsible for kidnapping Gardal, so the high king brought his fighters in to take over the city. Where have you put that man's sister?"

"The only way you'll find out is if you leave these slaves right where you found them," Tellita stated, her face set into a little-girl pout. "I'm a princess and my father is the king, and I can do anything I please to anyone I please. That's the truth, and if you don't like it that's just too bad."

"I think it is going to be too bad, but not for us," Elissia said, having noticed the anger on the face of Jael Farange. "Jael, since it's your sister she's hiding, you can be the one to question her if you like. If you're the kind of man who can't bring himself to ... be firm with a woman, I'm sure one of my men will be able to - "

"No, ma'am, thank you, but I'd like to be the one," Jael answered at once. "I don't approve of hurting women, but punishing them is another matter entirely. And punished is what she'll be at least until she tells me what I need to know."

"Go to it, then," Elissia said as Tellita's expression changed to one of complete disbelief. Two of Yarrow's squad were carrying out the man who had been whipped, having discovered that the man wasn't able to stand, not to speak of walk. Another two had urged the kneeling man to his feet, and now were getting that man moving after the one being carried.

Elissia watched the two victims being taken out of the room, and it was hard not to wonder how many others Tellita had broken or killed. Tellita always had been as much of a spoiled brat as her brother Waysten, but it was possible to be a brat without causing terrible harm. Could there be something in the family's blood to cause such destructive

"No! Don't you dare!" Elissia heard the words Tellita screamed and turned back to see that Jael had already gotten started with his former tormentor. He'd moved the dressing table chair away from the dressing table, then had sat down and pulled Tellita across his lap. He hadn't bothered to find something to cover his nakedness, but had found a springy length of wood about two inches wide and better than twelve inches long that looked somewhat like a ruler. Pulling up the skirts of Tellita's robe and gown took Jael only a moment, and then he was ready to proceed.

"You're going to tell me where my sister is and you'd better do it fast," Jael said as he kept Tellita from struggling free or covering her bottom again. "You are going to be well punished for what you've done, but that punishment won't start until you tell me what I want to know. The longer you take to speak, the worse that eventual punishment will be for you."

"You expect me to believe that you'll actually be allowed to strike me?" Tellita spat as she continued to struggle. "I'm a princess, and no one is permitted to - Ow! No! Stop that at once!"

Jael had used his slender paddle twice on Tellita, and the smacking sounds against her round white bottom were accompanied by a faint pinkness left on the white. Even as Elissia watched, Jael smacked Tellita's bottom twice again, and the strokes made the girl writhe as well as scream. Tellita's right arm was being held to keep her from covering her bottom protectively, and Elissia felt a faint urge to tell the girl how well being a princess did with keeping your bottom from being spanked. But if anyone deserved a good spanking Tellita was the one, so Elissia just watched quietly without the least urge to interfere.

The paddle kept whacking across Tellita's bottom as it made that bottom more red than pink, and Tellita screamed and writhed and kicked without being able to free herself. Ten or twelve strokes produced nothing but cries from the girl, but then she broke through the shock of being treated like something other than queen of the world.

"Stop! I'll tell you!" Tellita shouted, the words savage rather than repentant. "You disgusting beast! Your sniveling little sister is two doors down, and now you will let me go!"

Jael looked up at us, so I nodded to Yarrow to go and take a look. Tellita kept insisting that she be released, but

Jael continued to hold his former "owner" over his lap until Yarrow came back with a girl who was rubbing her wrists. The girl wore a simple day gown, but the gown was rumpled and dirty as though it had been worn much too long.

"That miserable female threatened to have me raped when I refused to call her mistress," the newcomer was saying to Yarrow as they entered the room. Jael's sister's voice was trembling slightly, but Elissia thought the girl was more angry than frightened. "She's crazy, and she really needs to be - "

The girl's words broke off when she saw her brother and Tellita, and an expression of deep satisfaction settled across her face.

"Don't worry, Jaesi, I'm taking care of it," Jael said to his sister. "Are you all right?"

"My wrists and ankles hurt from the way I was tied, but aside from that I'm fine, Jael," Jaesi answered with a smile for her brother. "You just go ahead and continue with what you were doing."

"Oh, I certainly will," Jael murmured, looking down at the girl across his knees. "So she threatened to have you raped, did she...?"

"I told you what you wanted to know, and now you have to release me!" Tellita screeched, her face having paled at what Jael had said. "If you hurt me any more you'll be killed slowly and painfully, and so will that sister of yours! You - Ow! Oh! Noooo!"

Jael had started to spank Tellita again with the paddle, and now he seemed to be really putting his back into it. As Elissia watched Tellita kick and struggle and scream as her bottom turned an even deeper red, she felt a small shudder go through her from something Jaesi had said. She's crazy, Jael's sister had stated, and probably would have gone on to say that crazy people who couldn't be cured needed to be put down. Elissia didn't know if she'd have the strength to condemn Tellita along with her father and brother, but that decision didn't have to be made now. And certainly not by her...

"Yarrow, leave one or two of your men here, to take Tellita to a cell near the rest of her family once Jael is done with her," Elissia said as she turned away from the punishment a crying Tellita was being given without stint. "If there's anything in the woman to be saved, being treated like the criminal she is might bring it out. If all it does is make her resentful... Well, let's just wait and see."

Yarrow nodded and spoke to two of his men, and then the squad leader and the rest of his men followed Elissia out of the room. Elissia waited until they were back out in the public hall, and then she turned to Yarrow again.

"Now that I've done the job Lord Listan gave me, I think I'll go back to my apartment and have some tea," she said, working to keep from sounding weary. "If you need to accompany me back that's fine, but once we get there - "

"Your Majesty, excuse me for interrupting," Yarrow said, his expression telling Elissia that he really wasn't happy to be saying what he was. "Lord Listan left orders that if you finished this chore before lunch, I was to tell you that he'd also like you to take a look at the laws that have been recently enacted. Prince Waysten

_"

"All right, yes, I know that Waysten passed laws that were to his benefit rather than to the people's," Elissia said with one hand raised, annoyance starting to touch her again. "Lord Listan is right about someone needing to go over those laws, but I'm giving you fair warning right now: if Lord Listen is foolish enough to show up in my apartment again, I'm going to order you to knock him down and then jump up and down on his prostrate body. If I'm going to be the only one around here doing the work, I intend to get some pleasure out of it."

And with that Elissia headed back toward her apartment, pretending she didn't hear the way Yarrow and his men were chuckling.

Chapter 3

Derand woke slowly, as though finally surfacing from a very deep dive. The last thing he remembered clearly was being in bed with Seea, so he reached a hand out to the side of the bed where she ought to be. When his hand found nothing but cold and empty bedclothes he woke even more fully and began to sit up.

"Slowly, my king, slowly," Listan's voice came, along with his hand on Derand's shoulder, keeping him from sitting up. "Everything is fine so you don't need to upset yourself."

"Seea," Derand croaked, his voice, for some reason, sounding long unused. "Where's Seea?"

"Your queen is here in the palace, busily engaged in straightening out this kingdom," Listan replied at once. "If you feel up to sitting, let me help you."

Derand still felt a bit vague, only now noticing that he no longer lay in the cabin he remembered falling asleep in. He let Listan help him to sit up, then leaned back against the extra pillows his friend and advisor had piled behind him.

"Moving didn't hurt as much as I expected it to," Derand observed aloud once he leaned on the pillows. "My body feels ... rusty and unused, but barely more than sore."

"Complete rest has helped you to heal faster, my king," Listan said, standing to Derand's right where he could be seen more easily. "Are you hungry? When it looked like you were about to wake up I ordered a meal prepared and brought."

"Hungry?" Derand echoed, now aware of how hollow he felt. "I'm not hungry, I'm starving! If you have food around here somewhere, have it brought in before I go to wherever it is."

"Just stay where you are," Listan said with a wide grin before turning and nodding to one of the guardsmen standing in the room. The guardsman went to the door he stood near, opened it, then beckoned in a group of waiting servants. A minute later the aroma of hot food was turning Derand into a slobbering mound of appetite, and as soon as the first dish was put in front of him he dove in. It was breakfast he'd been brought and he wasn't able to eat as much of it as he wanted to, but once all he could hold was inside him he sat back against the pillows with a sigh.

"I felt as though I hadn't eaten in a month," he said to Listan, who sat near the bed sipping from a cup of tea. "Would you like to tell me now what's been going on? The last thing I remember is falling asleep in a forest cabin."

"You may have fallen asleep, but you went from that to unconsciousness," Listan said, amusement no longer touching him. "Happily, though, the queen was with you and she called your guard. They all got you back here, and after examining you the doctor said that if you went running around again before your wounds were allowed to heal you could die. That's why I let the man keep you asleep for three days, feeding you broth every time you came close to waking up. You're in a lot better shape now and can get out of that bed as soon as you feel up to it."

Derand sipped from the cup of tea he still held, forcing the angry words he wanted to speak to cool off before he let them free. The idea that he'd been kept asleep for three days without his permission made him furious, but it was Listan's job to keep him alive. And the fact that Listan had taken full responsibility for what had been done meant the man was fully aware of the fact that his king could well explode in anger. Derand knew that blaming someone for saving your life was a surly way to say thank you, but the matter couldn't just be overlooked.

"The matter is over and done with, so this time we won't say any more about it," Derand finally allowed, speaking very softly and holding Listan's gaze. "If the same should happen again, though, I'll make sure that a third repetition will be impossible. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," Listan said after clearing his throat, no longer looking directly at Derand. "You have my word that this will never happen again, since I know you'll never again put your life in danger the way you did this time. Would you like the tea in your cup refreshed?"

"Not yet," Derand answered, letting his annoyance be buried under wry amusement. Listan knew well enough that he could never stand against Derand in a fight, not when Derand had so far bested every opponent he'd ever faced. But Listan had also refused to back down, stating in so many words that if his own life

was forfeit in the saving of Derand's, so be it. It wasn't possible to fault loyalty like that, and Derand knew he would be a fool to try. With that in mind, he decided to change the subject.

"All through the meal I wondered where my wife was," Derand said after sipping at the tea again. "Didn't you let her know I'd be waking up about now?"

"I thought you might prefer to be on your feet again before she saw you," Listan replied, and this time there was a sigh behind the words. "For the past three days she's been in here every time she had a spare minute, and afterward the look in her eyes was painfully bleak. I have the feeling she blames herself for your collapse, for making you ride after her when you were in no condition even to stand up very long. But she's also been really busy and I didn't want to interrupt her schedule until you were able to reassure her."

"What's she been busy with?" Derand asked, mostly to distract himself from the thought of the guilt Seea might be suffering from. He'd have to speak to her about that, but not while he still lay helpless in a bed... "And I need to talk to you about precautions that have to be taken, things that should have been done three days ago. I just hope we're not locking the barn door after the horses are already stolen. The surrounding kingdoms will be aware of what happened here, and they might - "

"It's all right, my king," Listan interrupted with an odd kind of amusement. "I already have scouts watching those other kingdoms, and if any of them starts to gather what looks like an army our scouts will ride for Arvin and bring back an army of our own."

"Well done, Listan," Derand said, really meaning the words. "That's one worry taken care of, but there are others. There are sure to be people in this city who want Waysten back in charge, so - "

"That's also been taken care of, my king," Listan interrupted again, the odd amusement increasing. "Those in this city who have grown fat under Prince Waysten's rule are being watched, and if any of them tries to recruit assassins or troublemakers we'll know about it almost at once."

"Listan, I'm delighted and very impressed," Derand said, his brows high with surprise. "I never realized you were this good a strategist, and I feel better knowing that our people here aren't in as much danger as they might have been. You should have shown me this talent of yours when we first began the campaigns. I could have used the help."

"Talent was definitely used, my king, but it wasn't mine," Listan answered, a grin finally breaking through. "I wanted to distract your queen and keep her from deciding to ride off again, so I asked for her 'help' just as I did when you were Prince Waysten's prisoner. To my shock and chagrin she immediately mentioned just what you did, and I fell all over myself rushing to make the necessary arrangements. You were absolutely right when you suggested she was a master strategist."

"So my people were in good hands while I slept," Derand murmured, his delight increasing. "And she's foolish

enough to feel guilty that I didn't let her ride out of my life? But you still haven't told me what else she's been busy with."

"I realized that I didn't have the authority to make decisions about the royal family," Listan said after sipping from his own cup of tea. "King Limond is a drunk and Princess Tellita was running wild, so I asked the queen to decide on what their disposition ought to be. The queen interviewed them both, then had them sent to the dungeons with Prince Waysten. King Limond, by the way, knew about and approved everything Prince Waysten did."

"Then Limond can also join his son in death," Derand said, all delight and amusement gone. "We were wondering if Limond was a victim or a co-conspirator, and now we know. But what about Tellita? Does Seea seriously expect me to execute a woman?"

"It seems that Princess Tellita made a hobby of turning innocent men into slaves," Listan answered heavily. "She had them chained up and beaten at her whim, and even broke at least one man that we know of. The queen had the princess put in the dungeons to see if punishment made the woman regret what she'd done. But Princess Tellita has been showing resentment instead of regret, and that's why the queen has recommended that she be executed with her father and brother. If the princess is allowed to live, the queen said, no one you place on the throne here will ever be safe."

Derand made a sound of understanding, knowing just what Seea meant. Anyone interested in revolution had only to marry Tellita, and the legitimacy of the man's claim couldn't be argued. Seea was right again, and Derand would have to find the innards to back her decision. If he didn't, he had no right to jeopardize anyone by putting him on the throne.

"But the queen handled all that much too quickly, so I had to find something else to occupy her," Listan went on. "I asked her to look at the laws Waysten passed for his own purposes, our purpose being to rescind the ones that turned honest men into outlaws. She did that as well, and then she had a closer look at the rest of the laws. She decided that there were other laws that could use rescinding, but she didn't want to act hastily. So she sent for that man Torban, who used to be a teacher, and asked his opinion. She also had Torban bring in someone else, someone who could argue for the laws she wanted to repeal."

"Getting all sides of the picture before making a decision," Derand said with a nod and what was probably a foolish smile. "It's too bad people actually on a throne aren't wise enough to do that. So that's what she's involved with right now?"

"Well, no, not entirely," Listan replied, and now the man looked the least bit uncomfortable. "She's working on restructuring the laws, but at the same time she's also ... reorganizing the people. All the beggars are being rounded up, fed, and given clean clothing, and some of Torban's friends are finding jobs for those who are willing to work. Those who have no interest in honest work are being kept together, waiting until you can decide if they should be thrown out of the city or simply put down. I'm supposed to tell you that if the group is thrown out of the city they'll probably take to stealing from the farms and disrupt food deliveries into the city, but the decision about what to do with them has to be yours."

"How nice of her not to usurp my authority," Derand said after blowing out a breath of annoyance, no longer smiling. "And I'll bet gold that by the time I'm ready to make the decision she'll have included any members of the thieves guild still left alive. She's really giving me no choice at all, but clearly doesn't want me to feel left out."

"I think it's your standing and image the queen is concerned about," Listan said slowly, as though thinking the matter through as he spoke. "She knows it's foolish to keep people around who want to use society instead of be a part of it, but she also knows that the power and fighters are yours. If she took it upon herself to decide a matter that was yours to decide, she would be usurping your authority and making you look weak. She seems to be going

out of her way not to do that."

"Yes, of course, you're right," Derand said, now wondering why he'd gotten annoyed. Seea was doing exactly what he'd hoped she would, seeing to time-consuming and boring preparatory work and providing him with recommendations for the decisions that were his to make. Maybe it was the fact that she'd gone ahead and started projects that should have had his approval before they were begun. But she couldn't have gotten his approval, not with him dead asleep in his bed...

"I think I'm ready to get up and walk around a bit," Derand said abruptly, putting aside his tea cup. "If I don't plan to make this city my home, and I don't, I have to get back into good enough shape to leave it. And not in a coach or wagon."

Listan nodded as he put aside his own cup and stood, ready to give whatever help Derand needed. Listan knew as well as Derand did that Derand couldn't return to Arvin looking the least bit weak without having half the kings he'd conquered trying to take him down. Strength was the only thing the men of the Federated Kingdoms respected, so that was the only thing they could be shown.

But strength was something Derand didn't have much of at the moment, a fact he learned once he'd thrown aside the bedcovers and gotten to his feet. Standing up had taken a special effort, and the idea of walking even as far as the end of the bed seemed like a project meant for one of the legendary heroes of popular myth. But the effort had to be made so Derand took the walk, but once he'd returned to his starting point he was covered with sweat and had no choice about collapsing back into the bed.

"Your strength will return fairly quickly, my king, but for now it might be best if you rested," Listan said as he helped Derand to lie flat again. "The wounds were certainly giving you trouble, but the more they heal the less trouble you'll be given."

"Yes... The wounds..." Derand gasped out, pretending that that was the trouble. But the wounds were only throbbing faintly, a small amount of pain to be felt behind the throbbing. It was the water in his muscles that plagued Derand the most, and even as he raged silently at the feeling of helplessness the weariness took him down into sleep again.

The next time Derand awoke he felt a good deal better. The vagueness around his thoughts was gone and he was able to sit up without help, and when a meal was brought he finished most of the food without any trouble. For dessert he left the bed and walked to its foot and back, sitting down again with only heavier breathing -and faintly aching muscles - to show for the effort.

"Better," Derand said as he settled himself against the pillows again. "By tomorrow I expect to make it out to the sitting room, and then the hard part will be over. Did my wife show up while I was asleep?"

"As a matter of fact she did, my king, and she seemed pleased that you were slowly returning to yourself," Listan responded from the chair he sat in again. "She suggested that you send for her when you're up to having visitors, as there's something she wants to talk to you about."

"You sound as if you know what the something is," Derand observed, seeing

Listan's wry expression. "Is there a problem you haven't mentioned?"

"Oh, not exactly a problem," Listan responded, now looking a bit uncomfortable. "When you and she first returned here to the palace, the queen was very worried about you. I had the apartment next to yours prepared for her so she could have the privacy she couldn't have had here, and then I ... arranged for a sleeping draught to be put in her tea. If I hadn't she would have spent the night sitting up at your bedside, worry and guilt causing untold harm."

"And instead she had a good night's sleep," Derand said with a nod of approval. "So where does the problem that's not a problem come in?"

"The queen ... disliked the idea of having been put to sleep against her will, so to speak," Listan said, obviously choosing his words carefully. "She told me so in no uncertain terms, then told me she means to ask you to ... punish me for the ... intrusion."

"Does she now?" Derand said, feeling the grin he wore. Listan had known he'd probably get away with keeping his king drugged, but he wasn't quite as certain about what he'd done to Seea. She was Derand's queen and wife, after all, and men usually did what they could to please the wives they loved... "What do you suppose she'll ask me to do to you, old friend?"

"I ... think I'd rather not speculate," Listan answered, obviously trying not to look worried. "Yarrow also told me that she wasn't pleased with all the chores I'd found for her to do, and it might be best if I ... refrained from visiting her apartment unless I came in force. Yarrow was laughing when he told me that, but I didn't take it as a joke. He and his squad have learned to admire the queen, and her orders to the squad would naturally supersede my own."

"Naturally," Derand agreed, enjoying himself enormously. "Well, we'll just have to see what she asks for before I decide whether or not to go along with it. And now I'd like to hear the reports made by the men after the takeover."

Listan looked as if he wanted to pursue the previous subject of discussion, but he'd been given an order by his king and knew he couldn't argue. What he didn't know was that Derand was in the midst of punishing him for three days of forced sleep in the only way he could use. Listan was a friend as well as being Derand's most loyal follower so Derand would never harm the man, but that didn't mean Listan couldn't be teased unmercifully for a time. The longer Listan worried about whether or not he would be punished, the longer he would hesitate next time before doing something for Derand's "own good."

The next day and a half saw Derand's strength slowly returning to what it had previously been. The second night he even had a dream, one that he really enjoyed when he remembered it. In the dream he and Seea were at a fancy ball in someone's palace, the two of them moving through the crowds in the ballroom with Seea holding to his arm. He'd had to punish her for some reason before they left for the ball, using the insertion she so disliked and a hard spanking, and by now she was truly desperate.

"Husband, please!" she'd whispered as they strolled, a smile on her face to disguise what she really felt. "I'll admit I earned that punishment, but I simply can't wait any longer! You have to find a way to ease me right now!"

"During a ball?" he'd murmured back in a drawl. "It won't be easy to find a private corner, so why don't we just wait until we get home?"

"Oh, no, please, I can't wait!" she whispered at once, all but squirming as she spoke. "I'll do anything you say if only you ease me! I burn for you, husband! Please!"

The way she looked at him made Derand do some burning of his own, and the opportunity had been too good to let go by.

"Having you do anything I say will make the effort worthwhile, I think," Derand had replied after a long moment. "All right, wife, let's look for that private corner I mentioned."

An eyeblink later they were at the opened doors that led into a garden, so Derand guided Seea outside and down the steps. Couples and small groups moved in all directions as they strolled and talked, the paths lit by torches so that the strollers might see where they were going. Derand led Seea off on their own stroll, all the way down to the

final torch and then beyond. There weren't any strollers down this far, or at least there didn't seem to be, so Derand took Seea over to a stone bench that was almost completely hidden in the darkness. He hadn't seen the bench until his eyes adjusted to the dark from the light of the torches, so the area ought to be private enough.

"It's here or nowhere, wife," Derand had said softly to a squirming Seea once they stopped. "If you don't like this spot, we'll just wait until we get home to ease you."

Even in the dark Derand had been able to see that Seea wanted to protest the possibility of someone coming along and seeing them, but she'd been much too hot

to refuse the opportunity. She let him guide her to the end of the bench and then into leaning down on it with her forearms, and then he'd raised her skirts while she stood bent over. Untying her undergarment took only a moment and then, with the undergarment down around her ankles and her skirts up over her back, Derand had rolled up a kerchief and put it in her mouth.

With all the necessary done, Derand had finally been able to put his now-raging desire to Seea's. When he thrust deeply into her she tried to scream with delight, which was why the kerchief had been necessary. She also tried to howl when he came in contact with her still-sore bottom, which was a second reason for the presence of the kerchief. Derand had stroked his wife over and over and over, more than sharing the pleasure she felt until his own release finally ended the time. And the thought that someone might come along and see them had somehow added incredibly to the delight... Maybe, he thought when remembering the dream, he might be able to arrange that for real at some time...

By the third day after waking up from a drugged sleep Derand was feeling well enough to stroll through the palace. He spent quite a lot of time in Waysten's former apartment, going through the paperwork and files that Waysten had kept. It had come to Derand to wonder if Waysten had had secret allies in his efforts, allies who were defeated kings in the Federated Kingdoms of Arvin.

"Have you found anything, my king?" Listan asked when he joined Derand in the room that had been Waysten's study. "I'll admit I've been hoping there would be nothing to find."

"No such luck," Derand answered with a small growl, dropping the report he'd been reading back onto the desk. "There is someone Waysten was in touch with, but there isn't a single clue as to who it could be. Names are very deliberately not used, so it looks like we'll have to ask Waysten before he's executed."

"Unfortunately, questioning Prince Waysten won't be possible," Listan replied with a sigh as he dropped into the chair standing in front of the desk. "The shock of the beating he was given combined with having been thrown into his own dungeon has unhinged the prince's mind. I went to see him just now, and he does nothing but lie on the dirty straw in his cell, staring into space. If he's touched he starts to whimper, but speaking seems to be beyond him."

"How about Limond?" Derand asked after cursing under his breath. "Waysten's father ought to know the names of the people his son was dealing with."

"The former King Limond is in only slightly better shape than his son," Listan reported with a sigh. "His sobering up has been brutal, and the shakes have him with a vengeance. I offered to bring him a bottle of anything he liked if he told me the names of Prince Waysten's allies, and that started the man crying. Apparently Prince Waysten knew better than to give sensitive information to a drunk."

"And you said that Tellita didn't even know that her brother had been defeated," Derand finished up with disgust in his voice. "That means she's another one who won't have any idea of who Waysten was dealing with, so who does that leave?"

"I hate to say it, my king, but that leaves no one," Listan said after nodding confirmation of Derand's guess about Tellita. "Prince Waysten had no real advisors or confidantes, so there was no one for him to share the information with. Whoever the traitor is, his identity will remain a secret."

"For now," Derand qualified as he stood and stretched. Only twinges came from his wounds, and soon even the twinges would be gone. "I'll probably have another look through these papers before we return to Arvin, but I intend to spend the rest of the afternoon soaking in a bath and getting prettied up. My wife will be joining me for dinner, and tonight she'll be back in my bed."

"And she'll be able to see that you've completely returned to yourself," Listan added after also standing. "I think you were wise to wait until now."

"I had more trouble waiting than in getting my strength back, but the wait was necessary," Derand said, a good portion of his mind on what going to bed would bring. Not sleep, this time, not for a long time... "My wife needs to see that I'm back to my old self, not shuffling around like an old and toothless derelict. I don't want her feistiness drowned under guilt."

Listan smiled but said nothing, so the two men left the former Prince Waysten's apartment. Derand didn't mention that he'd come across some of Waysten's toys that he'd taken for his own. Seea hadn't needed encouragement that night in the cabin, but if she did happen to need some help in getting over her guilt Derand meant to be prepared.

The rest of the afternoon went just as planned, and Derand enjoyed his bath and pampering. The palace's servants were very good at pampering, a service Derand usually avoided, but this time he actually enjoyed the attention. After the bath, massage, and shave only a few small bandages were put over the remnants of his wounds before he was helped into clothes. He then went out to the sitting room and watched the food being delivered.

Seea arrived just as most of the servants were leaving, and Derand found himself surprised. He'd expected his wife to be wearing a gown, but instead she wore trousers, a tunic, and short boots. About to protest an appearance he considered inappropriate, Derand abruptly pulled himself up short. Making a fuss about clothes right now would be stupid, and it was still much too soon for him to be stupid with Seea and not regret the consequences. Maybe, once they'd been together for a few decades, he'd be able to speak without thinking first...

So Derand stepped forward and said with a smile, "Good evening, wife. I've missed seeing you these past few days, but now that you're here the world is perfect again."

"You can't be serious, saying something like that," Seea protested with a surprised laugh as she came forward from the doorway. "You sound as if you've been reading a really bad romance novel."

"And you sound as if you could use a dose of romance, good, bad, or otherwise," Derand returned with a grin. "Has Listan really been working you that hard?"

"Don't even mention that man's name," Seea answered with a mock growl as she stopped a few feet away from Derand. "He's been smart enough to stay away from me these past few days, and lucky for him he was. Which reminds me: since he's your man, I want you to punish him in some way that will make him hesitate the next time he thinks he knows what's best for me."

"I've been trying to find a fitting punishment for that attitude for years now without having any luck," Derand told her ruefully, firmly keeping himself from closing the distance between them. "The problem is Listan really would give his life to save mine, and I think he's learning to feel the same way about you. Do you really want to find a way to make the man less loyally devoted?"

"I want to find a way to make the man less meddlesome," Seea stated, obviously not swayed in the least by what Derand had said. "It is possible to be devoted without feeling you have the right to run the life of the person you're

devoted to. If you haven't been able to think of anything to do, then I'll have to give the problem some thought."

"Can your thinking wait until we've ... gotten acquainted again?" Derand asked, feeling the way his grin had changed to a smile on the wry side. "You're standing so far away... Does that mean you don't want me to touch you?"

"I ... know you're still not completely healed," Seea answered after a brief but definite hesitation, her gaze no longer meeting his. "The last thing I want to do is

cause you even more hurt..."

"My getting hurt wasn't your fault," Derand said, doing some firm stating of his own as he moved closer to her. "If you want to get technical, the fact that I wasn't hurt even worse than I was is due to no one's efforts but yours. You know you were wrong to run from me and you were soundly punished for that foolishness, so why don't we forget about it and go on to more pleasant things? If you believe I'm not healed enough, you're in for a nice surprise."

"You know, you're right," Seea said, surprising him into stopping with his arms about to go around her as she looked up at him. "I was punished for going off on my own, but what about you? You rode after me when you shouldn't have, which could have cost you your life. So in what way are we going to punish you for that foolishness?"

"Me?" Derand echoed with a disbelieving laugh. "My dear girl, I'm the one who does the punishing, not the one on the receiving end. And my riding after you wasn't foolishness. I would have been the world's biggest fool if I'd let you get away."

"So... Among all those men you command there wasn't even one who could have followed my trail in your place?" Seea said, again making Derand stop as he was about to put his arms around her. "I know I probably could have bested most of your people in single combat, but two or three of them together should have been safe. And able to bring me back without you risking your life. So where in all that was the requirement that you come after me yourself?"

"I had to tell you that I love you," Derand reminded her, relieved that he'd thought of the point. For some reason the girl was making him feel cornered and outnumbered... "What good would it have done for my men to say the words? You wouldn't have believed them and no one could have blamed you for not believing."

"What would have kept you from saying the words once I'd been brought back?" the fiendish woman countered immediately, as though expecting the point. "You would have been rested and already starting to heal, instead of being half dead and ready to fall over. If what you had to say was true, theatrics wouldn't have been necessary. Truth doesn't need theatrics to make itself known..."

"Stop right there!" Derand ordered, his hands going to her arms instead of gently around her body. "It isn't theatrics when you're desperate to speak to the woman you love, desperate to make her believe you. I do love you, so you can't start doubting me again."

"All right, I'll put doubt aside for the moment," she said, her gaze coming back up to his. "You came after me because you were desperate to tell the truth, not a convincing story. Well, I was just as desperate when I rode away from you, desperate to get away from a man who might want to stay married to me because of gratitude, guilt, and pity. But I was still punished for riding away because the effort put my life at risk. If my desperation did nothing to save me, why should yours save you from punishment?"

Derand parted his lips to answer her question, but for a moment nothing in the way of words came out. The woman really was trying to back him into a corner, and that was something he couldn't allow.

"You seem to forget that I was punished," Derand finally offered, sliding his hands around to Seea's back. "I was forced to spend three days asleep, and it's taken almost another three to get back to my previous state of health and strength. During all that time I couldn't touch my wife or show her how much I love her, and that, my girl, is a punishment worse than the one you got."

And then Derand lowered his lips to hers, cutting off whatever she would have said in rebuttal to his statement. And she had been about to say something, but surprise kept her from continuing with the effort. At first she responded with all the passion he'd come to expect from her, stirring him with desire as her arms went around his body. But when he tightened his hold on her, expecting her to do the same, she pulled back from the kiss instead.

"Not so tight, or you'll hurt yourself," she scolded in an almost-breathless way. "Do you want to have to go back to bed - alone?"

"I can see that telling you I'm all right won't do the job," Derand answered with a sigh, reluctantly releasing her. "Let's have dinner and then I'll show you what kind of shape I'm in."

Seea was back to not quite looking at him, but she let herself be seated at the table set for two. Derand did his best to jolly her out of the worry during their meal, but he could see that visions of him lying unconscious were probably undoing all his efforts. Well, once he had her in bed that would change.

Derand made sure that Seea drank her share of the wine, and once the meal was done he deftly guided her into his bedchamber. It didn't take long to get her out of her clothes, and once he was just as bare he joined her in the bed. He took her in his arms and kissed her with all the passion rising inside him, but her response was more reluctant than uninhibited. She seemed to want him as much as he wanted her, but it looked like worry about his condition kept her from really letting go.

Eventually Derand brought her to a high-enough heat for them to make love, but the complete abandon he'd been looking forward to never appeared. The time was only just adequate, and once he left Seea to lie on his own side of the bed she stirred just a little.

"That wasn't too good," she murmured as she turned to snuggle under the covers, the slurred words apparently spoken to herself. "Serves him right, but it isn't fair that I have to be punished right along with him."

And then she seemed to be instantly asleep, probably because of all the wine he'd gotten her to drink. For a moment Derand didn't understand what she'd been talking about, but then the answer came almost with a burst of blinding light. Seea had been talking to herself, the wine making her speak the words instead of just thinking them. And those words said she was in the process of deliberately holding herself back during lovemaking, adding to the punishment he'd told her he was suffering under!

It looks like she didn't believe me, and decided to make an excuse reality, Derand thought, suddenly angry enough to growl under his breath. She probably wouldn't have done something like this if she hadn't been put in what amounts to sole charge of this city, with no one able to countermand her decisions and actions, but that's a reason for what she did, not an excuse. I have to make her regret playing games with me, but not right now. Once we leave the city, though...

That thought let Derand relax, and he fell asleep making the necessary plans.

Chapter 4

The next morning Derand awoke to find Seea gone. She'd left without waking him and she'd probably claim she did it out of concern, but Derand knew better. His wife was determined to see him punished for risking his life, but he'd told the truth in everything. Not having her beside him for so long was a punishment, but not the same kind he meant to give to her. What she got would remind her who was really in charge.

Derand was just finishing breakfast when a new arrival was shown into his apartment. The new arrival was Skallin, one of Derand's older brothers who Derand had sent for just before the taking of the city. Derand got to his feet to greet his brother with a buffet to the shoulder and a hug.

"Derand, boy, you're looking fitter than I expected," Skallin said after the hug, inspecting Derand with narrowed eyes. "One of your men said that Waysten had turned his torturers loose on you before your men broke in."

"It's true, and the time was far from pleasant, but they didn't get to do much damage," Derand reassured this older brother of his that he'd always been so close to. "The wounds are healing nicely, which means I'm ready to head back to Arvin, but I can't leave until I finish straightening out this city and kingdom. Did you bring your fighters along with you, brother?"

"Your message said I had to," Skallin pointed out as he moved to Derand's breakfast table and reached to the tea pitcher. "I never knew why you had me recruit all those fighters when I had no interest in going after a throne the way you did, but I still brought them with me."

"Good, because you'll need them," Derand said, ringing for a servant before joining Skallin at the table. "You may not want to take someone else's throne by force, but you always said that if a throne became available you would be willing to accept the job. Well, now a throne has become available, so the job is yours. You'll have something to eat, and then I'll show you around the palace that will be yours. You're the best choice for taking the throne here, brother, because I know you're strong enough to hold onto it."

"But what about Waysten and his father King Limond?" Skallin asked from the chair he'd taken after pouring himself some tea. Skallin looked a good deal like Derand and was just as big, but Skallin's hair and eyes were just a bit lighter brown than Derand's and he wasn't quite as imposing.

"Waysten planned to take over every kingdom in reach after defeating me with treachery, and Limond knew all about it," Derand said after sitting again near his own cup of tea. "Before I leave I mean to see the two of them executed, but you have a decision to make in that regard."

Derand stopped the explanation in the middle when the servant he'd rung for entered the apartment, then he quickly ordered breakfast for his guest. Once the servant was gone again, Derand returned his attention to a waiting Skallin.

"Limond's daughter Tellita wasn't a party to the planning, but she can't be described as innocent," Derand continued. "She spent her own time turning free men into slaves, and she wasn't gentle about it. She's in a cell near her father and brother now, and I want you to take a look at her. If you think you can stand having her as your wife I'll arrange the marriage, but otherwise she'll have to be executed with Waysten and Limond."

"Having her as my wife would legitimize my taking the throne, and I hate the idea of a woman being put to death," Skallin said after taking a long drink of the tea he'd poured. "Still and all, a king has to be practical and consider all sides of his decisions before he puts them into effect. I met Tellita again about two years ago when Limond brought her to Father's palace for a visit, and she was even worse as an adult than she'd been as a child. As a girl she was badly spoiled, but as a woman she was vicious and uncaring about anyone but herself. Any children she produced could well be ruined by the same taint, and even if they weren't I could never trust the woman near them or let her be unsupervised near anyone else. No, Derand, I won't take her as my queen."

"I think you're wise, but I still had to ask," Derand said, feeling a good deal of relief. "If you're going to be in charge around here, the decision had to be yours. I'm going to set the executions for this afternoon, and tomorrow you'll be crowned king. After that your fighters can take the place of mine, and I can leave for home."

"Considering what was done to you I don't blame you for wanting to get out of here, but you can't leave quite that

fast," Skallin said with a wry smile. "I have to be told what you've done with the city after taking over, what new policies have been initiated and what old policies have been thrown out. Even above that I need to know who I'll have to watch my back with, otherwise I'll spend all my time looking over my shoulder instead of ruling the way a king is supposed to."

"For that information you'll have to speak to my wife," Derand said, watching for Skallin's reaction - which ought to be fun. "Elissia has been in charge while I was recovering from the wounds, so she'll be able to bring you up to date."

"Your wife," Skallin echoed with a frown, then his expression cleared. "Oh, yes, now I remember, that skinny girl child of King Ostrin's. I heard you were going to claim her, but how did the two of you end up here? And how in the name of sanity could you let a girl be put in charge of a kingdom?"

"She's a woman now, and I wasn't exactly in a position to argue even if I'd wanted to," Derand said with a laugh for Skallin's obvious outrage. "But I wouldn't have wanted to, and here's why."

Derand told his brother the story of how he and Seea had ended up in Ramsond, leaving out only purely personal details. The servant returned with Skallin's breakfast not long after Derand started the tale, so Skallin listened while he ate. And almost choked when Derand mentioned the way Seea had reached her brother before he and his men were able to act.

"She outmaneuvered you?" Skallin demanded once he could speak again. "You, the master strategist?"

"She's at least as good as I am, maybe even better," Derand said with all the pride he felt. "Which is a lucky thing, because only her quick and clever efforts kept me from losing parts of my anatomy that are best left unmentioned. She got Listan and herself into the palace and in a position to protect me until my fighters took this place, and while I was unconscious she told Listan all the right things to do to protect our backs here. Her only fault is that she tends to do things her own way instead of mine even if her way is wrong, but I plan to help her get over that once I get her home."

"You always did prefer your women on the wild side," Skallin said with a shake of his head. "My own taste runs to the homebody sort with a good sense of humor, and one of the first things I do will be to invite my neighboring kings and any marriageable daughters they may have to come visit. I'll make it clear that I'm not promising to marry one of their daughters, but I'm more than willing to take a look."

And I'm ready now for that tour you promised me. I've already turned over the billeting of my fighters to your man Listan."

"Then the first thing we'll do is find out where he put them," Derand said as he stood. "You'll want some of your fighters with you at all times until things settle down, and maybe even for a short while after that. You won't be in the same position I am, but it can't hurt for you to use some of the same precautions. After that I'll introduce you to my wife and let her fill you in."

Skallin finished the tea in his cup and then got to his feet to follow Derand out of the apartment. The first thing they did was find Listan, and then Derand sent for some of Skallin's fighters. Once Skallin had a proper escort, Derand showed him to the king's apartments which had been cleaned up in preparation for the new king's arrival. While Skallin and his fighters were looking around, Derand took Listan to one side.

"I want you to find out if my wife has been supplied with any gowns," Derand said softly to his friend and advisor. "If she hasn't, make sure you have someone collect a few for all occasions. She'll need a gown for the coronation tomorrow, and I don't want her in pants for the trip home. When Gardal left for home yesterday, I asked him to speak to his father about getting the servants to pack up all of Seea's possessions. I've already been gone from Arvin for too long, so we won't be stopping at King Ostrin's palace on our way home."

"You know, it's possible she wasn't given any gowns to wear," Listan said, surprise having raised his eyebrows. "She's been wearing different trousers and tunics every day so those girls must have gotten a good supply of the clothing, but they may have thought that she didn't want any gowns. I'll have a talk with them to correct the oversight."

Derand nodded his approval, and then it was time to continue with Skallin's tour. The new king was shown the highlights of the palace and how to get from one area to another, and then Derand took Skallin to talk to Seea. She didn't really remember Derand's older brother but she was fairly pleasant when introduced to him. Derand had the feeling that something was disturbing Seea, but it wasn't the time to ask. He'd have to remember to do it later...

The rest of the day went by almost in a blur, what with all the preparations that had to be made for leaving. Skallin's fighters had to take over patrolling the city while his own fighters gathered their belongings, and then his own fighters had to leave in assigned groups. It wasn't practical to have five hundred men traveling together, but the various groups had to be close enough to one another in case of trouble.

After grabbing a quick lunch, Derand made one more effort to search Waysten's apartment for any clue as to which of the kings of Arvin had been conspiring with the wayward prince. Derand had reached the point of checking the walls for secret recesses when Listan appeared to end the effort.

"It's almost sundown, my king," Listan said rather quietly. "King Limond, Prince Waysten, and Princess Tellita have been prepared for the execution, and the representatives chosen from the city are beginning to arrive."

"Then I'd better find Skallin," Derand said after forcing himself to give up the search. "If he and I show up late, the city people might think we're reluctant to do what's necessary. Or that he's reluctant, which won't be good for him as king. Let's go."

Derand found Skallin in the room Seea had been using, poring over the notes she'd made and taking up where she'd left off. Skallin looked up, and then he smiled.

"Say, little brother, I really have to hand it to you," Skallin said as he leaned back in the chair. "That wife of yours is special, and I can't believe the amount of work she did. Or the high quality of that work. If I follow the plans she laid out I ought to have little or no trouble here."

"I'm glad to hear that," Derand answered, but couldn't find a matching smile. "Right now we have less pleasant work to take care of, so we'd better get to it."

"The executions," Skallin said at once, losing his own smile as he stood. "If you'd like to forget about attending I think my own presence will be enough."

"No, we both have to be there," Derand answered with a headshake. "The witnesses from the city have to understand that I'm firmly behind you with these executions, just as I'll be firmly behind you if there's any trouble you find you can't handle alone. That understanding ought to stop most trouble before it starts."

Skallin nodded his own understanding, and they left the room together. A back courtyard of the palace had been chosen as the place for the executions, mostly because other executions had been held there. A chopping block had been set on a low wooden platform, and when Derand led Skallin outside they could see that the executioner was already standing beside the block.

Derand signaled some of his fighters, and they went to get the three people everyone else was waiting for. The witnesses from the city stood in a bunch as far

from the platform as they could get, and Derand didn't blame them for being upset. It was one thing to kill

someone who was trying to kill you, but executions had always turned his stomach.

When Waysten, Limond, and Tellita were led out, a small amount of relief touched Derand. Waysten had certainly enjoyed the terror and screams of the people he'd had executed, but the same would not be happening today. The three people had been given a drug in their afternoon tea - or wine, in Limond's case - and now they moved as if in a dream. They had no idea about what was being done, and would die without knowing it was happening.

"If Waysten had come back to himself I might not have let him have the drug," Derand murmured to Skallin as the three prisoners were urged up onto the low platform. "A lot of people were harmed because of Waysten's ambitions, but now that the man has turned into a frightened, shivering child I couldn't justify holding back the drug."

Skallin nodded without saying anything, and they both watched the executions without expression. Limond, the father who had so failed his children, was taken first, and the headsman did his job briskly and without trouble. Then it was Waysten's turn, but the man's run of bad luck proved itself still there. It took two tries before Waysten's head was free of his body, and a single whimper came from the former prince's throat before he was forever put beyond making any sound at all.

Tellita was last, and disturbed murmurs came from the witnesses as the executioner took her arm and led her closer to the block. But the murmurs quieted when Tellita began to slur out curses at the executioner, calling the big man a slave. He was her slave, she insisted as she was knelt in front of the block, hers to do with as she pleased just as every man in the city would be. And when her brother made himself king of everywhere, she announced, she would be able to do the same with everyone.

The recital of what Tellita would do with all men went on as she was made to lean over the block, and then her list was ended permanently. Derand noticed that the witnesses were now more grim-faced than disturbed, just as Skallin was.

"I'm glad I decided to be practical rather than political," Skallin murmured as the witnesses gathered themselves to leave. "That woman was crazy, and if I'd been fool enough to marry her I would have regretted it sooner rather than later... Derand, are you sure that letting your wife attend the executions was wise? She was white-faced when she hurried back into the palace."

"Seea was out here?" Derand demanded as he turned to look all around. "I didn't want her here, which is why I made no effort to remind her about the time. That woman needs a good talking to, so I'll join you for dinner later, brother."

Skallin nodded again, leaving Derand free to go looking for Seea. The first place he went was to her apartment, but she wasn't there. Rather than running all over the place Derand returned to his own apartment with the intention of sending the servants to find Seea, but as soon as he walked into his sitting room the need to send out search parties disappeared. Seea sat in a chair looking almost as pale as Skallin had described her, and she didn't stand up when she saw Derand.

"I know you're busy so I won't take much of your time," Seea said, not quite looking at him. "I'd just like to ... make a request for the future."

"A request?" Derand echoed as he walked closer to her, diverted from the anger he'd felt. "What kind of request?"

"If there's ever another need to execute someone, I'd like to be excused from attending," she answered, one hand pressed to her middle. "I know I had to be at this execution because I was ... involved in the decision about Tellita, but - "

Seea's words ended abruptly as she looked like she wanted to press that hand to her mouth instead of her middle, but she was obviously stronger than that. She simply sat staring down at the carpeting, clearly fighting to keep control of herself.

"Is that why you were there?" Derand asked as he knelt in front of her chair and took her free hand. "Because you thought it was your duty? Why didn't you talk to me about this before you put yourself through such a terrible time? There was no reason for you to be at the execution, and I would have told you so."

"I - looked for you but couldn't find you," she said after a moment, still staring at the carpeting. "When it became clear that I wasn't going to find you, I gave up and went out to the courtyard. But there was a reason for me to be there. I recommended that Tellita be put down with her father and brother, and you should never recommend a thing like that without knowing exactly what's involved. After seeing what I did, I'll probably never be able to say the same again..."

This time Seea's hand did go to her mouth, showing that she wasn't well at all. Derand helped her to her feet and back to her own apartment, then he summoned her maids. The girls took over at once and helped Seea toward her bedchamber, and Derand followed to make sure the woman he loved was being cared for properly. The girls quickly got Seea into a nightdress and then into bed, and when Seea's eyes closed Derand quietly left. He'd check on her again later, but right now the woman needed sleep more than she needed a scolding.

A servant found Derand in the hall and said that Lord Listan was looking for him, so Derand followed the servant back to where Listan waited. There were some final questions Listan needed answers to, and by the time he supplied the answers Derand discovered that it was time to join Skallin for dinner.

"You're alone, brother?" Skallin said when Derand was admitted to the apartment by a servant. "Was the discussion you had with your wife too strenuous for the lady to bear?"

"My wife was close to throwing up, so I had her maids put her to bed," Derand answered with a sigh. "She thought it was her duty to attend the executions, and now she wants me to excuse her from ever having to do the same again."

"Women often have the best of it, don't they?" Skallin said as he led Derand to a small, private dining room in the back of the apartment. "I'd enjoy being excused from attending any more executions, but if I did it I'd look weak and any enemies would be quick to take advantage of the supposed weakness. Women have no need to show strength at all times, and it's a shame your Elissia didn't join us in the courtyard. You could have relieved her of that 'duty' before she was forced to witness the horror."

Derand nodded his agreement as he joined Skallin in sitting at the table already set and ready, and then the servants began to serve the food. The meal was delicious, of course, but Derand found himself diverted from what he put in his mouth by a nagging itch in his mind. Something he'd seen or been told didn't quite ring true, and now his mind chased after the something in order to scratch the itch.

The cold fish salad and soup were swallowed before Derand finally figured out what was bothering him. As it happened there were two somethings, and both of them led back to the same situation. The servant Listan had sent had had no trouble finding him, and he and Skallin had been in the courtyard before Seea arrived. Those two facts together meant

Meant that Seea had been playing him! Derand sat straighter in his chair as the realization hit, all the anger he'd felt earlier returning intensified. She'd said she'd looked for him and couldn't find him, and because he'd been in Waysten's apartment he'd accepted the statement without question. But any number of servants had seen him going into the apartment, which was probably how Listan had found him there. If Seea had really wanted to find him, asking the servants if they'd seen him would have been an automatic part of the process.

But Seea hadn't wanted to find him, not when she had what she considered a duty to perform. She couldn't have helped but know that he didn't want her at the executions, otherwise he would have made sure she knew when it was time to go to the courtyard. And that was why she hadn't come over to him when she reached the courtyard. She'd known he would probably refuse to let her stay, so she'd stayed back to keep him from learning of her presence!

"Is something wrong?" Skallin asked, abruptly pulling Derand out of his thoughts. "You're wearing the most peculiar expression..."

"Something was wrong, but it's all straightened out now," Derand answered, letting a smile curve his lips. "As a matter of fact two somethings are straightened out, or at least they will be by tomorrow afternoon. What do you plan to do first after the coronation, brother?"

Skallin began to discuss his plans, much of it based on Seea's notes, and that suddenly brought Derand another revelation. Seea hadn't known that Derand had sent for Skallin and meant to put his brother on the throne, and when she'd found out her expression had been more than odd. It was just possible that Seea had meant to demand that she be allowed the throne in Ramsond, and that's why she'd put together so detailed a plan of rule. After all, she had taken the palace before his fighters arrived.

Which in turn meant that Seea had planned to run away from him again, but this time in reverse. She would have been the one to stay, while he took his fighters and returned to Arvin. Or so she might have thought, doubting his love again as she'd said she would not. To think that she'd expected him to ride away from her for any reason at all...

Well, Seea was due a good lesson about behaving foolishly, a sterner lesson than the one she'd already had. Derand knew exactly what to do, embellished by that dream, and it was just too bad that he couldn't begin immediately. But Seea hadn't been pretending about being ill, she'd simply used her illness in an effort to protect herself. Her punishment would have to wait until tomorrow, then, which would actually make it worse for her. And worse would be good, better for her and definitely for him. A few orders to various people in the morning, and everything would be set for their trip home...

Derand was pleased to see the coronation go off without a hitch, and the newly crowned King Skallin accepted the pledges of loyalty from the few members of the nobility who were left. Those few nobles had probably gone along with Waysten's plans to save their necks, which others of their ilk hadn't managed to do. The four men looked downright delighted with their new king, and if they were only pretending then Skallin could take care of them. He'd already mentioned his intention to ennoble many of the men who had been helping Seea and then him straighten things out, so there would be people on Skallin's side.

Seea appeared for the ceremony dressed in a truly beautiful gown in silver and white which set off her red hair and green eyes. She looked completely recovered from the illness she'd felt yesterday, an observation that really pleased Derand. His plans had all been arranged earlier, and now only needed to be implemented.

"Skallin has declared a feast for tonight, but we won't be staying for it," Derand said to Seea as they left the throne room after the ceremony. She held to his arm without stiffness, but there was still a shadow of deep unhappiness in her. "We'll have an early lunch and then we'll start for Arvin. Once we reach home we'll have a feast of our own, a wedding feast. I've decided that we'll renew our vows and that all my subject kings will be invited to the ceremony. Since you don't remember our original ceremony, the time will be as much for you as for the people I want to know for certain that you're my queen."

"Another ceremony?" Seea said, a hint of suspicion in the words. "If we really are married, why would we need to go through another ceremony? Aren't there enough people around who know about the first ceremony that we don't need a second? If you believe you're doing it for my benefit, I can assure you that I don't need - "

"Ah, but you do need the ceremony," Derand interrupted in a pleasant voice. "I know you're still having trouble thinking of yourself as my wife, and a second ceremony will settle the question for good. You'll come to my apartment for our early lunch as soon as you've changed into traveling clothes."

Rather than argue any more, Seea simply nodded. She didn't seem to have changed her mind, Derand noticed, but she did stop trying to get him to change his mind. Once they reached his castle in Arvin, Derand knew he'd have to have a serious talk with Seea to find out what exactly was bothering her. By then she ought to have learned better than to lie to him or try manipulation.

Derand saw his wife to the door of her apartment, then went on to that of the new king of Ramsond. Skallin was surrounded by a number of his new subjects, and Derand was pleased to see that a strong section of Skallin's fighters was also there. His brother came forward to greet him, knowing that Derand had come to say his good-byes now. Later, at departure time, there would be too much confusion going on. He and Skallin hugged, then Derand left to return to his own apartment.

Everything Derand had with him was ready to go by the time Seea arrived. She walked in wearing a traveling gown of light brown trimmed with yellow, and her expression showed a distinct lack of happiness.

"Why were all of my trousers and tunics taken away?" she demanded as soon as she was in the door and saw him. "How am I supposed to ride a horse wearing this?"

"The obvious answer is that you're not," Derand replied pleasantly. "We're not sneaking around any longer, so there's no reason for you to ride a horse. You'll travel in the coach I arranged for you, the way a lady and a queen should travel."

"The way other people think a lady and a queen ought to travel," Seea countered at once. "Riding in a coach is boring, and I'll bet you mean to ride your horse."

"Yes, I'll be on my horse, but I promise that your trip in the coach won't be boring," Derand came back, still being nothing but pleasant. "Let's have lunch now, and then I'll show you why you won't be bored."

Seea looked ready to demand an answer right now, then clearly remembered that forcing an answer out of him before he was ready to give it just wasn't possible. She blew out a small breath of vexation, then let herself be seated at the table. The meal wasn't very involved and before long they'd finished the last of it. Derand emptied the last of his tea down his throat, and then he stood up.

"There's something I need to talk to you about before we leave," he said without the lightness his voice had held earlier, holding out his hand to Seea. "I don't want the conversation interrupted, so let's hold it somewhere other than this sitting room."

After a brief hesitation Seea rose to her feet, then let Derand guide her to and into his bedchamber. Derand could see that she wasn't at all happy to go with him, but she knew well enough that refusal would do no good at all. Once they were inside the bedchamber with the door closed behind them, Derand guided her to the middle of the room before releasing her arm.

"To say I'm furious with you would be severely understating the matter," Derand said without any more delay, staring down at this woman who was his wife. "I would have sworn you knew better than to lie to me and play games, but obviously you don't."

"What lies and games are you talking about?" Seea responded after another hesitation, her cheeks having gone pink. "You seem to think there are so many, so you'll have to be more specific."

"You lied when you said you tried to find me before the executions," Derand answered flatly, in no mood to beat

around the bush. "You knew I didn't want you there, so you avoided me even after you came out into the courtyard. If you hadn't wanted to be there you would have spoken to me as soon as you came out, but instead you deliberately disobeyed me and attended."

"You never told me not to attend, so how can you call it disobeying?" she countered, not quite looking at him. "I may have stretched the truth a bit about not being able to find you, but since you hadn't told me I had to find you the exaggeration can't be called disobeying."

"Getting picky and technical isn't going to save you," Derand stated, hearing the near growl in his voice. "I also happen to know that you deliberately resisted when I made love to you, giving me what you considered a just punishment. As I said that night, I'm not the one who gets punished, I'm the one who does the punishing."

"But you can't punish me now, not when we're almost ready to leave," she protested when he took her arm and began to lead her to a chair. "If you do then the trip will be terrible for me!"

"But it won't be boring," Derand said, sitting down and pulling her over his knees. "You may remember I promised that, and I like to keep my promises."

Seea began to struggle, of course, but Derand had no trouble holding her down. He also had no trouble pulling up her skirts and throwing them over the upper part of her body, which made holding her still even easier. Beneath the skirts she wore a silk undergarment that could almost be called breeches, stretching as it did from her waist to just above her knees. The undergarment was tied at her waist on the right, so Derand undid the ties and pushed the silken thing down to her knees.

Under the covering was Seea's lovely round bottom, the bottom Derand had been attracted to from the moment he'd first seen it. He caressed that lovely seat with his hand the way he so enjoyed doing, and Seea moved in silent protest at the touch. She knew well enough what was coming, and obviously also knew that any words she spoke would make the time even harder for her. But Seea only knew part of what was coming, although in another minute she would certainly know the rest.

Derand had prepared for this time, so he reached to his belt and took out one of the toys he'd appropriated from Waysten's apartment. The item was nothing more than a round black bead with a thin string attached, but it would serve the same purpose Derand's lost device had and would be easier to use and carry. Its shiny surface was also on the slick side, so he had no trouble quickly separating Seea's cheeks and thrusting the bead inside her.

"Oh, no, not again!" Seea shrieked, for a moment fighting even harder to free herself before suddenly going very still. "You can't do this to me again, you just can't!"

"Oh, but I can," Derand disagreed, stroking her bottom again to prove the point. "You deliberately refrained from doing your wifely duty properly, so you can't say you didn't earn this punishment. And believe me, my girl, you will remember it for quite some time."

And with those words Derand began to spank her, even the first stroke making her yelp and squirm and jump. Her firm round bottom felt so good to the palm of his hand that he came close to humming as he smacked that bottom again and again, quickly bringing a proper ruddiness to the white. Seea was now shrieking wordlessly as her legs tried to kick, the bead inside her making her wild as his hand came down on her seat over and over again. No, he thought, boredom would not be her problem in the coach.

Derand reluctantly stopped the spanking after only a few minutes. He wanted Seea to be extremely uncomfortable, not in so much pain that it would distract her from what the bead was doing. Her bottom was nicely rosy from his efforts, so he raised her drawers again and retied them before pulling her skirts down as well. Only then did he lift her from his lap and stand.

"Please don't leave that thing in me, please don't," Seea begged as the tears ran down her cheeks and she squirmed where she stood. "I won't be able to stand it without going completely insane!"

"You won't go insane and you will stand it," Derand corrected as he took a handkerchief and began to gently dry her tears. "And don't think that you'll be able to take the bead out of you once you're in the coach. Some of my fighters will be riding right next to the coach, and they've been given orders to keep a close watch on you. Anything you do in the coach will have an audience, and if the anything is strange enough I'll be told about it. When we reach the inn we'll spend the night in, you'll be given the chance to do your duty properly."

Seea closed her eyes and began to cry even harder, but Derand had no intention of

letting her sway him. He waited a few minutes while she cried, wiped her tears again, then took her arm and led her out of the apartment. In accordance with his orders there was no one around on the route he took to the side door of the palace where the coach waited, and once there he got Seea inside and the door closed. Another minute saw him mounted on his stallion, and then they were finally leaving Ramsond and heading home.

Chapter 5

I hate that miserable savage! Elissia thought, almost on the verge of tears again. I hate him more than I've ever hated anyone, and if I don't have him soon I'll die!

Her thoughts might have been on the melodramatic side, but Elissia didn't care. The coach seat she sat on might have been nicely padded, but for the first hour it had really hurt to sit on it. Because of him. Now there was only a small ache left, but that wasn't the main problem. That thing he'd put inside her was driving her crazy with need, and there was nothing she could do about it.

"If only those men would stop looking at me for a little while," Elissia whispered, pretending she didn't see the riders looking in at her now. She hadn't understood why the beast had had all her pants outfits taken away, but now she did. He'd known what he was going to do to her, and had also known that if she wore pants she might manage to pull out that bead thing with none of the men watching her noticing the effort.

But with her in skirts and underdrawers there was no quick and easy way to undo the invasion. Elissia tried to concentrate on the woods to either side of the uneven road they traveled, but it simply wasn't possible. What the savage had put in her bottom this time wasn't as large as what he'd used at first, but in its own way it was just as maddening. And the way the coach bounced over the rutty road made her jiggle up and down on the seat, adding to what the simple presence of the horrible device did. She wanted nothing more in all the world than to be eased, but that would have to wait until they reached the inn they would stay at. And exactly where that inn might be was something she didn't know for certain.

"So I have to keep looking out of the window, praying for the sight of a building or for the sensation of the coach slowing down," she muttered, clenching her fists to keep from looking out again. "But it's not really close to dark yet, so I still have to wait. But how long? How long?"

Elissia closed her eyes to keep from screaming out those words, finding it harder and harder to retain control of herself. She was being put through all this because that miserable savage had caught her in a lie that wasn't really a lie, and because he'd somehow found out that she'd tried to punish him for almost causing his own death. But that last part of it, at least, wasn't much of a surprise. In this world men were allowed to do everything and women nothing, a fact of life she should have learned a long time ago.

She had learned that fact of life, she just couldn't find a way to accept it. More than anything she wanted to do something with her life, to make a difference, and for a little while she'd thought that the savage would help her reach that goal. Now... Now she could only remember what he'd said about his intention to hold another marriage ceremony. He'd said that the ceremony would be for her, obviously meaning that he wanted her to swear to obey

him in all things again, only this time do it knowingly as an adult. If he didn't mean to keep her tied down the way other women were held, there would be no reason for another ceremony.

"And I thought he was so different," Elissia whispered as she felt a tear trail down her cheek. "Did he make me fall in love with him for no purpose other than to bind me more tightly? How can I know if he loves me the way he claims he does, or just said the words he knew I needed to hear? He sees so many things, that savage of a man, things he ought to know nothing about but somehow does. Is this idea of love just one of those things? And how can I think straight with my body screaming for release?"

Elissia just stopped herself from shifting on the coach seat, which would have made a tidal wave of desire roll completely over her again. Simply sitting still was bad enough but it was a thousand times better than shifting around, a fact she'd learned thoroughly during the first hour of the trip. Back then she hadn't been able to sit still, not with the throbbing, aching bottom his spanking had given her, and she'd almost broken down into tears out where everyone could see her crying. Only her desperate refusal to shame herself that badly had kept the tears away, but now the urge was back again even stronger. How much longer would it be before they stopped?

The answer turned out to be: unbearably longer. At least another hour went by before the coach began to slow, and more long minutes dragged past before the inn came into view. It was a large inn and looked well-tended and busy, and by the time the coach came to a full stop most of their escort had dismounted. Elissia was more than ready to open the coach door and climb out herself, but the savage was suddenly there to open the door himself and offer her his hand.

"We'll spend the night here, wife," the savage said as she took his hand and let him help her down. "We'll have our evening meal early and then go to bed, because we'll be leaving really early tomorrow morning."

Elissia had been looking forward to standing up, but only because she hadn't let herself remember that standing up would also meant walking. Every step she took made her even more aware of the thing inside her, but she held to the savage's arm and fought not to show what she felt. For that reason they'd entered the inn and were moving toward a private dining room before Elissia actually heard what the savage had said. She would have to wait even longer before she could be expected to be eased, and if she tried to argue he would probably extend the wait even more.

"Well, look at that," the savage said as they entered the private dining room, his tone pleased. "Since I had the foresight to send a rider ahead to let them know we were coming, we have tea ready and waiting for us. Here, Seea, take this chair."

He had pulled out the chair to the right of the table, and waited to seat her before going to his own chair which stood opposite hers. Elissia really hadn't wanted to sit down again, but there was no choice at all. She was being punished by the man she belonged to, and he'd obviously decided to make the punishment even worse than it would normally be.

A male servant had followed them in to pour tea for them, and then he stood at the side of the room ready to refill the cups as soon as they were emptied. The savage made no attempt to send the man away, which told Elissia exactly what her husband wanted and didn't want. He didn't want her begging him to wait until later for the meal, or even to just allow her to remove the thing driving her insane until the meal was done. Elissia sipped her tea while hating the savage even more, then waited anxiously to see how fast they would be served.

The food came only a handful of minutes later, and the servant in the room helped the new male servant arrange the dishes on the table. After that the servants put food on the plates for them, and the second man opened a bottle of wine and poured glasses for them. The savage tasted the food and made a sound of approval, then nodded after sipping from his wineglass. The two serving men bowed, then both of them moved to the wall to wait until they were needed again.

Elissia made an attempt to eat what she'd been given, but after a few tastes she wasn't able to continue. She also found it impossible to take more than a single sip of wine, not with the way the wine made her blood surge. That was the last thing she needed, so she simply made do with the tea. The savage happily ate everything he'd been given, and even gestured over one of the serving men to refill his plate. Elissia gave all her attention to her teacup - and to not squirming where she sat - and forced herself to wait again.

The savage had a second glass of wine before he let the meal end. He came around to Elissia's side of the table and offered her his arm again, pretending that she had a choice about whether or not to take it. Once she held to his arm he led the way out of the private dining room, took a key from one of his fighters, then led Elissia up the stairs. Their room was only a few steps away on the second floor, and the savage unlocked the door and escorted her inside. Once inside he brightened the lamp beside the door before closing and locking that door, and only then did he turn to look directly at her.

"So how did you find the day's trip?" he asked in a definite drawl. "Was I right to promise that it wouldn't be boring?"

"You know perfectly well that the trip wasn't boring," Elissia said, finding it impossible to look directly at him while her cheeks heated up with embarrassment. "How much longer are you going to make me wait?"

"Long enough to be certain that you're learning your lesson," he answered, still in that hateful drawl. "By the time this punishment is over the mere thought of lying to me again or playing games will send you into hysterics. A woman can't do as she pleases in this world, not when she can't fight to defend her right to do those things. The lesson ought to help to keep you alive - if you learn it well enough."

So he thought he was doing this for her own good. For a short while Elissia had thought that that meant he cared about her, but doubt had begun to set in again. Doing something for someone else's good doesn't mean you have to torture them, not if caring is the real reason you're doing that something...

"I was going to make you ask to do your wifely duty, but I've changed my mind," the savage said, drawing her out of darkening thoughts. "Being allowed to ask for something gives you a small amount of control over that something, or at least that's the way I think you see the matter. Having a small amount of control makes you believe you can take even more, a habit of yours I'd almost forgotten about. For the sake of my future peace and quiet you have to learn that your husband has the final say in all things, and this ought to be the best way to teach you that truth. Let's get you out of those clothes and into your husband's bed."

Elissia would have loved to be able to tell "her husband" exactly what she thought of him and what he could do with his bed, but the miserable beast had made sure she'd be helpless to defy him. When he came close and began to open the buttons of her dress, her body started to pulse and scream out its need. She wanted him so badly that she would have preferred to tear off her clothing, but all she could do was slip out of the gown once it had been opened far enough.

That left her in camisole, underdrawers, stockings, and the soft shoes that matched her gown. She kicked off the shoes herself while the beast took the camisole and pulled it off over her head, but when she reached for the tie of the underdrawers one of his hands stopped her.

"You can take off these drawers and your stockings, but the insert will stay where it is," he said, a warning note to the words. "I'm the only one permitted to take the bead out of you, and if you try to do it yourself I'll make you wait until tomorrow night before you're eased. When you're completely free of clothing, lie down on the bed on your back."

His hand moved away then, so Elissia was able to undo the ties, take off the underdrawers and stockings, and then make her way to the bed. More than anything she wanted to pull that bead out of her bottom, but the thought of

having to wait an entire night and day longer filled her with the cowardice of desperation. Simply removing the bead would not bring her ease, so once again she had no choice.

Once she lay on her back as ordered, Elissia was able to see that the savage was in the process of removing his own clothing. When he tossed his black leather pants to the pile of the rest of his things, Elissia nearly gasped at the strength of the flames burning through her. Sight of his naked body added terribly to the desire she felt, and when he came close to look down at her she had to fight for air to breathe.

"I see you really are eager to do your duty," he commented with a chuckle as he straddled her before putting his hands to her breasts. "Your nipples seemed to have turned to rock, and they harden even more at the touch of my thumbs."

Elissia had begun to gasp when he touched her nipples, and speaking was entirely beyond her. She stood the circling caress of his thumbs for as long as she could, then she reached to his body with the intention of guiding his inflamed desire to where she needed it the most. She was an inch away from taking his rod into her hand when his hands quickly left her breasts to capture her wrists and force her arms over her head.

"When your duty begins and what it entails is your husband's decision," the savage said, no longer amused. "Since you still seem to be missing that point I'll have to underscore it for you. If you find the time difficult, consider it adequate repayment for having denied your husband what love alone should have given him without question. Someone who ruins the sharing between husband and wife has more than earned the punishment she gets."

Elissia cried out when his lips and tongue replaced his fingers at her nipples, but her cries were muffled down to choking when he used only one hand to hold her wrists and the other to tickle at her womanhood. Her body writhed pitifully between his knees, a movement she found it impossible to stop, but he ignored this added torment as he went on with the extra punishment he'd decreed for her.

It took forever before Elissia felt him guiding his rod into her womanhood, and just as she was about to scream in relief his lips took hers and smothered the scream. He thrust all the way into her burning desire, and when he began to stroke in and out Elissia was taken by true madness. She wanted to run her hands over his body and move in the rhythm she'd been taught, but her wrists were still being held above her head and his free hand was clamped around her thigh. The hand on her thigh kept her from moving, kept her from doing anything but accept what was being done to her, and there was nothing she found it possible to do to change that state of affairs.

Elissia's body erupted time and time again, but only because of the need forced on her by the bead. The savage wasn't making love to her he was using her, and when he finally found release of his own and lay down beside her after pulling the bead free, she closed her eyes and didn't move.

"When I offered to share love, you refused the offer in an effort to make a point you decided needed to be made." The savage's words came after a long moment, faint bitterness clear even through his still-heavy breathing. "I'd missed you so much and wanted so much to give you that love, and you deliberately ruined the time. If at any point you stopped to wonder how that made me feel, you should now have the knowledge through personal experience. You used me for your own purposes, and now I've done the same with you. Not much fun, was it?"

Elissia didn't answer him, mostly because she couldn't think of what to say and also because she didn't have the strength to try. She hadn't considered what her idiotic plan would make him feel like, but now she'd found out the hard way. She owed him an apology, but she'd distantly noticed that he'd gotten out of bed. It wasn't hard to decide to make the apology when he got back, but somehow sleep arrived before he did.

"It's time to get up, wife," Elissia heard, and only then did she notice that a lamp was burning and she was under the bedcovers. She didn't remember getting under the covers, but she had the impression that the lamp had been turned out. "Come and have breakfast, and then I'll help you get dressed."

By now Elissia was awake enough to remember that they were at an inn and had to get back on the road to Arvin, so she sat up after rubbing her eyes. A yellow wrap she didn't recognize lay on the covers near her, but she took it anyway and put it on before leaving the bed. The wrap had probably come from the same source as the gowns, and a fresh gown in dark blue with matching shoes lay on a chair waiting for her to be ready for them. The old gown and shoes were nowhere to be seen, so they must have been taken by the same person or people who had brought the new.

The room's table held dishes and a pot of tea, and Elissia waited only long enough to sit down and pour herself a cup of the tea before she glanced at the savage.

"I meant to say this last night, but I stupidly fell asleep instead," she got out without looking directly at him, the words square and blocky and difficult to manage. "I -had no idea you would feel like that, and I owe you a deeply sincere apology for -making it happen. I'm obviously not bright enough to understand and notice other people's feelings, so I - hope you'll find it possible to forgive me."

"Since I never asked for an apology, you have no idea how happy this one makes me," the savage said, and then his hand came to cover one of hers. "Everyone makes mistakes, but the telling point is whether or not they learn from those mistakes. I knew you were someone who would do the right thing if you could, and I thank you for proving the point in a way that was obviously difficult for you. Now let's have breakfast before the food gets too cold."

He took his hand away and began to serve himself from the food on the table, and Elissia sipped her tea as she watched him. This man spent his time doing outrageous things to her and then, when she was certain she really did hate him, he suddenly did something that rekindled her love. Confusion surrounded her again, the way it had been doing much too often lately, and there didn't seem to be a permanent way out of the state. Maybe once a little more time had passed...

The savage put food on her plate as well, and then he applied himself to making his helpings disappear. Elissia hadn't eaten much the night before, but after only a few bites her faint appetite disappeared. She wondered if she ought to mention now that she didn't really want to go to Arvin, or wait until they were in her father's palace. The savage wasn't likely to enjoy hearing what she had to say, so Elissia decided to play the coward and put off saying it. There had been few enough pleasant moments between them that the one they now shared was worth preserving.

Once the savage finished eating he helped Elissia into the fresh clothes. He himself was already fully dressed, so when everything was properly closed she turned to him.

"Well, it looks like we're ready to go," she said, having glanced around the room to make sure nothing had been accidentally left behind. "Is there any chance of finding a decent book here, do you think? Having something to read will make the travel time go much faster."

"Do you really think you'll be able to concentrate on a book?" the savage answered with raised brows. "If not, there's no sense in spending time looking for one."

"Why wouldn't I be able to concentrate on a book?" Elissia returned, her own brows low. "The coach doesn't bounce so badly that - " Then a terrible thought came to her and she looked at the savage and said, "No, you wouldn't. Not again."

"Seea, try to understand," he answered with a sigh, and there wasn't a single sign that he might be teasing her. "Half a day of punishment won't mean a thing to you, and the lesson you need to learn in order to survive in the world will be lost. If I let you off easy you'll think you can do exactly as you please, you know you will. You need a solid reason for obeying me completely and never lying again, and that's what you'll have."

Babbling out shocked protests did nothing to keep the savage from taking her arm and pulling her over to a chair and then across his knees. He stuffed a cloth in her mouth before pulling up her skirts, a cloth that was certainly meant to help her keep from making so much noise that it would be heard outside the room. How lovely that he was so concerned about keeping embarrassment from her and protecting her life...

Elissia shouted into the cloth when the bead was put in her bottom again, then the shouts turned to screams when the spanking started. The beast's hand was so hard when it smacked her bottom, bringing her pain and flashing, flaring desire both at the same time. Elissia fought to struggle against what was being done to her, but her skirts were draped over her head and arms, and her drawers were down around her knees. Struggle proved to be completely useless as the beast's hand kept hitting her bottom, each solid smack adding to the growing ache in her seat.

Tears had started to run down Elissia's face by the time the beast stopped spanking her and began to pull her drawers back to where they belonged. He tied the ties snugly before pulling her skirts down over them, and then he helped her to her feet. Once again she couldn't stop squirming and crying, and the miserable savage held her a moment before removing the cloth from her mouth and wiping at her tears with a fresh cloth.

"The day will come when you finally understand how much good this treatment has done for you," the savage said gently as he wiped at her eyes. "When that day arrives I know you'll thank me, so let's leave discussion about this until then, all right? We'll get your face washed and then we'll leave."

He filled the room's basin with fresh water and brought it over to her, helped her wash and gently dry her face, and then they left the room. Walking was the same horrible experience it had been yesterday, especially with her bottom aching the way it was, and Elissia knew there was an even more horrible experience waiting for her. The savage was taking her to the coach where she would have to sit down again, and there was nothing she could do to stop what was being done.

Sometimes an anticipated terrible experience turns out to be less terrible than imagined, but every now and then the time turns out to be worse. Elissia discovered that sitting in the coach on an aching bottom with a horrible bead inside was worse than she remembered, and keeping herself from crying was harder than it had been the day before. But fighting against the tears gave her something to do besides suffer and squirm, so she spent her time fighting.

Most of the ache was gone from her bottom by the time the coach pulled into an inn's yard at noon, but the need inside her had grown higher as the ache receded. The savage came to the coach to hand her down and lead her into the inn, and again there was a private dining room waiting for them. It came as no surprise when Elissia was made to sit in a chair at the table, and the food and tea was brought even more quickly than the night before.

As soon as the food was served to them the savage began to eat, but Elissia found she still had almost nothing of an appetite. She picked at the food until a servant came to take the plates away, dreading the time when she would have to go back to the coach and its jouncing progress along the road. She had to let herself squirm whenever no one was looking at her, and the heat had built so high that she felt like ripping open her clothing. The idea of having to wait until dark before she could be eased was devastating, and so sunk into her thoughts was she that when the savage spoke he startled her.

"I'm delighted to say, Seea, that it looks like you've already learned part of your lesson," he said, causing Elissia to look at him across the table. "If you'd demanded or even begged to be eased I would have made you wait until tonight, but showing that you understand the choice to be mine has earned you easing right now."

"Is there a room we can go to?" Elissia asked at once, helpless to keep the pitiful words inside as she rose to her feet. Her body had flashed even hotter at the thought

of having him, the only thought that meant anything to her right now.

"Taking you to a room right now would be embarrassing for you, so we'll make do in this room," he answered as he stood more slowly. "Come over here and I'll show you what I mean."

Walking hadn't become less difficult, but Elissia ignored the feelings as she moved the few steps to the other side of the table. She stared at the savage with desperate eyes, and he smiled gently as he produced another of those cloths.

"I think you'll need this to keep our private doings private," he said, holding out the cloth. "But that's just a suggestion, so don't use it if you think you don't need it."

Elissia hesitated only a moment before taking the cloth and putting it in her mouth. Screaming in delight had become a good part of her relationship with this man, almost as much a part as screaming in protest...

Once the cloth was in Elissia's mouth, the savage had her lean down to the seat of his chair with her forearms flat on the seat. Elissia had no idea what was going on until the savage threw her skirts over her head again, then began to untie the ties of her drawers. For a moment she was afraid that he would spank her again, but once the drawers were down around her knees and he'd spread her legs as far as possible she was shown the truth.

A moan tried to escape from Elissia's throat as his rod touched the heat of her womanhood, then a scream came as he thrust completely inside her. At first the scream was one of protest because he felt so much bigger than usual, but then he began to stroke hard and fast and all thoughts but those of pleasure flew out of her head. In no time at all her body was spasming with delightful release again and again, making it difficult to stay on her feet.

But somehow Elissia did manage to keep standing, even though mists of pleasure clouded her mind and awareness. When her skirts were pulled down and she was urged by the savage to straight up, it came as a surprise to realize that her drawers had already been replaced and retied. But just as surprising and a lot less pleasant was the realization that the bead hadn't been taken out of her bottom.

"Tonight we'll do that again but in the right way," the savage murmured after taking the cloth out of her mouth and briefly touching her lips with his own. "The dessert you so kindly provided was delightful, but now we have to be on our way again."

Before Elissia knew it she'd been returned to the coach, and the trip was

immediately resumed. She moved a very small bit on the coach seat, feeling the need begin to build again after being so thoroughly seen to. The savage had thanked her for what he called dessert, just as if she'd had a choice in the matter, but he hadn't been thankful enough to take that bead away. He'd made it perfectly clear that he intended to keep on with this punishment, and Elissia had only one question: Just how long would he keep on with it?

By the time evening came and they stopped at another inn, Elissia was back to being terribly in need. She ate only a little of the food put in front of her, all her thoughts and attention on the time when she and the savage would go to their room. That time finally came, and unlike the night before they shared what the savage called lovemaking. Elissia felt completely satisfied, and once the bead was pulled out of her she fell into an exhausted sleep. Her last thought was that she'd ask tomorrow about how long...

Chapter 6

The next morning there was another traveling gown and shoes waiting when she awoke, this time in dark gold. She ate some of the breakfast that was also waiting, and then let the savage help her dress. She'd wanted to question him during the meal but hadn't had the nerve, and so simply spent her time hoping that the punishment

would be over. Once she was dressed, though, the savage began to lead her to a chair again.

"Wait!" she begged, trying to pull back against that large, square hand on her arm. "I - need to know how long this is going to continue. I give you my word that I'll never forget what's been done to me - or why it was done - so you don't really have to - "

"Seea, please," he said, the sigh he voiced actually looking real. "How long the punishment continues depends on you, and although you've been modestly quiet the last day or so I can still tell that you haven't really made up your mind to obey me the way I want you to. When I see that you have come around to the proper way of thinking, that's when the punishment will end."

Elissia was too shocked to say anything more, which meant that she was quickly over the savage's knees with a cloth in her mouth, her dress up, and her drawers down to her knees. The bead was put into her and then the spanking began, and as usual Elissia wasn't able to keep from trying to scream. But this time she didn't cry, and that fact seemed to please the savage once she was put back on her feet with an aching, throbbing bottom.

"See, that's a step in the right direction," the savage said as he took the cloth out of her mouth, at the same time showing a smile. "You're starting to realize that crying isn't getting you anywhere, that you have to change your attitudes instead to show real remorse. If you keep moving forward in a positive way like this, the punishment will end even before we reach Arvin."

He touched his lips to hers then led the way out to the coach, and they were back on the road before Elissia let herself think again. She was more than aware of how it hurt to sit on that seat and how her aching bottom made her squirm and cause the bead to send shudders of need through her body, but that wasn't what she thought about. They would reach her father's palace in just a couple of hours, and once there she would not talk to the savage about not continuing on to Arvin with him. She would just disappear and let her lack of presence tell him what he needed to know.

"And that will be the end of the threat of having to go to Arvin," Elissia murmured as she looked down at her hands. "I was right to hesitate over the idea of living in the midst of a bunch of savages, a place I know nothing about and where I never wanted to go. And I was even more right to hate the idea of marriage, where a man can do as he likes to you in the name of caring. If this is an example of caring, I'd rather be hated."

Elissia spent the next two hours or so staring out the window, pretending that she wasn't beginning to burn up on the inside as familiar landmarks began to appear. They were almost to the road that led to her father's palace, and once they turned left onto that road -

"No!" Elissia choked out as the road was simply passed by. No one had turned onto that road, and a wagon waiting there seemed to be ready to join their procession at the end. A man in black leather drove the wagon, with a horse tied on at the back.

"Ah, I see you've noticed the arrival of your wardrobe and other possessions," the savage's voice came, and Elissia turned her head to see him riding on the other side of the coach. "I sent word to your father with Gardal when your brother went home a couple of days ago, asking that all your possessions be packed in a wagon and readied to join us when we came by. I also sent my apologies for not being able to stop, but I've been gone from Arvin much too long already. You'll see your mother, father, and brother again when they come to attend the new marriage ceremony and festivities. We'll stop for lunch at noon as usual, and tonight you'll be able to pick out what you want to wear for tomorrow."

He gave her a smile before riding toward the head of the column again, and Elissia felt too numb to stop staring at the place he'd been. Her last hope of escape was gone, snatched away by the savage who held her captive even though he'd had no idea what she meant to do. She'd been put into that box she'd once told Gardal about, the box

he'd been rescued from but she never would be.

Pulling into an inn yard at noon came as a surprise to Elissia. She'd been so deeply

sunk into depression that she'd barely been aware of the nagging need of her body, and she continued to feel distant even when she was led into the usual private dining room. She had no idea what food was put in front of her, and she certainly didn't eat any of it. When, after the meal, the savage "eased" her, she had no real need of the cloth in her mouth. Her body spasmed with release automatically, nothing in the way of pleasure appearing to make her want to scream.

When she was back in the coach and they were on the road again, Elissia felt a small, distant hint of satisfaction. There was more than one way to escape capture, and the only way left to her was probably best. There would be no regrets afterward, no tears, and no condemnation. And no yearning for someone to love her in the same way she loved...

When the next inn came into view, Derand almost wished that he hadn't sent one of his fighters ahead to make arrangements there for the night. Seea had been more than just silent during lunch, she'd been almost like the ghost of a stranger. Or someone not enough of a stranger. He remembered what she'd been like when depression held her, not long after she'd been told she was his wife and during their trip to Ramsond. The punishment was obviously weighing heavily on her, but he couldn't afford to stop it before she'd learned her lesson. The punishment would teach her that lesson... Unless it taught her something else entirely and something he didn't want her to learn... She wasn't acting at all the way she had in his dream...

"I'll have to talk to her tonight," Derand decided in a mutter, the words too soft to reach the men around him. What he would say he still didn't know, but he definitely had to talk to the woman. He had to make her understand somehow that he really was acting for her own good...

"Tomorrow we cross over into Arvin, my king," Listan said from Derand's right, satisfaction in his friend's voice. "We'll have to be more alert then, but it feels good to be getting home."

"Yes, it will feel good to get home," Derand agreed as they rode into the inn's yard. "I wonder if one or two of my 'loyal kings' will try to take advantage of the situation when it looks like I'm settling down."

"Since they probably will, we'll just have to be ready for whatever they try," Listan said with something of a smile. "If Arvin itself ever settles down to a peaceful existence, we probably won't know what to do with ourselves."

"I think I'll be able to find one or two things to occupy my time," Derand answered dryly, then pulled his stallion to a stop and dismounted. "Have a good night, and I'll see you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow, my king," Listan agreed as he took the rein of Derand's mount. Listan would see to the horses and the men while Derand looked after Seea, and for a brief moment Derand wished he could trade jobs. But even if Listan had been up to handling Seea, Derand would never have really traded. He had to make sure personally that the woman he loved was all right and would also stay that way.

The coach pulled into the inn yard behind Derand and his fighters, others of his fighters still around the coach. Derand hadn't really ordered his men to watch Seea and report anything odd that she might do, not when the woman thinking he had given that order was enough to keep her from escaping her punishment. Derand walked over to the coach when it stopped and opened the door, then handed Seea out. Unfortunately she looked just as remote and almost unreal as she had at lunch, so as soon as he led her into the private dining room he stopped her near the table and took her in his arms.

"Seea, I'm worried about you," he said, feeling his insides twinge when she stared at his chest rather than looking

up at his face. "I know that this punishment is really hard on you, but it will turn out to be for the best. Arvin isn't like your father's kingdom or Ramsond, and if you don't learn to obey me instantly it could some day mean your life."

Derand paused to let her say something, anything to show that she was still here with him, but not a single sound came. She simply stood in his arms and stared at his chest, and the twinge in his insides turned into a true tightening.

"Seea, speak to me," he urged, desperate for some normal reaction from her. "Say something to show that you understand I'm not just torturing you for the fun of it. I love you, and in order to keep you safe I'll do anything I have to even if it makes you unhappy. Being unhappy is better than being dead."

"I thought you said you didn't want me to lie," she responded, still not looking at him even though her manner had changed in some small way. "I'm not the one who doesn't understand things, but you'll never believe that."

"You're saying that I don't understand?" he asked, glad that she'd finally spoken to him but otherwise confused. "What is it that I don't understand?"

"You don't understand that if you really did love me you would accept me as I am, not try to change me into someone you approve of more," she answered, and Derand became aware of the fact that she now held herself away from him even though she hadn't moved. "If you want a woman who will obey you instantly and completely, you should have chosen someone else. It isn't in me to be that kind of woman, so trying anyway would be futile. And from where I stand, death doesn't look to be a bad choice at all."

"But that's ridiculous," Derand protested, now even more confused. "Anyone can learn to do anything if they want to badly enough, which is why I chose this particular punishment. It's designed to make you want to obey me rather than be punished this way again, and it will work. And suggesting that I choose a different woman is nonsense. You're the one I love, which means I don't want a different woman."

"And it's all about what you want, isn't it?" she said, but there was a deadness to the words rather than bitterness. "I'm not another human being, I'm a woman, and what a woman wants doesn't matter because she can't fight to defend her stance. I understand the point perfectly."

"But you're understanding the wrong point," Derand protested, very much aware of the fact that Seea wasn't playing a game in order to get him to change his mind. She wasn't even really arguing... "It isn't because you're a woman that you need to obey me, it's because you don't know how dangerous living in Arvin can be. If trouble starts you have to do exactly as I say or I could end up losing you!"

And your loss or continuing possession is all that matters, Derand almost heard her say as soon as the words about losing her were out of his mouth. But Seea didn't offer the counter his own mind had provided, which meant things were even worse than he'd thought.

"All right, I'll grant you that when a man is in love he turns selfish," Derand said into the continuing silence, wishing she would look at him even once. "I never knew how wonderful being in love is, and I can't accept the idea of losing the woman I feel that love for. If not wanting to see you dead makes me a monster, then I'll be a monster. It is, after all, your life that I'm most concerned about."

"If it was my life you were most concerned about, you would let me live it my way," Seea stated, and again there was no argumentative edge to her words. "Trying to force me to live my life your way says that the happiness of your own life is most important. And I can't stop you, so what does it matter anyway?"

Derand's arms had loosened their hold, and Seea proved she knew that by moving away from him to the waiting table. She poured some of the hot tea into a cup before sitting gingerly in her chair, and Derand closed his eyes

and then rubbed at them. The conversation had gone as badly as he'd been afraid it might, but he refused to lose hope. After Seea had a hot meal in her and they'd made love, he ought to have better luck.

The luck Derand was hoping for started out being conspicuous by its absence. The food was really good when it came, but Seea ignored it completely and simply drank tea. Derand was tempted to make an issue over her not eating, but starting an argument wasn't the best way to lighten the woman's mood. Missing a single meal wasn't likely to do her much harm, and after they'd made love she would certainly be more likely to listen to him.

Thinking about making love to Seea caused Derand to hurry the last of his meal. He couldn't seem to get enough of the woman, especially since the presence of that bead turned her wildly passionate and responsive. She held to his arm without comment when he led her out of the small dining room, took his room key, then guided her up the stairs, but that distance she'd been showing was obviously still there. Well, that wasn't likely to last very long once he had her in bed.

As soon as they were both bare Derand took his wife in his arms and began to kiss her. Her body showed strong indications of the need she was being made to feel, her nipples tight and hard, her hips moving as his hand stroked her beautiful, round bottom. Her response to his kiss, though, wasn't as eager as he would have liked, but Derand ignored that and quickly put her to her back. His not making her wait for relief ought to please her, his own delight strong as he parted her thighs and presented himself to the soft warmth of her womanhood.

His thrusting deep drew a sound from her, but what the sound indicated wasn't very clear. Derand was certain he hadn't hurt her, so he began to stroke her in the way he most loved to do. After a few minutes her body responded to the stroking by exploding in release, but there seemed to be fewer explosions than usual. She also made very little noise, and the wild abandon was mostly absent. It was almost as though if not for the bead urging her on, she would not have responded to him at all...

After a shorter while than usual Derand let his own release come, and once he'd withdrawn from Seea he lay on his back trying to understand what had happened. It shouldn't have been possible for Seea's response to have the same distance that her manner had taken on, but somehow she'd managed it. But Derand didn't have the feeling that she's done it on purpose, the way she had when she thought she was punishing him. Whatever it was he refused to let it go on, so he sat up, turned Seea's unmoving body to the side so that the bead could be removed, then turned her back to him.

"You ... didn't seem to enjoy the way I made love to you," he began, his hand turning her face in his direction. "I didn't hurt you, I hope?"

"No, you didn't hurt me," she said, and then there was nothing. Her face was turned toward him, but her gaze was somewhere other than on him. And the satisfaction that usually held her for a while didn't seem to have come to her at all...

"How do you know that obeying me completely will be so terrible?" Derand finally tried, the only thing he could think of to say. "Wouldn't it be more fair to try something before condemning it? You might discover that you really enjoy being obedient, and if you do I promise not to tease you with any I-told-you-so's. And if you do agree to trying it my way, I'll suspend the punishment until we see how the experiment works out. So what do you say? Is it a deal?"

The idea of a "deal" had come as a stroke of inspiration, and Derand was delighted that it had. This morning Seea had been ready to agree to just about anything to have the punishment stop, so the relief of his offer would certainly break her out of the depression. If she didn't keep her word about obeying him he could always start the punishment again, but memory of what she'd gone through should make her do whatever was necessary to ... keep it from ... happening again...

"Seea, you aren't answering me," Derand noted aloud as his insides twinged again. "I expected you to accept my offer immediately, but -"

"You were right about complete truth being best," Seea said, breaking into his half-bewildered question. "Lying only makes more trouble than you already have, so I will tell the truth. No, I won't obey you, completely or otherwise, under any circumstance at all. Whether or not I can do it is beside the point. I simply won't."

"Not even to stop a punishment you can't bear?" Derand demanded, so confused that he was getting angry. "Not even to stop a punishment that can be made even worse? What's wrong with you, Seea? Why are you being so unreasonable?"

"My name is Elissia," she said with no emphasis at all as she sat up and moved to put herself under the covers. Then she lay down again, and a long moment later her breathing showed that she was asleep.

"I don't believe this," Derand muttered, staring at the woman who was his wife. She'd stated what her name was and then had gone to sleep, as though rejecting his love-name for her without actually saying the words. She'd rejected his love-name...! That couldn't mean she was also rejecting his love...!

Derand got to his feet and began to pace around the room, the confusion surrounding him so intense that it was almost painful. Seea needed a strong hand to restrain her take-charge impulses in a situation that could cause her harm, and she'd even said she wanted to be punished if she did something that might prove harmful. For some unknown reason she'd now changed her mind, and refused to cooperate even to have a painful and embarrassing punishment stopped.

"So what do I do?" Derand whispered, willing to take advice from anyone able to give it. But no one was here to give advice, which was typical of the way that whole matter was turning out. His first, angered, urge had been to show Seea that the punishment could be worse, which would hardly be difficult to do. If, after lunch, he spanked her again instead of easing her, then made her ask for yet another spanking before taking her to bed...

Yes, the punishment could be made harder on her, and he just might have to choose that option. She'd flatly refused to obey him and he couldn't let that decision stand. But - and this was what disturbed him the most - she hadn't been defiant in her refusal. She'd simply spoken what she clearly saw as the truth and then had gone to sleep, making no effort to challenge him. It was as if the darkness she'd sunk into had taken control, and nothing that mattered had been left her.

"And I've lost the only way I had to pull her out of it," Derand whispered again, the realization bringing him unexpected fear as well as a sense of helplessness. "She was so set on saving Gardal that she kept pulling herself out of the depression for her brother's sake, but now Gardal is safely at home. She isn't fighting the depression in any way for any reason, and I don't know what the hell to do!"

Derand's last words had almost become the shout he so desperately wanted to voice, but shouting and yelling would have been useless. He couldn't back down on demanding obedience from Seea, not if he wanted her to live whole and safe. But his demanding that obedience had sent her into a black pit of lifelessness, and if he didn't find some way to pull her out of the pit she wouldn't live long enough to get herself killed by disobeying him.

Another hour and more of pacing brought Derand nothing in the way of answers. Weariness finally forced him to a stop, that and the fact that he'd heard the guard being changed in the hall a bit earlier. He had to get some sleep if he was going to be as alert as he needed to be once they crossed over into Arvin tomorrow. In the morning he'd talk to Seea again over breakfast, hopefully implementing the idea that would come to his rested mind.

The room's lamp still burned, so he crossed to the door and turned it down, then made his careful way to the bed in the dark. He sat down on the near side of the bed, more than aware of Seea's sleeping presence on the other side, wanting desperately to hold her in his arms as he slept but unsure of whether that was a good idea. Taking

her in his arms might wake her, and loss of sleep would simply add to what held her so tightly

Before Derand could lie down the room's door was kicked open and a dark form rushed in. The intruder was clearly male and very big, just about as large as Derand himself - and on top of that he held what looked like a long dagger in his fist. As soon as the intruder entered the room he headed for the bed, and if Derand had been asleep he would never have been able to wake quickly enough to keep from being killed.

But Derand hadn't been asleep, and hadn't even been lying down. Instead of finding an easy victim the intruder was met by a man who had surged to his feet with uncanny speed, and then had grasped the wrist of the hand holding the dagger. Derand used his right hand to take the intruder by the throat, at the same time delivering a vicious knee to the intruder's privates. When the intruder bent with the pain of being kneed, Derand forced the man to drop his dagger.

Unfortunately, though, being fouled didn't keep the intruder from fighting. He recovered from being kneed faster than Derand would have, and then Derand was fighting for his life again. The intruder was strong and seemed fresher than his intended victim, and was obviously a good fighter. The punches he threw were solid with the man's body weight behind them, but Derand had taken as bad or worse in his time. He threw his own punches in response that the intruder had to feel - and then came the one thing Derand had hoped wouldn't happen.

The intruder must have somehow felt the bandage still covering parts of Derand's body. When the first blow struck directly on the wound that hadn't yet healed, Derand told himself that it had been a lucky shot and tried to ignore the heavy pain. But when the second and third blows came there was no longer any doubt about the intruder's knowing he had an edge to use against his intended victim. Derand, well aware of the fact that he'd be able to stand up to the treatment only so long, desperately grappled the intruder close and pulled him down to the floor.

Derand and the intruder rolled back and forth, each of them struggling to get the other under him where it would be possible to use body weight again. Derand was just about to win the struggle and pin his assailant down when the son of a diseased whore punched him in his wound again. When the blinding flash of pain passed Derand discovered that he'd lost the struggle after all, and the intruder knelt above him - with hands closed tight around Derand's throat! The dagger was gone, but strangulation would kill the intended victim just as dead as edged steel!

Trying to force the hands from his throat while lying flat on the floor wasn't working. Derand would have pulled out one or both of his attacker's eyes if he could have, but the man kept his head back as his fingers closed tighter and tighter. The darkened room started to get darker still as it also began to spin -

And then the big body was gone from above him, the hands gone from his throat. Derand lay still for a moment as he dragged all the air in the world into his lungs, then he forced himself to sit up. His attacker - former attacker - lay unmoving on the floor beside him, and as the lamp brightened Derand could see the pool of blood slowly spreading from under the man's body. He turned to thank whichever of his guards had come to his rescue - and got a shock almost as bad as the one the attack had brought.

"Is he safely dead?" Seea asked, the dagger dripping blood still held in her hand as she adjusted the lamp by the door. "What happened?"

"I was a fool," Derand answered with a small bit of trouble as he forced himself to his feet. "Just because we won't cross over into Arvin until tomorrow shouldn't have been taken as a guarantee that no attack would come until then. And yes, he is dead so you can put the dagger down now. And get some clothes on."

Derand added that last when he heard the sudden shout and sound of running boots, showing that someone had noticed either the absence or the death of the fighters who were supposed to be out in the hall. All the rooms on

this floor had been reserved for Derand, but Listan wouldn't hear of putting their fighters into those rooms. The High King of Arvin and his queen deserved privacy, Listan had said, and his good friend and advisor meant to see that they got it. Privacy in life that had almost led to the complete privacy of death...

"Your Majesty, what happened?" a voice came as Derand was putting on his pants -with his sword right next to his hand. "The men in the hall are down with arrows through the neck, and in here..."

"And in here is probably the man who used the bow," Derand finished when the fighter's voice trailed off. "But just to be sure, wake up a couple of extra sections of the guard to do a search. And send for Lord Listan."

"No need, Your Majesty," the fighter said, causing Derand to look up to see both fighters at the door looking to their right. "Here comes Lord Listan with more men right now."

The next few minutes were filled with a furious Listan issuing orders in all directions, which gave Derand a chance to glance around. Rather than getting dressed Seea had gotten back into bed, which was probably the wiser move. She couldn't have closed that gown herself, so being completely under the bedcovers was considerably more effective. Derand really wanted to talk to her, but the conversation would have to wait until the hubbub died down.

"My king, are you all right?" Listan finally got around to demanding as he stalked up to Derand. "We found a bow and quiver near the stairs, but the men outside swear that no one got past them. How this filthy assassin got into the inn - "

"The late assassin probably got to this inn before we did and then waited, so he didn't have to get past the outer guards," Derand interrupted to say. "Check to make sure that no one else registered with him or even at the same time, get the body out of here, and then get the men settled down again. And put someone in the kitchens, to make sure that nothing ... unusual is added to the breakfast I'll want in just a few hours. Then go back to your own bed."

Listan almost argued the last of that, but Derand knew that his expression was one that Listan had learned not to argue with. Instead of arguing Listan had two of the men remove the body before he bowed and left, closing the door as well as possible behind him. That meant it was time for Derand to have that talk with Seea...

Chapter 7

"Seea, please remind me to thank my father and yours," Derand said as he walked to the bed and sat on it. "That's the second time you saved my life, and you were here to do it only because they had us marry. Are you all right?"

"I wasn't the one fighting," Seea answered obliquely, but at least it was an answer. Flat and distant and almost uninterested, but an answer.

"I'm glad you're unharmed," Derand said as warmly as he could, pretending he didn't notice the flatness and distance. "Seea... I think we need to discuss our relationship a bit more. I'm not insisting that you obey me completely because I don't believe you capable of doing things on your own. I know you're more than capable, but you lack experience for living safely in my world. And didn't you once ask me to punish you if you did something that wasn't good for you?"

Derand asked the question knowing she'd probably refuse to answer him, but at least it ought to give her something to think about. It was a good point that he should have brought up sooner, but before he could congratulate himself Seea stirred where she lay.

"If I'd given my word to obey you completely you'd be dead right now," she stated, faint anger tingeing the words. "Obeying someone else completely means making no decisions of any sort on your own. All you can do is stand

around waiting to be told what to do, because anything you decide to do on your own could be against the wishes of the person you're supposed to obey. You don't want a woman you want a well-trained dog, so why don't you go and find one."

"That's not fair!" Derand protested, stung by everything she'd said. "I never - !"

Derand's words broke off before he could insist that he'd never said he didn't want Seea to make her own decisions. The line of logic she'd thrown at him was valid, especially the part about saving his life. He'd made it very clear that he didn't want Seea involved in any dangerous situations, and picking up a dagger to use on an assassin who might turn on you before you killed him was a very dangerous situation.

"Now that you mention it, this was the second time I saved your life," Seea went on before Derand found anything constructive to say. "The first time I didn't even hear a simple thank-you, and this time you decided to thank two other people entirely. And Torban didn't understand why I knew a reward was completely out of the question."

"All right, you are due a reward, and for both times," Derand responded at once, now more hurt - and embarrassed - than stung. "I never thought I'd have to use ordinary words to someone who loved me and whom I loved in return, but - So what do you want? Gold? An entire new wardrobe? Name it!"

"I want my freedom," Seea answered instantly, but not with eagerness and not even bothering to sit up. "When you flatly refuse, don't forget to mention it's because you love me."

Derand's mouth had opened automatically to give her exactly that answer, but her comment made the words refuse to come. Seea was twisting everything around to make him look in the wrong, but he wasn't! He just couldn't find a way to prove the contention...

"Any man who saved the life of a king not once but twice would be given everything his heart desired," Seea went on, and now it was faint bitterness that colored her words. "A woman doing the same... Hey, she's only a woman so let's give her what we want her to have: complete slavery. If we tell her it's really a reward she won't be bright enough to know the difference."

"Seea, stop it!" Derand demanded harshly, the pain beginning to grow too high to bear. "You're cutting me to pieces with everything you say, and none of it is true! I do love you, so much that I can't abide the idea of losing you! Since when is it wrong to protect the woman you love?"

"It becomes wrong when you make her life not worth living because of your needs," was the immediate answer, weariness suddenly in her voice. "But I really hate to waste my breath so let's drop the subject now."

And with that she turned over, as if intending to go back to sleep. He'd told her to state her idea of a proper reward and she had, but not with any expectation of getting that reward. She'd called being married to him slavery, and she'd baldly shown that she didn't believe he loved her. His reason for treating her the way he had was still valid, but - What good was retaining life if it made you lose the one you loved in a different way...?

"All right," Derand heard himself saying, defeated as never before. "All right, you win. I can't stand the idea of making the life of the woman I love not worth the living, so I withdraw the demand that you obey me completely. Are you happy now?"

"At least as happy as any other slave," she answered after a very brief hesitation, not even bothering to turn around as her tone went back to being flat and dead. "I ask for freedom, and you grant me the gift of needing to obey you only some of the time. But you did make the effort, so just consider me ungrateful."

"Damn it, woman, what do you want from me?" Derand roared, reaching over to turn her back to him and shake her just a little. "In this world women are expected to obey their husbands, even women who think they're smarter

than everyone else! I may have made myself High King of Arvin, but I can't change the world!"

"I don't remember asking you to change the world," she responded, saying nothing about whether or not he was hurting her arms. "I asked for my freedom in exchange for having twice saved your life, but you considered the price too high for the services rendered. If the situation should even come up again, I'll have to remember that you refused my terms."

Derand let her go with a small push and then got to his feet to stalk around the room. Anger made him want to shout all sorts of things at her, things he would be sorry he said once he calmed down. Avoiding the need to make a later apology seemed like a much better idea, so Derand moved up and down and back and forth across the fairly small room. But by all the gods he was tempted to beat the woman more soundly than she was likely to appreciate, but at the moment that would solve nothing but satisfying his anger. No, he had to talk to her, so it might be best to start with a question.

"You said you wanted freedom," he began after turning back to see that she'd lain down again. "Does that mean you expect me to let you run around doing as you please no matter how bad an idea you get? If one of my enemies takes advantage of the opportunity and kills you, will I then be allowed to say 'I told you so'?"

"If you give me the freedom I want the problem will never come up," she said after a very long moment. The words sounded reluctant, but more out of weariness than regret. "I've never had any desire even to see Arvin, not to mention live there. If you put the marriage aside and let me go back to my father's palace I'll be as safe as you claim you want me to be."

"So you really don't believe I love you," Derand said, his own weariness suddenly rushing up to choke him. "And you can't possibly love me if all you want is an end to our marriage. Well, if that's the reward you want it's yours. I'll make the arrangements right now."

And with that Derand left the room, the pain inside him worse than any wound he'd ever gotten. The woman he loved didn't love him, didn't believe he did love her, and wanted nothing more than to be away from him. Never in his life had he so wished that he could break down and cry, but somehow he managed to control himself as he sent one of his guards for Listan before going into a room across the hall from the one Seea lay in. The room Elissia lay in, not Seea. Seea was the woman he loved and who loved him in return. Elissia was a stranger who would soon be gone.

By leaving the door to this new room open, Derand made it easier for Listan to find him. Derand was sprawled in a chair when Listan almost went past the room, then stopped abruptly and entered.

"My king?" Listan said as he looked around. "If you want to move the queen to this room, I can - "

"Close the door and sit down, Listan," Derand said in a voice that was very much like the one Seea had been using. "The queen - will be going back to her father's palace, after which she'll no longer be the queen. I want you to arrange an escort to take her back first thing in the morning."

"My king, are you sure?" Listan asked gently, his expression close to being stunned as he sat in the chair near Derand's. "Was she all that upset at seeing you kill the assassin? I hadn't thought she was that delicate a young lady, so there's a good chance she'll get over - "

"A delicate young lady, now there's a laugh," Derand interrupted, but couldn't quite find the laugh he'd mentioned. "No, Listan, she isn't upset at seeing me kill an assassin because she was the one who killed him just before he killed me. She saved my life again, and as a reward she wants me to put our marriage aside and send her back to her father. I was sure she loved me even though she never said the words, but now it's fairly obvious that she doesn't."

"That makes no sense, my king," Listan protested, his expression odd. "The queen

may never have mentioned her love for you aloud, but if you'd seen the way she shafted the torturer who wanted to start taking off parts of your body... And if she was that eager to be unmarried, why didn't she simply stand back and let the assassin get rid of you for her? You surely can't believe that she wasn't aware of how much power she would have if she went to Arvin as your widow? She's probably one of the very few people who would be able to keep the Federated Kingdoms from separating again, and if you think about it for a moment you'll see that you agree."

Derand, about to shake his head in denial, suddenly discovered that he did agree with Listan. Seea would have been able to continue with what he'd started, so why

"So why did she kill the assassin instead of letting the man finish his job?" Derand asked, speaking to Listan rather than just to himself. "When he crashed through the door the noise must have wakened her, so while he and I fought she had enough time to come all the way awake. That means she didn't just grab up the dagger unthinkingly, but took it and used it deliberately. If she doesn't love me, why wouldn't she be as practical as I know she can be?"

"The only answer I can think of is that she does love you, but for some reason believes that her love isn't returned." Listan spoke quietly and gently, but the look in his eyes was sharp and directly on Derand. "Could there possibly be a reason for her to believe that, my king?"

"I ... found it necessary to punish her," Derand gruded, feeling that twinge in his middle again. "What I did was for her own good, but the punishment made her extremely unhappy. That unhappiness should have turned into a strong willingness to do things my way, but instead she seems to now see herself as a - slave."

"Considering how the queen feels about things done for her own good, I'm not surprised." Listan sighed, now looking almost as upset as Derand felt. "She also went from being completely in charge of Ramsond to being nothing but a woman punished by her husband. The queen is a woman of great pride, my king. Your punishment must have been extreme for her to speak about having become a slave, and I have to say that she hasn't looked well this last day or so. And I'm also forced to remember her comments about being nothing but a woman... "

"Comments I assured her weren't going to be true about her in our marriage," Derand grumbled, only now able to see his biggest mistake. "It worried me that I was taking her back to an unsettled realm like Arvin, so I decided to make sure she would be safe. I should have waited instead until we were actually there and she was fully involved in the various chores she'll do so well with. And now I've promised her that I'll let her go, but I don't want her to leave me. So how do I retrieve my word without dishonoring myself even more than I've already done?"

"Your association with the queen has always struck me as being very much like a campaign," Listan commented, the words thoughtful. "If the queen were an enemy you wanted to win over and turn into a friend and ally, how would you go about doing it, my king?"

Listan's question made Derand stop emoting and start thinking, which was exactly what he needed. Ideas immediately began to flood his mind, strategical ideas to win the war he was in the midst of. This war could well be the most important one of his life, and as soon as the ideas firmed up he gave orders to Listan, orders which the other man accepted with a wide grin. The first battle of the war would be fought in the morning, and that one had to be won. If it wasn't... No, Derand refused to think of failure. He had to win so he would... He would...!

Elissia woke up when she heard the gentle tapping at her door, at first having no idea why she was alone in the room. Then memory of the night before returned, and she knew that the savage hadn't come back to the room while she slept. She also now remembered that he'd promised to free her, but that wonderful news didn't bring her the complete relief and happiness it should have. Which was very foolish of her, so she pushed the thought away

and said, "Who is it?"

"A maid to help you dress, Your Majesty," came a woman's voice, and then the door opened a crack. "May I come in?"

"Yes, of course," Elissia said, firmly pushing away the faint disappointment she felt. "Have you brought a wrap?"

The inn girl had brought a wrap, so Elissia put it on before she got up to wash. The girl also carried an outfit Elissia didn't recognize, which made Elissia remember that she hadn't chosen from her own possessions the night before. Well, tomorrow she'd be back in her own clothes, if not by tonight. Her father's palace was less than a full day's ride away.

The inn girl left as soon as Elissia was completely dressed, giving Elissia time to add something she'd prepared the night before. Once that was done she realized that she'd still heard nothing about her escort being ready to leave. Elissia waited no more than a minute before heading toward the door to find someone to ask, but just as she got there someone knocked. Thinking it was a fighter coming to tell her the coach was ready, Elissia was startled when she opened the door to find the savage standing outside.

"Your coach will be ready in just a little while," the savage said after blinking at the suddenly opened door. "Our breakfast has been brought up, and I would appreciate your sharing it with me. It's right in here."

He gestured toward a room across the hall, and Elissia hesitated only a moment before stepping out of her own room and heading for the other. Making a fuss now would be pointless; once she left she would never see the savage again.

A full breakfast had been laid out on the table, so Elissia sat down and poured herself some tea. The food looked tasty and fresh, but when Elissia found that her appetite still hadn't returned she gave all her attention to the tea. Odd how the prospect of going home was just as depressing as staying here had been...

"You don't expect me to send you back to your father looking like that, do you?" Elissia suddenly heard. She glanced up to find that the savage had taken the chair on the opposite side of the table, and now sat staring at her. "You're pale and thin and look as if you haven't eaten in a week," the savage continued in the same mild way. "If you don't do justice to that food in front of you, your father and brother will think I deliberately starved you."

Which may make me change my mind about sending you back, Elissia finished for him in her mind. That was something she definitely didn't want, so she reached for the food with a sigh. She'd eat as much as she could stuff down if that was what it took to escape.

The food really was good, but Elissia's mind wandered as she ate. The night before she'd been shocked when the savage had agreed to let her go, something she hadn't believed he'd ever agree to. She'd known all his talk about how much he loved her was nothing but talk, and hadn't expected him to prove the point for her quite that easily. But he had shown her the truth, and soon she would be on her way out of his life forever...

Just as Elissia put her fork down, finding it impossible to finish the last of her food, there was a knock at the door that continued to stand open. The savage put down his own fork as Elissia turned to see Listan in the doorway, gesturing to his king. The savage got up and walked over to Listan, listened to the soft words the man spoke, then he spoke soft words of his own. Listan nodded and bowed then left again, and the savage returned to his chair.

"It seems there may be a small problem," the savage said after picking up his teacup, the expression in his eyes distant. "That assassin from last night was alone here at the inn, but some of my men found indications that he may have had

accomplices camped in the woods. There's no sign of those accomplices themselves, only indications that they're

around, and it also wasn't possible to tell which way they went after their track was wiped out."

"Why should that be a problem?" Elissia asked, not seeing his point at all. "If those people were able to wipe out their tracks then they can't be a very large force at all. You have five hundred fighters all around you, so you can't possibly be worried that they'll try for you again."

"It wasn't me I was thinking of," the savage replied with a small shake of his head. "If I send half my force along as your escort you won't have any trouble getting back to your father's palace, but what if some of those accomplices follow you? If even one or two assassins get into your father's palace with the intention of hurting me by hurting those close to me, your father, mother, and brother could become targets. The assassins won't know, you see, that our marriage is over."

Elissia was so appalled that she nearly dropped her teacup.

"But that means if I go back now I could cause the deaths of my entire family!" she blurted. "But wouldn't the assassins go after me alone rather than anyone else? In their eyes I'd still be your wife and therefore the best target they could choose."

"In their place I would kill your family and leave you unharmed," the savage said, clearly having considered the point. "After last night you would know that the deaths came about because of me, and I would be the natural one for you to blame. Even if our marriage was nothing but a political arrangement, your hatred and disgust would accomplish more for my enemies than your death would. After all, a man can't be at his best when the woman who shares his bed can't abide the sight of him."

"I don't believe this," Elissia moaned, a hand to her head in an effort to stop the dizziness swirling her around. "Obviously I can't go home now, so where can I go? Back to Ramsond, possibly?"

"And lead the assassins to my brother?" the savage asked with a sound of ridicule. "Again, they would most likely leave you alive, this time with a different purpose in mind. I would naturally be expected to blame you for my brother's death, a contention that would be spread far and wide. Then they would be able to kill your family and blame the deaths on me, as a retaliatory gesture in revenge for my brother. Outrage and fear would spread through the common people of two kingdoms in addition to the ones in Arvin. The hatred between us would also be two way, making for an even more chaotic situation."

"This is a nightmare," Elissia whispered, wishing she hadn't eaten anything. Nausea was beginning to rise inside her, right next to fear and desperation.

"It looks like you'll have to continue on to Arvin with me," the savage said after a moment, sounding less than happy about the prospect. "The only problem is, I promised myself that your punishment would continue for as long as you were with me, until you learned the lesson I wanted you to learn. I really hate to break a promise, even one to myself..."

Elissia hadn't thought it possible to be even more appalled than she was, but the savage's words showed her it was perfectly possible. If she tried to leave all alone rather than with an escort, those assassins would have no trouble capturing her. With her to stand behind, they would find it easier to gain entrance to her father's palace. Killing her family and then blaming the deaths on the savage would do the same harm as in any of the other scenarios he'd mentioned, and that horror would be no one's fault but hers!

But to agree to let him continue with that terrible punishment! She could picture how the savage would put her over his knees, pull up her skirt and lower her drawers, then put that bead into her bottom. She would start to squirm immediately, of course, the bead giving her no other choice, and then the savage would start to spank her. The feel of his hand as it smacked her bottom hard, over and over until she wanted to scream like a mad woman, until no other thought filled her mind but the need to have him inside her, stroking hard and fast despite the ache

in her seat

-!

No, she couldn't allow that to be done to her again and not for the reason the savage might think. Elissia knew she'd never be able to bear wanting the savage's body again, desperately needing the lovemaking of a man who felt nothing of actual love for her. It was lust that he felt, nothing but physical desire, and Elissia knew she'd rather be dead than settle for anything less than the kind of love she'd secretly dreamed of. And that, of course, was her only remaining option. If she died right now it would be pointless for the assassins to go after her family. What a fortunate thing she'd kept possession of that dagger...

"On the other hand, if I break a promise to myself I can always forgive myself," the savage said just before Elissia spoke the first words of her refusal. "Since you won't be staying in Arvin any longer than it takes to find out who sent the assassins, you don't really need to learn any lessons, do you? If you're ready we can leave now."

"Yes, I'm ready," Elissia said at once, fighting not to show how flustered she felt. She hadn't expected the savage to change his mind about what he wanted to do to her, and being pulled back from the edge of violent death so abruptly was an unsettling experience. A final ending was still her major aim, but death would be easier to accept and accomplish if it was gentle...

As soon as she was in the coach and the savage was mounted, their procession headed back for the road they'd been following for days. Elissia fully expected to be bored after a short while had passed, but as soon as they were actually on the road she made an unsettling discovery. Even with the bead nowhere close to her bottom, her body began to ... hint that desire was growing anyway. Rather than be bored, Elissia spent the ride silently shouting at herself not to be a fool. Herself, unfortunately, didn't pay anything like complete attention...

Chapter 8

Derand breathed a voiceless sigh of relief after closing the coach door behind Seea, then went to mount his stallion. He'd actually come up with a counter to every protest Seea had made relating to leaving him, but he'd nearly lost the game when he tried to push it too far. He really enjoyed having his wife burn as high for him as he did for her, so he'd tried to maneuver her into continuing with the punishment that would keep putting her into that state.

But he'd left himself a just-in-case bolt hole, and it was a good thing he did. He'd been able to see that terrible depression about to weigh her down again, so he'd quickly reversed his position. She was now going to Arvin with him willingly, which would hopefully give him enough time to make her change her mind about wanting to leave.

"How did it go, my king?" Listan asked softly as soon as Derand was in his saddle. "Did the story work as well as we hoped it would?"

"It certainly did," Derand agreed, letting himself smile just a bit. "My wife now believes she doesn't dare go home or anywhere else, or those 'assassins' will follow and kill everyone she cares about. I don't feel particularly good about using her feelings against her, but desperation makes us use whatever tools are available. Have you told the men that we'll be stopping at my father's palace rather than going straight to mine?"

"Yes, the men have been told, my king," Listan agreed as he urged his mount to pace Derand's on the way to the road. "And they'll all be very much on the alert, not against mythical assassins, but against any ambushes that may have been set up. May I suggest that you wait to take lunch until you've reached your father's palace instead of stopping at another inn? We should get there only a short time past noon."

"I'd wait even if we arrived a long time past noon," Derand said with a grimace.

"Seea's family may be safe from my enemies, but my own family isn't. Skallin and his fighters will be fully alert in Ramsond for quite some time yet, but my father and other brothers need to be warned that someone has decided to move against me. Until I find out who that someone is they're all in danger."

Listan nodded without speaking, so Derand touched his stallion with a heel to increase his pace. The faster they reached his father's palace, the happier he would be.

Once they crossed the border into Arvin Derand's fighters closed up around the central party, but they still made really good time. Thanks to their early start they reached Meersond, Derand's father's city, even before noon and were immediately allowed through the gates. Another few minutes saw them at the palace, and Derand left Listan to escort Seea inside while he went looking for his father.

At that time of the day Derand knew where his father probably was, and the guess turned out to be right. The door of the small room next to the kitchens was closed, and the kitchen girls went busily about their chores without looking in the room's direction. That room was used when one or more of the kitchen girls needed punishing, and Derand's father, King Almis, was the one who gave that punishment.

Years earlier, Derand's father had discovered that the girls working in the kitchens were whipped if someone decided they deserved to be punished. Using a whip on mere girls had outraged King Almis, so he'd replaced the practice with one of his own. Every day before noon he went down to the kitchens, and all the girls who merited punishment were brought before him. If the offense was insignificant or an accident, King Almis usually let the girl off with a warning. If the offense was serious, though, the king provided a good, hard spanking.

As soon as Derand opened the door to the small room he heard the howling as a backdrop to the sound of smacking, and stepping inside provided the picture suggested by the sound. His father sat on a chair with a girl draped over his lap, her skirt raised high and her underdrawers down around her knees. Her pretty round bottom was well-tinged with red, and tears rolled down her cheeks as she howled. The spanking had obviously been going on for a while, so Derand closed the door behind him and stood near the wall until his father was free.

King Almis had sent his son a surprised smile when Derand first walked into the room, but his big hand hadn't stopped smacking that round and squirming bottom. The sound produced by his hand coming down showed that there was considerable strength behind each smack, and the girl's seat got another ten or twelve whacks before Almis finally reached to her underdrawers and pulled them up. Once the underdrawers were secured her skirt came down, and then she was set back on her feet.

"For your sake, Faela, I hope this session finally teaches you to mend your ways," Almis said sternly to the girl, who bounced and mewled where she stood but made no effort to rub at her bottom. "If you're caught bullying the smaller girls a third time, it won't be my hand warming your bottom. I'll take the wooden rule to your stubbornness for three days straight, and you won't be allowed to take your lunch standing up. You'll have to sit on your aching bottom on the bench with the other girls, and I promise you won't enjoy the experience. You may return to your work now."

"Yes, Your Majesty," the girl gasped out, some of her bouncing trying to turn into a curtsy. "I won't do it again, Your Majesty, I promise I won't!"

Derand joined his father in watching the girl hurry to the door and then disappear through it, and then they looked at each other instead.

"Obviously they're still not allowed to rub until they're out of this room," Derand said with a grin as he moved closer to his now-standing father. "It's good to see you again, Father."

"And you, Derand, or should I say, Your Majesty?" Almis replied with his own grin as he joined Derand in a mutual, back-slapping hug. "I heard that you sent for Skallin, but I still don't know why you needed him. Didn't

you have enough fighters of your own with you for a simple visit to Sollera?"

"That simple visit developed some serious complications," Derand answered as he stepped back. "If you have no other plans I can tell you all about it over lunch."

"Done," Almis agreed with a clap to Derand's shoulder. "Your mother is off lunching with friends, so we'll be able to speak privately."

"First, I think, we both need to pass along some orders to our people," Derand said, no longer amused. "If Mother is out of the palace her escort needs to be alerted. An assassin tried for me last night at the inn we stopped at, which has to mean that one of my loyal kings isn't as loyal as he should be."

Almis's amusement died with Derand's, and he quickly led the way up to the main part of the palace. Listan waited with the men of Derand's personal escort, so Derand took Listan aside and gave him instructions about Seea. Derand had finally become aware of how badly Seea had been eating, and she needed more than this morning's breakfast to stay alive. Listan agreed to stress the point with Seea that he, Derand, would need her help to find the person responsible for sending out the assassins, an effort that would assure the safety of her family. If that didn't make the stubborn mule of a woman start to eat properly again, Listan was to tell Derand at once.

With all matters of security taken care of, Almis led Derand to his apartment and the small, private dining room it contained. Fresh tea as well as a number of covered plates already waited for them along with servants ready to give them whatever they wanted. Almis acknowledged their bows and then dismissed them before gesturing Derand into joining him at the table. Derand sat down and then poured tea for them both.

"I thought your purpose in going to Sollera was to collect your bride," Almis remarked as Derand poured. "If Elissia is with you, she ought to be here eating with us."

"Elissia is with me, but things aren't going well between us," Derand admitted after no more than a heartbeat worth of hesitation. "That's why I wanted this time alone with you, to talk about her as well as this new problem. Let me tell you the whole story from the beginning."

Derand started from the time he first got to Sollera, then took the tale all the way through to the night before. He left out nothing in the way of detail, and his father listened quietly until he was through.

"So Skallin is now King of Ramsond and you have a wife who doesn't believe you love her," Almis summed up then. The food hadn't been touched, and Derand wasn't sure he had anything of an appetite left. "Even when Elissia was a little girl I had the feeling that she would be special, and that's why I agreed to having you married to her. You do understand what you did wrong, I hope?"

"With her involved, everything I do seems to be wrong," Derand answered glumly, toying with his teacup. "She has to learn that I'll punish her if she does something she shouldn't, but every time I do punish her she seems to fall into that life-eating depression. And she seems to think that if I punish her I can't love her. I suppose I should have waited until I got her home this last time, but I was trying to anticipate the trouble instead of simply waiting for it to happen."

"You were trying to make her into a sweet, obedient wife, the most foolish move I've ever seen you make," Almis corrected with a small headshake, partially echoing something Seea had said. "You fell in love with the woman as she actually

is, seeing her differences and strengths and appreciating them, and then you promptly tried to erase both things. If you truly mean to keep her as your wife, you have to let her act as her nature demands and save the punishments for the times she overdoes it. I'm willing to bet she'll give you more than a few chances to punish her, and if she deserves the punishment she won't resent what you do. She may not like it, but she won't resent it - and she won't

become depressed."

"So now all I have to do is figure out a way to get close to her again," Derand muttered, aware of how glum he sounded. "I acted cool and distant this morning to keep her from seeing that I'd changed my mind about letting her go, but I don't want to be cool and distant. I want to take her in my arms and make wild and passionate love to her while she joins me in the same way, but I can't think of how to accomplish that."

"Let's have our meal and we can think while we eat," Almis suggested, reaching over to the serving cart for the first of the covered dishes. "This food is still hot, but it won't be for much longer. You can't expect to think constructively on an empty stomach."

Derand smiled faintly at that and accepted his portion of the meal, and then the two of them ate in silence. Derand chewed through ideas as he chewed the food, and by the time he finished he'd actually come up with a plan.

"I may have something that will work, Father, but I'll need help from you and Mother," Derand said when he finally looked up. "It's risky in that Seea may figure out what I'm doing, but it's probably my only chance."

"Then you have to try the plan," his father answered, obviously having finished eating some time ago and now only sipped tea. "If you'll tell me what parts your mother and I are supposed to play, I'll pass along the word as soon as your mother gets back."

Derand explained his idea in detail, and his father nodded as he listened before making a suggestion of his own. The suggestion was a good one so Derand adopted it at once, then sat back to finish his own tea. Now all he had to do was try the plan on Seea - as soon as he got up the nerve to make the try...

Elissia let Listan help her out of the coach while she wondered where they were. The fighters around them had dismounted, but they looked more alert than at home.

"I've been asked to tell you, Your Majesty, that we'll be staying here in Meersond until tomorrow morning," Listan said as soon as she was on the ground. "My king needs to warn his father about the assassins, and staying the night here should be safer than stopping at an inn. This city is, in a manner of speaking, out of our way, so detouring here just might ruin our enemy's plans."

"Yes, he does need to warn his father," Elissia realized aloud. "And it might even be a good idea to warn my father, if your king can do it without letting any watchers know it's happening."

"His Majesty will probably ask King Almis to send a rider who won't be noticed," Listan responded as he put a hand to her arm to guide her up the steps and into the palace. "Sending a messenger in black leather would defeat the purpose."

That made sense to Elissia, so she simply let herself be shown into the palace. Everything, including the city, looked very much like her own father's city of Sollera, a revelation Elissia hadn't been expecting. She'd always pictured the kingdoms of Arvin as backward, horrible places, completely uncivilized, with innocent people constantly being murdered in the streets while fighters ran riot. It was the reason she'd never before visited here in Meersond even when her father, mother, and brother did, but so far she'd seen nothing like that.

The inside of the palace was as calm and peaceful as the outside, with male servants in black trousers and red tunics hurrying past on errands. Female servants wore black skirts and red tunics, and oddly enough many of the skirts in sight were shorter than what was considered proper. It was possible to see the ankles of the girls wearing those skirts, and faintly shocked surprise turned into musing consideration for Elissia. Shorter skirts would make going up and down stairs much easier, a benefit Elissia had enjoyed while wearing breeches. Who would have expected to find an intelligent innovation here, in backward, savage Arvin?

"If you'll step this way, Your Majesty, I'll show you to your apartment," Listan said, gesturing toward a wide set of stairs not very far away. "I'll also have your trunks brought up, so you can have access to any of your possessions you might want."

Elissia wasn't particularly interested in having her trunks brought up, but rather than say so she simply followed Listan up the stairs. The only thing of interest to her right now was finding the man behind the assassins and then being able to go home, but that very pleasant end result was hardly likely to be immediately possible. She would have to be patient, but patience had never come to her very easily...

The apartment Listan showed her to was large and very beautifully furnished. In the mood Elissia was in she would have been happier with squalor or at the very least stark unloveliness. A moment after they entered the sitting room three servants appeared, one of them pushing a cart loaded down with food. Listan had them leave the cart near a nicely set round table, and then he dismissed them.

"I think that His Majesty will be taking lunch with King Almis, but I'm not certain," Listan said once the servants were gone. "I'll go and find out for sure, but since you must be hungry I know my king would not want you to wait even if he means to join you. I'll return as soon as I know what his plans are."

Listan gave her a bow before leaving, but Elissia did nothing to acknowledge the courtesy. She might be looking forward to the end of that laughable marriage she'd been dragged into, but that didn't mean she enjoyed having her savage of a husband going off without telling her what he was doing. It made her feel like an unimportant piece of furniture, and she'd never let people treat her that way. Now she had to put up with it from a savage, but happily not for much longer.

Elissia felt a small amount of hunger, but instead of going to the food she went to the room's terrace doors and through them to the balcony. Below the balcony was a beautifully laid out garden, a riot of colors that seemed to go really well with the calm gray, light blue, and light green of the sitting room behind her. The air was also sweet and warm, so Elissia stood looking at the garden as she lost herself in dark thoughts of how this piece of Arvin ought to look.

Hearing someone entering the sitting room brought Elissia back to where she stood. Turning showed her that it was Listan who had come in, probably with the word he'd promised to bring.

"Your Majesty, the servants have your possessions," Listan said as soon as he'd stepped out onto the terrace, gesturing behind himself. Inside pairs of men could be seen, struggling to carry the obviously heavy trunks. "I've told them to put the things in the main bedchamber, but if you'd prefer to have them somewhere else I'll countermand the order."

"The main bedchamber will be fine," Elissia said, not really caring one way or the other. "So what have you found out about the plans of your king?"

"My king is definitely lunching with his father," Listan answered, obviously dismissing the subject of her trunks. "As I understand it, they mean to discuss which of my king's followers might be behind the attack so they prefer to have you elsewhere. If their opinions give you a false impression of the men involved, you might be misled when it comes time to decide which of the kings really is guilty. If the miscreant isn't discovered sooner by another means, I believe my king means to have all of his subject kings introduced to you."

"And then I'll be able to form my own opinions without someone else's prejudice getting in the way," Elissia murmured, more impressed than she cared to admit. "All right, the reason for excluding me is a good one so I won't mention it again. Is there anything else?"

"Only one thing, Your Majesty, and that's a favor I'd like to ask," Listan came back without hesitation. "Would you mind if I joined you for lunch? Once I go back to the men there will be a thousand things people will want me

to take care of, and I'll be lucky if I get to eat before sundown. If I join you in the meal before I leave, I won't pass out from hunger in the middle of all those jobs."

"But if you pass out from hunger, you just might wake up to find that someone else has taken care of all those jobs," Elissia couldn't keep from suggesting with a straight face. "Wouldn't that end be worth a little hunger?"

"Speaking from experience, Your Majesty, I'd wake up to find that the job load had doubled," Listan answered dryly, clearly aware of the fact that he was being teased. "It pains me to say it, but once we're home you're likely to find out exactly what I mean. The tasks my king means to set your hand to aren't ones that can be done by others, otherwise others would already be doing them. Shall we go to table now?"

Elissia let Listan urge her back inside and over to the table, where he seated her before taking a chair of his own. The men who had carried in the trunks were already gone, so it was only the two of them in the apartment. The urge to ask Listan exactly what those jobs he'd mentioned would be was strong, but Elissia forced the words to stay unspoken. It wasn't as if she would be doing anything in Arvin for long, after all, so why waste time thinking about them?

Listan took covered dishes from the cart, removed the covers, then offered them one at a time to Elissia. She hesitated very briefly before taking the first, then decided not to make a fuss. If she refused to eat then Listan would probably go hungry as well, and he'd pester her nonstop to change her mind. Better to take a few tastes of the food and avoid a scene...

The various dishes were really tasty, much better than the inn food they'd been eating, and Elissia found herself swallowing more than she'd intended. Well, she did have to keep up her strength until the man behind the assassins had been discovered, so eating the meal couldn't be considered a setback to her plans.

"Thank you, Your Majesty, that was really good," Listan said when he finally pushed his plate away. "One more cup of tea and then I'll be on my way."

"Listan, what do your men who aren't right next to us eat when we travel?" Elissia asked, something she'd been wondering about. "It would take forever for the inns to feed five hundred men, wouldn't it?"

"It certainly would, so they don't eat at the inns," Listan answered with a chuckle as he poured the last cup of tea he'd mentioned. "Each man carries a supply of dried meat and vegetables, and the inns capable of doing it are paid to bake as much extra bread as they can. Some of the men also hunt while they're on the move, so there's usually fresh venison or sometimes pork available for dinner. We also change around the twenty-man escort twice a day, so if we're out long enough all of the men get a chance at an inn meal and a real bed."

Elissia nodded her thanks for the information, surprised at a small revelation that had come. Men might be in charge of her world, but that was only some men. The rest weren't even in charge of their own lives, not if they were fighters employed by one of the high ones. No one, no man would expect a woman to live like a wagonless nomad, but for other men to live that way was considered nothing unusual. Maybe some day it would be possible for women and men who weren't in high positions to step forward together to demand their rights...

"It's time for me to leave, Your Majesty," Listan said as he stood, drawing Elissia out of her thoughts. "Thank you again for letting me share your meal."

"I should have made you stand there and watch me eat instead of letting you join me," Elissia said, remembering how she really felt about Listan. "Next time I just might do that - if I haven't thought of a better way to show you how I feel about people who don't mind making me angry."

"I'm willing to apologize as often as you like about that incident, Your Majesty," Listan said with a bow - that probably hid his amusement. "I assure you that I'll never do the same again, and now I really must leave."

The man turned and hurried out of the apartment, obviously getting out while the getting was good. Listan had "assured" her that he would never drug her food again, but if he really meant to keep to the assurance he would have given his word instead of offering empty, meaningless gestures. Listan would need something to teach him not to consider her someone to mess around with, but so far she hadn't been able to think of a decent punishment.

With her cup still mostly full of tea, Elissia stayed at the table and thought about what it might be possible to do to teach Listan to mind his own business. An unnoticed amount of time passed, during which time she still couldn't think of anything really effective or fitting, and then a servant knocked and entered the room.

"Excuse me, ma'am, but I was told to clean up the remnants of lunch from the High Queen's apartment," the man said in a hesitant way as he slowly moved closer after closing the door again. "You are the High Queen, aren't you?"

"I suppose so," Elissia agreed. She expected the red-shirted servant to look confused over the oddness of her answer, but the man just smiled and nodded and then turned to the cart. Instead of clearing the table he began to do something with the extra teacup and pitcher of tea still standing on the cart, an action that made Elissia immediately suspicious. She'd grown up surrounded by servants, and none of them had acted the way this one did. That could mean... It might be a good idea to prepare for the worst even if it never came...

The night before, Elissia had used strips cut from the bed sheet to fashion a makeshift sheathe for the dagger she'd used to kill the assassin. This morning, after the inn girl had helped her dress and then had left, she'd tied the sheathe and dagger to her right leg, arranging the dagger hilt down and held in place with a simple slip knot.

Now Elissia raised her leg and gown skirt without bending, pretending that nothing was wrong as she opened the slip knot with a single pull and took the dagger hilt into her hand. Putting her leg down again and letting her gown skirt fall back in place made it possible for Elissia to hide the presence of the dagger in a fold of the skirt. If the servant was a real servant, she'd let him clear up the mess without trouble. If he wasn't a real servant...

"Ah, here we are, Your Majesty," the man said as he suddenly turned away from the cart with a cup in his hand. "A nice fresh cup of tea for you. All you have to do is drink it, and then I'll be able to leave."

"I already have a cup of tea," Elissia pointed out in as calm a voice as she could manage. "Since I don't need another yet, you can just finish cleaning up and go now."

"I'm afraid I'll have to insist, Your Majesty," the man said, stopping only a couple of steps away from where she sat, his expression not in the least servant-like. "My ... employer would be very unhappy with me if I didn't watch you drink this tea with my own eyes. It's a kindness you would do well not to argue with, girl. Take the tea and drink it."

"Your employer," Elissia repeated, not nearly as calm as she was pretending to be. "You're not talking about King Almis, I know, so how about telling me his actual name."

"I think not," the man answered, an odd smile turning his lips. "And if you're waiting for members of the High King's guard to rush in here and save you, I'm afraid it won't be happening. Only King Almis's guards are on the floor, and they're too far away to hear you even if you scream. I admire your attitude of bravery, but if you don't drink the tea I'll have to use less pleasant means to end you. You're very much in the way now, and that can't be allowed to continue."

"I'm afraid you'll just have to put up with the inconvenience," Elissia returned, her heart beginning to thump instead of beat. "I'm not going to drink that tea or anything else you may have, so you'd better run for your life right now."

"I'm sorry you feel that way," the man said with a sigh as he put the teacup down on the table and gave her full

attention again. "I'll try to get this done as fast as possible, but it won't be as pleasant as simply falling asleep. Don't forget that whatever pain and anguish you experience is your own fault."

And then he raised his hands as he came toward her, obviously intending to use strangulation instead of poison to end her. Elissia tried to ignore her pounding heart as she braced herself, a silent prayer occupying most of her thoughts.

Please don't let me hesitate with the dagger, she whispered inside her head. Please let me strike at once - and hit what I'm aiming at. If I don't...

As inexperienced as she was with edged weapons, if she missed it would certainly be the end of her...

Chapter 9

Elissia watched the assassin move closer to her, her fist tight around the hidden dagger hilt, her heart thudding loud enough to be heard on the other side of the palace. She had to wait until the man actually put his hands around her throat, otherwise she ran the risk of his jumping back before she could use the dagger on him. But she couldn't wait too long, or the man might break her neck instead of strangling her, and then -

All the clamoring of possibilities her head rang with suddenly stopped when the assassin reached her and began to take her throat in his big hands. Just as he touched her she brought the dagger out from behind the fold of her gown skirt and thrust it with all her strength into the middle of his stomach and then cut upward. Most of the dagger didn't move but the point did, and the assassin's mouth opened to let out blood instead of words. The man looked terribly shocked, and then all expression disappeared from his face as he simply fell to the floor in front of her.

Elissia sat shaking and staring down at the body for an unknowable amount of time, her hand still tightly wrapped around the dagger hilt, a faint dizziness threatening to turn all of her weightless. Once the dizziness faded, though, she was able to start pulling herself together - and notice that her gown was covered in blood. A good thing the traveling outfit wasn't hers, then...

"All right, now you have to decide what to do next," she muttered as she stood up, feeling less shaky by the minute. "You definitely have to call someone, but you want to make sure that it isn't the wrong someone you use as a messenger. The next time you won't have surprise on your side..."

There were supposed to be palace guards on the floor, and calling them might be the best idea. Elissia considered that as she moved slowly toward the hall door, hoping the background of guards would be looked into more closely than that of servants. The man she'd killed hadn't simply been paid to attack her, so -

Before she could reach the door it opened suddenly, and the savage strode into the room. He seemed the least bit preoccupied, but as soon as he got a look at her he turned downright pale.

"Seea, what happened?" he almost screamed as he rushed over to her, the look in his eyes wild. "How badly are you hurt? Who - ?"

"The blood isn't mine," Elissia answered, struggling to sound calm as the savage's big hands came gently to her arms. "That man back there... He wasn't a servant he was an assassin, but he didn't know I had this dagger..."

Elissia held up the dagger to show what she was talking about, and oddly enough its blade was also covered in blood. Obviously she'd have to clean it before she put it back into its sheathe...

"Thank all the gods you did have that dagger," the savage said as he held her to him, paying no attention to all the blood. "Come over here and sit down while I get a few things taken care of."

He walked her to a chair and made her sit in it, then strode back to the hall door. Instead of going out, though, he bellowed for the guards, then gave a large number of orders when the men ran up. After the guards hurried away again he came back to the chair Elissia sat in, then perched on its arm to hold Elissia close.

By the time people began to arrive, Elissia had realized that she'd been in shock. Her hand ached from the death grip she'd had on the dagger for so long, and her stomach was beginning to protest the presence of blood all over her. And she'd been leaning against the savage and soaking up the feeling of his arm around her, just as though he really cared about her. He'd been upset when he thought she'd been hurt in his father's house, but other than that...

"Derand, what's happened?" King Almis demanded as he strode into the room only a step ahead of Listan and a group of the savage's fighters. "Has your lady been hurt?"

"Happily, she was the one who did the hurting," the savage answered, a touch of satisfaction coloring his words. "One of your servants tried to kill her."

"One of my servants?" Almis echoed, now looking shocked. "Most of my people have been with me for years. Let me take a look at him..."

The savage's father stalked over to where the body lay and stared down for a moment, then he turned back to them.

"I'm glad - and disturbed - to say that I don't recognize this man," Almis said as he moved closer to where Elissia sat. "Just how certain is your lady that the man really meant to harm her?"

"He wanted me to drink the 'fresh tea' he'd prepared, and when I refused he settled on strangulation," Elissia answered before the savage could speak. "He told me I was 'in the way,' and therefore had to be removed. My guess would be that I wasn't the victim he originally came here to take care of. Since he hadn't reached that original victim yet, his employer was able to take advantage of his presence and send him after me. He refused to say who his employer was even when he thought I would take the knowledge into death with me."

"You actually asked him who he worked for, Elissia?" Almis said with sudden amusement as he looked down at her. "Even when you knew he meant to kill you? My dear girl, you've surpassed even my high expectations concerning your abilities."

"Just asking doesn't win you any prizes," Elissia answered, knowing that she sounded sour. "If I'd asked in the right way he might have told me what I wanted to know. As it is... As it is I've ruined a perfectly good traveling outfit for nothing. Would you gentlemen care to excuse me while I change into something less ... colorful."

"Yes, of course you need to bathe and change," the savage said at once, sounding annoyed with himself. "Listan, get that body moved out of here and then have some servants in to clean up. And it might be a good idea to move my wife to another apartment entirely. I'll ring for maids, and then we'll wait here until they arrive."

"I - would prefer a minute to myself until the maids arrive," Elissia said just as quickly, actually needing that minute rather badly. "And there's no need to move to another apartment. This wasn't the apartment's fault, just the fault of the man who came into it."

"I think giving your wife a minute to herself is a very good idea," King Almis said just as his son looked about to disagree. "We'll be right outside the door, after all, and I'd like to speak to you for a moment about extra security measures."

"All right, Father, we'll do it your way," the savage said after a moment of what looked like inner argument. "But I'll want only maids you recognize allowed in here. And we need to know when that assassin was hired for your

household staff -

and if anyone was hired with him or at almost the same time."

"I'll take care of that part of it myself," Almis said, urging his son out after the fighters carrying the body. Listan was directing the fighters, and a moment later the door was closed behind all of them.

Elissia fought down a shudder as she rose unsteadily from the chair and hurried over to the table she'd eaten at. She would have very much enjoyed asking for another apartment, but being elsewhere would have ruined her plans. Later she would need to be in this apartment, to complete what she only now started.

The cup of tea the assassin had poisoned still sat on the table where he'd left it, so Elissia took it, saucer and all, and quickly hid it under a couch a good number of feet away from the center of the mess. When the servants came in to clean she didn't want them to find the cup and its contents, not when she hoped to get a couple of vials from her possessions and fill them with the tea. When the time came, she would put her trophy to excellent use...

Elissia was back in her chair and trying to clean the dagger when the maids were admitted behind the savage. He led them forward, stopping a few feet away from where Elissia sat as the girls hurried forward.

"I'd like to take that dagger and clean it properly for you," the savage said, his words even but an odd look appearing in his eyes. "You can be very certain that I'll get it back to you as soon as you've had your bath and are in clean clothes. After that, I expect that weapon to be with you at all times. And my father assures me that these girls were born here in the palace, so there's no question about their loyalty."

"Yes, I could use some help with this dagger, so thank you," Elissia said as she stood to hand over the weapon. "I won't be long bathing and changing."

"Take as long as you want to," the savage said, all but caressing the weapon he now held. "My men and I will be right out here waiting."

Elissia nodded and then let the girls show her to the main bedchamber, the place her trunks had been put. The room was enormous, easily able to hold all the trunks as well as its usual furniture, and its bathing chamber was through a door to the left. Two of the four girls had gone ahead to get the bath water started into the very large tub, and when the other two led Elissia into the room they began to help her out of the bloody clothing.

It was a bit stomach-turning to find that the blood had soaked down to Elissia's camisole and underdrawers as well as to her skin, and even more of her body was smeared in the process of getting out of the clothing. By then the tub was half full with four fish figures pouring water into it, so Elissia climbed into the water and immediately began to wash. It would have been nice to soak for a while, but that would have to wait until she could do it in water that wasn't mostly red.

It didn't take long to get her body and hair clean, and when she climbed out there were towels waiting to wrap around and dry that body and hair. Once the water was gone from her body she exchanged that towel for a wrap one of the girls held, a wrap she recognized as one of her own. That let her go comfortably back into the bedchamber to look through the trunks herself, where she picked out what she wanted to wear.

The day gown she chose was white with tiny flowers embroidered all over, one of her favorites, along with the matching slippers. She'd almost chosen one of her pants outfits instead, but hiding a dagger under breeches would be harder than using a skirt. And right now having that dagger was more important than being comfortable, so wearing the breeches would have to wait.

Two of the girls had cleaned up the bathing chamber while the other two helped her dress before doing her hair, and then all four went back out into the sitting room with her. The savage was there with his father, and once the

four girls curtsied and left, King Almis gestured to Elissia.

"Come and sit over here with us, my dear," Almis said, indicating the small ring of chairs he and his son were partially occupying. "There's something we'd like to discuss with you."

Both of the men, now on their feet, were obviously waiting for her, so Elissia walked over and joined them.

"I'm glad to say you look better than you did a short while ago," Almis said with a smile that disappeared rather quickly. "Your husband has a plan to find this miscreant who keeps sending assassins, but very frankly I don't approve of what he wants to do. I'm sure that once you hear the plan you'll agree with me, so - "

"Father, please," the savage interrupted. They were all still on their feet, and the savage looked unhappy but determined. "I'd like to have a few minutes alone with my wife, and then you can put forward your opinion of my plan. The time won't be long."

The savage's words were polite enough, but it was perfectly clear to Elissia that he spoke an order rather than a request. The same was obviously just as clear to his father; Almis hesitated a moment, and then he nodded.

"All right, Derand, I'll leave you two alone for a short while," he said. "But don't think I intend to change my opinion - or will hesitate to speak it. I'll be right outside the door, so call me after you've had your ... talk."

With that the savage's father left the room, and once the door had closed behind him the savage gestured to the chair behind Elissia.

"Please sit down," the savage said in that calm and distant way he'd spoken to her this morning. "I'm no happier about the plan I've come up with than my father is, but you're more than entitled to be a part of solving this problem. And before I forget, here's your dagger."

He pulled a sheathed dagger out from behind him, where it had most probably been stuck down into the back of his swordbelt. The sheath had leather ties that would do a better job than strips of a bedsheet, and a loop of leather around one side of the finger guard would keep the dagger from falling out of the sheath by accident. Deliberately freeing the dagger would be no more involved than flicking the loop out of the way, which made the whole arrangement perfectly fine.

"Thank you," Elissia said as she took the dagger before sitting and raising her gown skirt. It was the work of only a moment to tie the sheath in place, and then she was able to smooth her skirt down again and look toward the savage. "What plan do you have that everyone is so unhappy about?"

"It came to me that the best way to gather my subject kings without arousing suspicion in the guilty one would be to invite them all to a ... happy occasion." The distance in the savage's voice was still very much there, as though he discussed the doings of strangers. "No one knows yet that I've agreed to free you to go wherever you please, so if we pretend that we'll be having a second wedding ceremony we'll be able to mingle with our 'guests' for the days of celebration before the ceremony. Working together we ought to be able to find the one who likes to send out assassins."

"That sounds reasonable," Elissia said, ignoring his tone. "Why would your father dislike what sounds like a fairly good idea?"

"My father thinks that the situation is much too dangerous for you to be involved in," the savage answered with a gesture of dismissal. "He wants me to forbid you to get any more deeply involved than you already are, and if I refuse to be what he considers intelligent, he's ready to do the forbidding in my place. He refuses to understand that you're already involved, so trying to keep you out of the search would hurt us more than help anyone. But I have a different problem with the plan, and if you feel that you can't go along with all aspects of it then I'll have to

think of something else that doesn't include you."

"What can there be about the plan that I won't want to go along with?" Elissia asked, instantly suspicious. "As long as you don't expect me to actually go through with that second ceremony I can't see anything to object to."

"No, I don't expect you to go through with a second ceremony that will have to be put aside," the savage said with a small shake of his head. "What we will have to do, though, is pretend that we're deeply in love so we'll have a good reason for wanting a second ceremony. I need you to understand that I will only be pretending, no matter how sincere I happen to look, so there won't be any misunderstandings. You'll have to do the same, and we'll also have to sleep in the same bed and share sex. Servants always know about these things, and if any others here or in my own palace are in the pay of the enemy... Well, we'd be wasting our time pretending."

Elissia sat and thought about what the savage had said, and at first she hated the idea of pretending to be in love. The time seemed destined to be terribly painful, but then it occurred to her that the pain usually came from being in doubt. Unlike the time with him until now, she would not have to waste a single moment agonizing over the question of whether or not he really loved her. She would know he didn't, so the only pain involved would be from disappointment. That particular pain already had to be lived with, which meant that nothing new would be added.

But there was also the matter of sleeping with him, although she couldn't argue the fact that the servants would know about almost everything going on between them. Elissia stirred just a little in her chair at the thought of sharing her body with the savage, hating to admit even to herself that she very much wanted the savage's body. She'd gotten to the point of wanting him almost every time she saw him, and when she stopped to think about it she realized there was no reason not to indulge the desire. After all, it would only be for a short while longer...

"As long as we're both clear on the fact that we're only pretending, where's the harm?" Elissia finally said as she looked at the savage again. "I'd be willing to pretend to some worse things in order to be free to go where I please again, and that's the object of this game. Is your father likely to be a problem when he discovers I won't let him 'forbid' me to do things?"

"If he gets too persistent, just remind him that you're his sovereign," the savage said with an odd smile of satisfaction. "Every now and then that's what I have to do, and he can't very well deny it. We'll start the game as soon as he's back in here, and make sure you don't mention or show that dagger. He thought it wasn't 'ladylike' for a woman to have a weapon, and wanted me to surround you with my fighters instead."

The savage shook his head as he rose to go to the door, seeing nothing of Elissia's smile of amusement. The savage knew well enough that she wasn't worried about the way other people defined the word "ladylike," and he obviously agreed with her. And since they were playing a game, Elissia intended to relax and enjoy it. She'd probably never have another chance at some fun, so there was every reason to indulge the opportunity...

Derand felt almost lightheaded with relief as he went to the door to call his father back into the room. His instincts had been right about the way Seea saw things, and as long as she thought he was only pretending to love her she'd have no trouble accepting whatever he said and did. Belief was her problem, belief in other people, and now she didn't have to agonize over whether or not to believe.

Opening the door showed Derand that his father was in the midst of a desultory conversation with Listan, who had brought a squad of the fighters to guard Seea and the apartment. Derand's father turned at the sound of the door opening, so Derand nodded once before asking his father to join them again. His father smiled with brief amusement, then put on an expression that was obviously ready to be stern and parental. It had been his idea that Seea ought to be "forbidden" to go along with the plan, an attitude that was almost guaranteed to make her do just the opposite, and Derand's father was obviously pleased that his idea had worked. Now he'd have the fun of playing stern while Seea ignored him.

"Now it's my turn," King Almis announced as soon as he and Derand were back near the chairs. "I'd like a few private words with your lady, Derand, so please wait outside for short while."

"As you like, Father," Derand agreed mildly, then turned to Seea. "I'll be right outside, love, and when I come back I'll want to hold you a while. I came much too close to losing you, and I need to be reassured that you're still all right."

He leaned down to touch her lips with his, and then he turned and left the room. It was ridiculous that the only way he could hold and make love to his woman was to claim that he didn't love her, but if that's what it took then that's what he'd do. Judging the needs of other people was foolish; if you loved that other person you gave her what she needed without making any judgments.

"How is it going, my king?" Listan asked once he was out in the hall. "Is your queen really all right?"

"She seems to be," Derand answered softly as he looked around. "And so far the plan is also all right. I now have a reason to be with her most of the time as well as to be worried and concerned. If I'd had to be aloof and uncaring for much longer I probably would have turned violent."

"I assigned some of the men to help your father's fighters check into the background of the staff," Listan said after voicing a sigh. "There's nothing I can say to excuse my lapse in judgment, my king. Once we've returned home I'll understand perfectly when you replace me with someone you can rely on. If the queen had been killed the fault would have been no one's but mine."

"Come on, Listan, give me a break!" Derand protested, instantly aware of how careful he had to be. "Don't I have enough problems right now without you adding to them? I know you're upset about Seea's almost being killed, but the attack had nothing to do with your reliability. Even if her apartment had been guarded, would the door guards have refused to allow entrance to a servant who'd come to clean up? And the man had been working as a servant for a while, so even checking on his identity wouldn't have done any good. Whoever is responsible for this mess, it certainly isn't you."

It was clear to Derand that Listan wanted to argue what his king had said, guilt having made the man certain he was to blame. But the common-sense points Derand had made worked to calm the guilt the way little else would have. If Derand had been gentle and understanding with Listan the man would have felt even guiltier; acting tired and beset had been a much better idea.

"Well, from now on no one will enter that apartment without being accompanied by my fighters," Listan gruded after a moment, still not looking terribly happy. "The men will stand between the servants and your queen, and if anyone tries anything else they won't live long enough to regret their foolhardiness."

"If someone else makes a try, do your best to capture the man rather than kill him," Derand said, back to speaking softly. "I need information more than I need another dead body, and the slime can always be put to death later. Make sure the men understand that if they have to choose between killing the attacker and letting him get away then they can kill him, but other than that I want them to try to take a prisoner."

Listan bowed his agreement and went off to pass the word along to their men, so Derand had nothing more to do than wait. The wait lasted longer than he thought it would, but finally the door opened and his father gestured to him.

"Your lady is just as stubborn as you are," King Almis complained when Derand walked into the sitting room again. "She refuses to listen to reason, and I'm tired of wasting my breath. I'm going to leave you two mules to be stubborn with each other, and we'll see you later at dinner."

Derand's father gave him a wink before stalking out of the apartment, at the same time giving Derand the job of needing to keep his face straight. His father was a great lover of intrigue, and as long as only the would-be assassin was dead the king would relish every part of Derand's plan.

The rest of the day went by very pleasantly for Derand. He ordered in fresh tea for himself and Seea, and then he kept his word and sat with her on a couch with his arms around her. For her part Seea made no effort to hold herself away from him especially when servants entered, and that made things even better.

When the same four girls came in to help Seea dress for dinner, Derand was able to go to his own apartment and do the same. When he was dressed he left orders for his few possessions and small amount of clothing to be moved to Seea's apartment while they were at dinner, and then he went back to wait for his wife to be ready. She came out wearing a breathtaking gown of silver lace with matching slippers, and her smile of amusement at his expression looked real.

"You're very good at this pretending business," she murmured as she took his arm, ignoring the chattering of the girls as the four left the apartment. "I'll try to be just as good, of course, but I probably won't be able to match your performance."

"You're doing just fine," he assured her in a matching murmur, showing his own amusement but for a different reason. His "pretense" would probably be flawless, but not because he was that good at it. Actually feeling what you're pretending about makes all the difference.

Derand's parents, King Almis and Queen Rildin, waited for them in the private dining room Derand had shared with his father earlier at lunch. The room was also filled with servants now, and Derand's mother came forward immediately to greet them.

"Derand, how lovely to see you again, my darling," the queen said with a laugh as

she hugged her son before turning to Seea. "And Elissia is finally with you. I haven't seen you in a few years, Elissia, and I must say that you've grown into a really beautiful woman. Welcome to our family, my dear."

Seea accepted the hug she was also given without drawing back, and then she let herself be walked away while the queen began to give her "advice" about married life. The advice was actually a listing of the failures of men and how women could overcome those failures, and in no time Seea was laughing aloud and apparently really enjoying herself.

"I knew your mother would cooperate with the plan," Derand's father murmured after joining Derand where he stood. "She really does like the girl, so she'll do her best to make Elissia feel as comfortable here as she does at home. At her former home. You'll be leaving in the morning to take her to her new home?"

"First thing," Derand confirmed with a nod. "And if things continue to go as well as they've been going, I'm going to owe major thanks to the gods. Have you found out anything about that assassin?"

"Only that he was friendly and pleasant to everyone but close to no one," Almis answered, losing his satisfied expression. "And he had 'friends' visit him on a regular basis, people who were strangers to those who saw them. I think the man was sent here to be in a position to strike when the word came, which would mean that there's more of a plot afoot than we can see right now. I've sent riders to alert your brothers, so from now on we'll all be very aware of the people around us."

"And as soon as I get home I'll set the rest of our plan in motion," Derand said, watching Seea laugh as she joined his mother in defaming men. "With any luck we'll know who the miscreant is before the month is out."

Derand's father made a sound of pleased agreement, but Derand barely noticed. Once the threat was over Seea

would expect to be allowed to leave him, but that wasn't going to happen. Before then he would find some way to make her know that his love was real, that he wanted her to stay with him for the rest of their lives. He would find a way to do that, he would!

Almis, one of the kings of the newly federated kingdoms of Alvin, watched his wife Rildin walk toward him where he sat relaxing in their bedchamber. It had taken her girls longer to get her ready for bed than it had taken his own valets, so he sat comfortably in his favorite wrap and sipped wine while he waited. And enjoyed the sight of his wife walking toward him dressed in nothing but filmy clouds of the pink night outfit she'd put on. Rildin was still a very beautiful woman, and even after all the children she'd given him her body still had the power to make him ... rise to the occasion.

"She really is a lovely girl, Almis," Rildin said with a sigh as she stopped not far from where her husband sat. "Are you certain she wants to leave Derand? He paid her constant attention during dinner, and she accepted that attention like a woman in love."

"They've agreed to 'pretend,' Rildin," Almis answered with a sigh. "For the sake of our counterplot against the unknown enemy, they're both going to pretend to be deeply in love. I'll admit I wondered if Derand hadn't gone ... strange when he told me what he intended to do, but after seeing how much more relaxed and happy Elissia was tonight than this afternoon... She's no longer worried about whether or not Derand loves her because she knows for a fact that he doesn't."

"That poor girl!" Rildin exclaimed as she hurried to Almis's lap so that he might hold her tight. "I shudder to think what life has been like for her that she's happier when she believes she isn't loved. And she isn't all that happy either. You men didn't seem to notice that she ate less of the meal than she should have."

"Just because we didn't say anything out loud doesn't mean we didn't notice," Almis corrected as he stroked her beautiful black hair. "I know for a fact that Derand noticed, but he's made so many mistakes with her lately that he would have been a fool to say anything. Elissia has to be accepted on her own terms, otherwise Derand will lose her."

"I don't even want to think about that," Rildin said, raising her head to show dark eyes filled with anticipated pain. "I've never seen Derand look at a woman the way he looks at Elissia, and if he loses her it will destroy him. Isn't there anything more we can do to help?"

"From now on it's up to them," Almis replied, privately wishing there was another answer to be found. "They're both adults, so they have to be left alone to work out their own lives. And now that that's settled, we can talk about you."

"What about me?" Rildin said after a very short hesitation, obviously letting herself be distracted. "I'm doing fine, thank you very much."

"Not from where I sit," Almis returned, letting her see a scowl. "Did you think I missed hearing what you said to Elissia about men? Or did you simply think I'd accept your insults without a murmur?"

"I wasn't being insulting, I was telling the truth," Rildin countered, a gleam of devilment now in her beautiful dark eyes. "All men need a woman to guide them in the proper direction, the more important the man, the more he needs the guidance. The ones who stay unmarried are beyond help, of course, but those who are smart enough to choose women like Elissia and me show a definite spark of hope."

"And you don't see that remark as insulting," Almis said with a sigh. "It's really unfortunate that you haven't yet learned your lesson, because now I'll have to teach it to you again."

"If you think you can make me back down from my beliefs then it's you who hasn't learned the lesson," Rildin

said with a smirk of arrogance. "You won't make me sorry no matter what you do."

"Let's see if that's true," Almis said as he turned her face down over his lap. "I've been fairly gentle with you until now, but I won't repeat the mistake. This time you're going to learn to be a good girl with no two ways about it."

"That's easy enough to say," Rildin countered with a laugh as he raised the skirts of her pink sleep outfit. "Harder is actually accomplishing what you intend, and I seriously doubt if you'll be any more successful this time than you've - Oh! What are you doing?"

"I'm making use of a story I heard only just recently," Almis answered as he kept her from reaching the string of the bead he'd put in her bottom. Derand had a fairly large supply of the things, so he shouldn't miss the one Almis had taken. "You may take a brisk spanking better than most, my sweet, but this addition ought to make the time more ... interesting for you."

"No, Almis, don't you dare!" she protested desperately as he kept her from escaping his hold. "You haven't used something like that since we were first married, and even then you didn't spank me at the same - Oh! Ow! No, stop it! Stop!"

"Why would you want me to stop?" Almis asked calmly as his hand whacked that beautiful bottom again and again. "You said I wasn't very effective at teaching you a good lesson, so what are you complaining about?"

Rildin was so busy squirming and howling that she couldn't seem to put together lucid answers to his questions. Every time his hand came down on her bottom with a satisfying "smack!" she kicked and writhed, her reactions more ... abandoned than they'd been in quite some time. She really was good at taking a hard spanking without losing her self-possession, so it was more than time that her complacency was rattled.

Almis's hand had turned his wife's bottom a bright red before she finally gave it up. She interrupted her own yelling in an obviously desperate attempt to speak.

"All right, you win!" she gasped out, squirming harder with every swat of his hand. "I apologize for insulting you and ask to be forgiven! Please, Almis, please forgive me!"

"I don't think I'm feeling very forgiving yet, Rildin," Almis said as he paused in the spanking. "You were a very bad girl, a very arrogant girl, and both of those things demand punishing. From where I sit that punishment isn't complete yet."

"If - if you take me to bed I can help you with wanting to forgive me," Rildin tried, still squirming hard. "I was a bad and arrogant girl and I know I have to make up for it, but not with any more spanking. Please, husband, I just can't take any more!"

"Oh, I think you can take more of the spanking," Almis disagreed in a lighthearted way. "In fact I know you can take more and I'm prepared to prove the contention, but first we're going to make one small change. I'm going to let go of your arm, and then I'll continue. If that arm comes up even once to get in my way - or if you try to get up before I let you up - I'll go and fetch a switch before I catch you and start again. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, husband, I understand," Rildin answered miserably, probably hating herself for the challenge she'd spoken. She also seemed to want to say something else, but very wisely kept the words unspoken.

Almis continued with the spanking for a while, and although Rildin wailed and twisted and squirmed she didn't try to get up and she didn't try to protect her aching seat. After the additional few minutes Almis discovered that he was very much in the mood to do something with Rildin that didn't include spanking, so he let her up and immediately took her to bed.

When his wife responded more passionately and wildly to his lovemaking than she had for years, Almis silently

thanked his son for the marvelous gift. And, as he lay panting beside his wife, he also promised himself that tonight's spanking would have to be repeated very, very soon...

Chapter 10

Elissia stirred on the coach seat, finally pulled out of her thoughts by the approach of sundown. They would be continuing on a short time past dark, she'd been told, in order to reach the savage's palace today. The night before they'd camped out rather than use an inn, and no matter how necessary the time had been it hadn't also been pleasant and comfortable. Continuing on would be a better idea than doing the same again.

The two days of travel since leaving the savage's father's palace hadn't been easy because of the pace they were keeping to, but for the first day at least the countryside had been nice to look at. Now that they'd crossed over into what was considered the savage's kingdom the story wasn't the same. Listan had ridden near the coach earlier in the day, and when Elissia had asked about the countryside he'd told her why it looked so ... ruined.

"This kingdom used to belong to the man who was most at fault for keeping everyone constantly at war," Listan had said, looking around with less than relish. "His farmers were virtual slaves, forced to grow their crops for no other reason than to feed his fighters. No one spent any time building new things or fixing the old because the next battle would certainly destroy the new right along with the old. We've been working to change all that, but it's a slow process."

After that Elissia was able to see a few indications that people worked to rebuild some of what had been destroyed. A barn here, a house there, fields being turned into neat growing areas from the churned-up battlefields they'd previously been. And the closer they got to the savage's city and palace, the better everything looked.

The savage. Elissia leaned back on the coach seat and closed her eyes, actually enjoying her memories of the man for a change. He'd moved into her apartment in his father's palace and he'd shared her bed that night, but he hadn't tried to touch her. His lack of interest in using her body had been disappointing, but she'd finally realized that his lack of interest had actually been for the best.

"I would have had to keep my desire for him hidden, and if the feelings had gotten away from me he would have seen them." Her whispered words were tinged with great unhappiness, not to mention frustration. "Last night we slept apart because there was no privacy, but tonight will be a different story. No assassin in the recent past, no lack of privacy... So what can I do?"

Annoyance now touched Elissia for more than one reason. In order for their plan to work she hadn't been able to refuse to share the savage's bed and hadn't even wanted to refuse. She felt herself entitled to a short time of pleasure, but not if that pleasure revealed more of her true feelings than she wanted known. The poisoned tea was safely put away among her belongings, and would not be discovered even when her trunks were unpacked. Once the man behind the assassins was discovered her future was assured, but her present was another story entirely...

Thinking about the problem all day had given Elissia only one idea, an idea she wasn't particularly eager to use despite the fact that she might have no choice. What she'd thought of would certainly solve the problem, but -

Elissia was suddenly dragged back to where she sat when the day around them abruptly went from peaceful early evening to a time of vicious attack. Men shouted curses as they drove in with swords in their fists and hatred on their faces, so large a number of men that there seemed to be more of them than of the savage's escort. Fighting broke out immediately, vicious and deadly and intense.

Startlement instantly turned to fright for Elissia, but she was still able to see something odd just beyond the fighters on the right side of the coach. Then another force galloped into the melee, the black leather they wore telling her that they were more of the savage's fighters. Elissia hadn't realized that their escort had been split as they rode through this area that was mostly wooded, but obviously it had been.

The new arrivals turned the numbers against the attackers, but it wasn't just a matter of numbers. Elissia saw more than one encounter end quickly with the attacker killed, the attacker no match for the fighter he attacked. And there was something else odd about the attack which, when combined with the first odd thing she'd seen, gave Elissia a picture that made her insides twist even more than the attack itself had.

Very little time passed before all the attackers were dead or mortally wounded. The defending fighters glared all around themselves in the late afternoon light to see if there were any more attackers waiting to follow the first group down to death, but no others were discovered. When that became perfectly clear, the savage rode over to Elissia's coach and dismounted.

"Are you all right?" he asked as he opened the coach door and offered a hand to help her down. "None of them reached you, did they?"

"None of them was meant to reach me," Elissia answered as she got out of the coach. It felt good to stand for a while after all those hours of traveling, but the chance to stretch would have been more enjoyable with a different reason behind the stop.

"What does that mean?" the savage asked at once, interest rather than annoyance clear in the question. "You think that I was the only target this time?"

"Actually, I think this attack was only a diversion," Elissia said, trying not to look at all the bodies lying in their own blood. "Just as the attack started, I saw two men on horseback turn together and ride away into the woods. It was as if their sending the attackers at us took care of what they were supposed to do, and the next item on their agenda was getting away as fast as possible. I think they lied to these men, telling them that their superior numbers would win the fight for them, mentioning nothing about the fact that what the attackers saw was only half your force. The ones I saw fighting weren't very good, and your fighters probably would have won even if they didn't get help from the rest."

"You're right, as fighters these men were on the pitiful side," the savage said thoughtfully. "They went down like wheat before a scythe, and the fight was almost over before the rest of my guard force joined in. So what was this attack supposed to divert us from?"

"That's the question of the hour," Elissia agreed glumly. "It could be anything from another attack by much better fighters to a single person coming over with smiles and a hidden dagger. This attack and the easy way you stopped it was supposed to put you off your guard, but for what purpose I just don't know."

"My fighters and I probably would be off guard now, even if only unconsciously," the savage said with a nod as Listan rode up. "We'll have to do something to change that attitude right away."

"My king, there don't seem to be any other attackers lurking in the woods," Listan said as he dismounted. "If this is the best your enemy can manage, we have nothing to fear from him."

"What you just said proves that we do have something to fear," the savage corrected after exchanging a glance with Elissia. "My queen has pointed out how

easily we stopped this attack and how incompetent the attackers were as fighters. I agree with her opinion that this attack was meant to divert us from a more serious attempt later, so the men need to be told that they have to be doubly alert from now on. The next attempt, whatever it will be, will probably come just about the time we reach my palace. That's when I would schedule it for."

Listan muttered a few words Elissia didn't catch, which told her he was probably cursing under his breath.

"You're absolutely right, my king," Listan finally managed to say in a louder voice. "You and the queen have seen

the truth that I never would have, which makes me an idiot. I'll pass the word to the men immediately."

"Not an idiot, Listan," Elissia said as he turned back to his horse. "Just a nicer, more trusting soul. It's really nothing to be ashamed of."

"Overlooking something that could end my king makes me an idiot," Listan disagreed after settling himself back into his saddle. "Happily, though, he has you to make up for my lacks."

And with that last remark Listan turned his horse and rode away again, leaving Elissia with nothing to say.

"We'd better get moving again," the savage commented as though he'd hadn't heard Listan. "After all, we don't want to be late for the next attack. Let me help you back into the coach."

Elissia let herself be helped back into the coach, and a couple of minutes later they were on the move again. At first the coach driver had to circle around clumps of bodies on the road, but then they were past the area of attack and moving freely again. The savage rode ahead to the front of the procession, but was back in a few minutes to ride to the right of the coach. A number of minutes went by in silence, and then he looked at Elissia.

"Would you like to make a small wager on what the next attack will consist of?" he asked in a mild and easy way. "I have gold to bet on the idea that the enemy will have a small group of men dressed like my fighters and will try to reach me that way."

"If I had any gold, I'd bet on the next attack coming from a single, familiar individual," Elissia answered, having considered the question for a few minutes. "Probably not a really close friend, but someone you know and discount as a threat."

But I don't have any gold, so I can't bet."

"You don't need the gold to bet," the savage answered with actual amusement. "If I lose I'll pay in gold, but if you lose you have to go along with anything I ask of you for one full day. Is it a bet?"

"Only if you're willing to use the same coin, so to speak, that I'd be using," Elissia answered at once, not about to be thick enough in the head to agree to his terms as they stood. "If you're that fond of your theory, back it with something more substantial than gold."

"Let me think about that," the savage suggested, his continuing amusement clear. "I'm not sure I'm all that fond of the theory."

Elissia nodded to show that she was willing to wait while he considered his response, and they rode on in silence while Elissia thought about a personal oddity she'd noticed. Every time she thought of the savage as "the savage," a small twinge tweaked her insides. Until now she'd had no idea why that was, but suddenly the answer had come to her along with a memory.

She'd once told the man that he was her savage, but that was when she'd almost believed that he really loved her. Now she knew better, so every time she thought of him as "the savage" the pain of what was lost came to torment her. Which meant it was more than time she started to call him by name, especially in her own thoughts. Public names meant very little, but private ones...

The rest of the trip disappeared behind dark clouds of trying-not-to-think, which meant that Elissia suddenly found that they were riding through the gates of a city. The savage's - Derand's - city was called Holdisond, and the city was supposed to be a bit larger than Ramsond - which was slightly larger than Elissia's father's Sollerasond. Their entire force had stayed together after the attack, so all of them rode through the widely opened gates.

It had grown too dark for Elissia to see all that much of the city, but what she did see was as disturbing as what she'd seen in Derand's father's city of Meersond. The squalor and backwardness she'd been expecting were conspicuous by their absence, and if anything Holdisond looked a bit more prosperous than her father's city. So why, Elissia wondered, had she been so sure that she was being taken to the end of civilization? She'd have to think about that question...

They finally reached Derand's palace, where the coach came to a halt at the foot of the wide stairs leading into the palace. Listan and Derand dismounted, and Derand came to open the coach door himself.

"We're probably about to find out which of us would have won the bet," Derand murmured as he helped Elissia out of the coach. "When the attack comes, don't waste any time getting behind me."

"That's one order you'll never find me disobeying," Elissia murmured back as she took Derand's offered arm. "And it's just possible that we both would have won the bet. The only question left is which of us would have won first."

Derand's brows rose high when he heard that, and a moment later he'd turned his head toward Listan and was speaking very softly to his friend and advisor. Elissia realized that Listan was probably being warned, which put a tight, angry expression on Listan's face even as he nodded his agreement with whatever he was being told.

They were mounting the stairs as Derand spoke to Listan, but the conversation ended when they reached the top. Guards in black leather stood all around, but there was also a contingent of guards from the escort close behind them. The entire group began to walk toward the open doors of the palace, and they were almost there when a figure in a red robe came out leading another group of guards.

"Your Majesty, welcome home!" the figure in the red robe called out as he approached. Elissia realized that the man was a priest of Drassar the Beneficent, a moderately popular god among the people of the kingdoms. Priests were supposed to be completely non-violent and concern themselves with nothing but their gods, but Elissia suddenly had the oddest feeling...

"Don't let him get close to you!" Elissia whispered to Derand as soon as she understood what was bothering her. "And watch those fighters behind him!"

Derand parted his lips to reply, but before the first word was out the attack was launched. The fighters behind the priest of Drassar suddenly drew their swords and rushed forward, all of them obviously heading for Derand and Elissia. Derand thrust her behind him as he drew his sword in answer, Listan and the rest of his escort immediately doing the same.

Elissia saw Derand's right arm swing forward sharply, but it looked more like he'd used the fist holding his sword rather than the sword itself. Then he was using the sword, and the attackers in his reach didn't stand a chance against him. Elissia had never seen anyone use a sword that well, and the fighters around him weren't that much worse. In a matter of minutes the attack was over, and more dead bodies littered the ground.

When the frantic fighting finally ended, Elissia was able to see the priest of Drassar stretched out on the stone. The red-robed man held a dagger in his left hand, but he didn't look dead.

"I knocked him out just as he started to pull out that dagger," Derand said, obviously knowing what Elissia was looking at. "I wanted him able to answer some questions, most especially about who's behind these attempts. This time the attacking fighters were much better with their swords."

"Stands to reason they would be," Elissia commented as she looked around. "And since both attacks came at the same time, neither of us would have won the bet. Listan, is there someone who knows most if not all of your fighters? If so, get that man and send him around with a good escort of those fighters you're sure of. Anyone he

doesn't know is to be taken into custody until they can be vouched for by someone trustworthy. And all fighters who were recruited in the last month or so need to be separated out from the rest."

"Good idea," Derand said, his nod thoughtful. "Yes, Listan, do as she says, but if someone unknown is found I want to hear about it fast. Now let's get this priest of Drassar to a place where we can revive him in peace."

Listan had already relieved the unconscious priest of the dagger, and now he gestured some of his fighters into picking up the limp body. Elissia found her right arm being wound around Derand's left again, and then they continued on into the palace. Listan walked in front of them, and their escort came along behind.

After being led up a set of stairs almost as wide as the ones outside, Elissia found herself on the second floor of the palace. All the decorations they passed were in incredibly good taste, beauty and balance obviously being considered above gaudy exhibitions of wealth. Elissia, having decided to refuse to think about things like that, simply glanced around as they moved past a group of guards watching over the entrance to a section of the palace.

The area they entered proved to be the approach to the royal apartments. A very large gathering room had its own guards ranged around the walls, and Elissia saw Listan examining the faces of these guards just as he'd examined every guard they'd passed. So far Listan looked satisfied, so chances were good that he knew the men on guard duty.

"The men I sent to the kitchens ought to be overseeing the preparation of the meal you undoubtedly want, my king," Listan said as Derand gestured the guardsmen carrying the priest into putting the man onto a couch. "If you like, I'll oversee the questioning of this priest while you and the queen refresh yourselves."

"The queen is fresh enough and so am I," Derand replied with an amused glance for Elissia as he looked down at the priest. "We need something to occupy our time until the food is ready, so handling the interrogation might as well be it. As soon as you wake him up for us, that is."

Listan bowed his agreement, but didn't approach the priest until a fighter hurried into the area and came up to Listan to hand something over. The something turned out to be smelling salts, which actually brought the priest around in only a few minutes.

"What... What happened?" the groggy man groaned out as he stirred on the couch. "Where am I?"

"You're in the robe of a man who just tried to kill his sovereign," Derand growled, sounding more dangerous and deadly than Elissia had ever heard anyone sound. "What I want to know is who put you up to the attempt."

"You!" the priest gasped, staring up at Derand. "The man who means to force an end to the worship of Drassar in all the kingdoms of Arvin! You should be dead for considering such sacrilege! You must be dead!"

And then the fool started to scramble erect, probably so that he might attack Derand again, Elissia thought. The man started to get up, but Listan pushed him flat again.

"Where did you hear that nonsense?" Listan demanded as he held the struggling man still. "My king respects the worship of all the gods and would never even think of deciding which should be allowed and which not. How could you believe someone who told you otherwise?"

"I - wasn't told that," the priest admitted after a long moment, the expression on his narrow face now one of confusion. "I ... overheard some of your fighters talking, and they were laughing about how Drassar would become unknown once his priests were driven out. When I heard that the king would be getting back tonight I made sure to be here, ready to end his blasphemy. Fighters were all around and some came up right behind me, but I never expected to survive after ending the threat to my god so their presence didn't matter. I ... don't understand why my attempt didn't work."

"Your attack didn't work because a superior strategist anticipated it," Derand

answered the man, his expression dark with anger. "So they baited you with a lie you were meant to overhear, waited for you to get here to the palace, then tried to camouflage and support your attack with one of their own. Very neat."

"Then ... it really is a lie?" the priest asked, his bewilderment stronger as he looked back and forth between Derand and Listan. "Your Majesty, please accept my deepest apologies for having allowed myself to be duped! I will certainly do penance for a very long - "

"Penance?" Derand interrupted with a snort of ridicule. "You try to kill me and now expect to get away with doing nothing but some penance? In this situation I get to name the penance, and I choose execution for an act of treason - and an act of stupidity. Listan, have him thrown into a cell until I decide when I want the execution carried out."

The priest paled and tried to babble out a protest, but Derand took Elissia's arm in his hand and urged her away with him. She made no effort to hang back, which meant they left the reception room and quickly reached a more private area. The sitting room wasn't exactly small, but it was smaller than the reception room and obviously meant for less formal occasions.

"Listan is upset because he thinks you meant what you said," Elissia commented when Derand's hand left her arm. "Hasn't the man learned anything about strategy from working with you?"

"Listan is a good friend and absolutely devoted, but he couldn't design a decent strategy if his life depended on it," Derand answered with a surprised laugh. "For a minute I thought I'd have to explain my intentions to you as well as to him, but I should have known better. You obviously know why I made that very public announcement about executing the man."

"You made the announcement to keep him alive," Elissia said with her own smile of amusement. "If your enemies believe you're going to be stupid enough to execute a priest, they'll just stand back and let you cut your own throat at the same time. If they thought you meant to let the man go, they'd kill him and then make sure you were blamed for his death. I'd have the man guarded really well tonight, and first thing tomorrow I'd send for the priests of the rest of the religions to explain what happened. Once they understand what your enemies are trying, the same trick won't work a second time. Are you just going to let that priest go, or have you something else in mind?"

"I'm going to let the man live, but not in Holdisond," Derand answered after ringing

for a servant. "Someone else in his place would have checked around before deciding on committing murder, but he just jumped right in without spending a minute's thinking time. If his superiors are wise they'll get rid of him entirely, but that's their decision and I don't intend to mix in. He just won't be welcome to remain in my city."

Elissia nodded, actually agreeing completely, and the conversation was ended when a servant entered. The servant carried a tea service on a tray, and his face wore a wide grin.

"Your Majesty, welcome home!" the man said with warmth that looked completely sincere. "Things have been really quiet here while you were gone, but now they're bound to liven up again. I brought your tea myself so you'd know it's perfectly safe to drink."

"We'll know the tea is safe to drink once you drink some first," Elissia said at once, the amusement on Derand's face telling her that he wasn't going to suggest something so practical. "You won't mind doing that for us, will you?"

"Why - no, of course not, my lady," the servant answered, his grin faltering. "If that's the king's wish I'll be glad to

drink first."

"It's the queen's wish, Potry, so that ought to be enough," Derand put in, the words easy and friendly if you discounted the steel behind them. "You'll be having tea with us, only your cup will be finished first."

"The queen?" Potry echoed with eyes and mouth wide. "You have a queen now, Your Majesty? Well, congratulations, my king, and many happy felicitations! Allow me to drink a toast to the both of you!"

And with that the man quickly poured a cup of tea, gestured toward them with the cup, then downed the tea in almost a single gulp. By then his grin had returned, and as he put the cup to one side of the tray he also bowed to Elissia.

"Welcome to Holdisond, Your Majesty," he said with a great deal of relish. "We're delighted to have you here, and just wait till I tell everyone in the kitchens!"

After another bow to Derand, the man hurried out of the room. Elissia watched the servant disappear with what she knew must be a very odd expression, a thought confirmed when Derand chuckled.

"Potry looked after me during the campaigns," he said as he walked toward the tea

service. "I've trusted him with my life before this, but you couldn't have known that so your suggestion was perfectly in order. I don't know about you, but I'm starving. If anyone tries to poison the food I'll probably kill them with my bare hands."

Elissia smiled her agreement as she took the cup of tea Derand had poured, but on the inside she was feeling very strange. The savage - Derand - kept saying things that showed approval of her and her doings, giving her an acceptance while he pretended to care that he hadn't given when he claimed to love her. How sad that the matter couldn't have turned out to be the other way around...

They took their tea into a small dining room, and not long after that their food was brought. Potry was there to direct the efforts of the other servants, so the meal went smoothly - not to mention deliciously.

After the meal Elissia was introduced to the girls who would be her maids, and said girls took her into a very large bedchamber where her trunks had been brought. The bedchamber had a bathing room almost as large, and the girls were efficient in their help. Elissia was bathed and helped into an ivory white sleep ensemble, and then the girls quietly disappeared. Since Derand, already in a lounging wrap, waited in the bedchamber, Elissia didn't wonder why the girls had left so quickly. As she moved closer to the man who was supposed to be her husband she knew it was time to try her ploy, and all she could do was pray that it worked.

"That's a very attractive ensemble," Derand said as she walked toward where he sat, a wine glass in his hand. "Would you care for a glass of this wine? It's really excellent."

"Thank you, no," Elissia answered with a small headshake, grabbing her courage with both hands. "I do have something I need to discuss with you, though. A problem I can't find an answer to."

"Then I'll be glad to help," Derand answered, putting his glass aside before leaning forward. "What's involved in the problem?"

"I - know I agreed to share your bed the way a real wife would, and I'm not trying to - back out of that agreement, but I'm having trouble - making myself feel as -eager as I should." Elissia had tried not to stumble over the words as she spoke, but the attempt had been a miserable failure. Still, there was nothing to do but continue to plow on... "I wanted you to know that so you don't feel - cheated and hurt. I agreed to go along with this plan wholeheartedly, and that's what I'm trying to do."

"I appreciate the warning, I really do," Derand murmured, leaning back as he studied her. "Under other circumstances I'd probably just shrug and let the matter pass, but I'm sure you understand why I can't do that here and now. We can't afford to have anyone think that we're not blissfully happy and deeply in love, so we need to have you be as eager and involved as you're supposed to be."

"So how do we accomplish that?" Elissia put in, speaking the lines she'd mentally written for herself. "If you have a magic wand of some kind you never mentioned -No, wait a minute. I hope you're not thinking what I think you're thinking."

"What other answer is there?" Derand countered with a gentle smile as he got to his feet. "You agree that you need the help, and that's what the device is for, to help you feel what you're supposed to. I'll just go and get it, and then the problem will be solved."

He put a gentle hand to her face as she made half-hearted attempts to argue what he'd said, but her formless babbling didn't stop him. He went to a wardrobe and opened one door, rummaged around for a moment, then brought out that bead on its string. Elissia closed her eyes when she saw it, hating the thing even while knowing it would be her salvation. She didn't want the bead inside her, but what other choice did she have...?

"Tomorrow night we'll try to find something else to do, but tonight we're both too tired to think," Derand said, startling Elissia with how near he now was. "Let's get this in you, then we can put on our show for anyone who may be listening before we fall into the sleep we both need. We have to get an early start tomorrow because there's a lot to do."

Elissia kept up a small bit of protest as he took her arm and led her to a chair, then draped her over his lap. Her heart began to beat faster when her skirts were lifted and tossed over her back, and the next thing she knew her nether cheeks were being separated. Holding back a gasp as the bead was put inside her proved to be impossible, just as impossible as not immediately starting to squirm. The experience was just as unpleasant as Elissia had known it would be, and before she could stand up again the unpleasantness was added to.

"Ow! No!" Elissia yelled as five hard, fast, whacks were given to her bottom. "What are you doing?"

"Just helping things along," the miserable beast answered mildly as she all but flew back to her feet. "We do want you to have the proper reactions, don't we?"

"Next time we'd better make sure that our definitions of 'proper' are the same," Elissia grumbled as she rubbed just a little at her stinging backside. And began to squirm even harder. "I'm ready to go straight to bed."

"As am I," the beast agreed as he got slowly to his feet, acting as if he had all the time in the world. "So let's do it this way."

"This way" turned out to be his lifting her into his arms before he carried her to the giant bed and put her down in the middle of it. Rather than getting up again he followed her down and kissed her, his hands moving all over her body as his tongue sought her soul. Elissia moaned as she gave herself over to responding to him completely, her hands stroking his back in a silent plea for him to hurry and get inside her.

But he didn't hurry, and by the time he came to her completely she found it impossible to hold back a scream of delight. He stroked her hard for a very long time, making her repeated release even better than usual, and by the time it was over Elissia was a limp rag. For once she didn't even wait for that blessed bead to be pulled out of her before she fell into a deep, exhausted sleep.

Chapter 11

Derand smiled as he walked along the hall the next morning, and his good humor had more than one reason

behind it. Last night he and Seea had made glorious love, and the way she'd fallen asleep so fast had let him cheat just a little. He'd put her under the quilts without removing the bead, so when she awoke this morning she was just as hot as she'd been last night.

And that was a discovery she hadn't enjoyed at first. She'd muttered under her breath and reached around for the string to take the bead out of her, but he hadn't allowed her to do that. He took her wrist and kept her hand away from what it reached for, and she'd actually pronounced a very unladylike word before trying to use her other hand.

If she hadn't used that word Derand would have simply taken her in his arms and made love to her, but he couldn't overlook what was a very pointed insult. He'd captured her other hand as well and had held both of her wrists as he put her across his lap, and then he'd administered a short but pointed spanking. Seea had yowled and struggled with every one of the ten or a dozen smacks he gave her, her reactions showing that the bead was making her even wilder than she'd been the night before.

The last two smacks were deliberately harder and slower than the rest, and by then Seea was mewling as she squirmed uncontrollably. When he put her face down on the bed and moved between her knees, she quickly raised a rosy and obviously tender bottom to let him enter her more easily. She had to know she would feel the spanking again while he made love to her, but she'd clearly been too hot to let that matter.

He'd happily seen to the heat of both of them, and they'd had to lie still for a while before they were able to get up to bathe and dress. Seea had tried to act annoyed over the spanking and his having taken advantage of her, but she hadn't tried to claim that she'd enjoyed the time less than he had.

"Even if she won't admit she enjoys my lovemaking," Derand murmured as he walked, more pleased than annoyed. "She'll be forced to admit her feelings eventually, so all I have to do is wait. And try not to act like a fool..."

A sigh tried to escape Derand as he thought about how quickly he'd jumped to use the bead in Seea again last night. It was probably nothing but pure luck that he'd made the right choice in how to handle her, so the next time he'd better take more than three heartbeats to make a decision that concerned her...

"Good morning, my king," Derand heard before looking up to see Listan waiting for him. "I trust you slept well last night?"

"I did indeed, my friend, I did indeed," Derand answered as he clapped Listan on the shoulder, finding it impossible to keep his good mood down for long. "And my own bed felt even better with my wife sharing it."

"I hope the queen had as good a night as you obviously did," Listan answered in a murmur meant only for Derand's ears. "Is it a bad sign that she isn't here with you?"

"My queen isn't here with me because she's busy with the first of her new jobs," Derand responded, knowing there was more than satisfaction showing in his grin. "I had all my battle commanders report to a briefing room, where I introduced them to Seea. Then I told them that she was better at strategy and tactics than they were, and challenged them to test the truth of that claim. When I left they were already throwing situations at her and demanding to know what she would do if she were in charge of the battle. They'll start with battles they were involved in personally, and then probably go on to classic battles from history."

"But when she shows them how good she is, will they welcome her presence or resent it?" Listan asked, clearly not as happy as his king. "I hate to think of her being given a hard time by a roomful of men too stiff-necked to see how valuable she is."

"All my battle commanders claim to care more about what a person knows than about who they are," Derand said,

flatly refusing to let himself shift into rage at the thought of someone trying to abuse his woman even with nothing but words. "I told Seea privately that I need to know which of my commanders are flexible enough to adapt and which can't, so she won't take any hostility as a sign that she's unwanted. If one or more of those men refuse to acknowledge her ability they'll be doing other things that are wrong, so relieving them from their command will work to strengthen the army. And before I relieve anyone, I'll have you look into what they are doing so I'll know where they really stand."

"As long as the queen has been warned to expect trouble there shouldn't be anything she can't handle," Listan said with a relieved nod. "Shall we get on with your tasks, my king?"

Derand thought that was an excellent idea, so the first thing he did was head for the room where the chief priests of all the religions waited. There were a lot of shocked comments being made as Derand entered the room, mainly because the priest from the night before had been brought in first in chains. As soon as Derand appeared, the chief priest of Drassar pushed forward.

"Your Majesty, what's the meaning of this outrage?" the man demanded, as close to being out of control as Derand had ever seen him. "That man is a priest and therefore must be released at once!"

"That man is also someone who tried to commit murder last night," Derand answered mildly, his calm words very much a contrast to the way the chief priest had spoken. "My enemies are tired of losing when they face me directly, so they've apparently started to sneak around behind my back. Here's what happened."

Derand told them all about the way the priest had been hoodwinked, and by the time he was finished the muttering from the other priests held a different note.

"So you can see that this man decided to become something other than an associate priest," Derand ended with. "If he'd been smart enough to speak to others and make sure of what he thought was the truth, he never would have done as he did. He tried to commit treason, and for that reason - and one other - I announced that he would be executed."

"Executed," the chief priest of Drassar breathed, a stricken look on his face as everyone else fell into a shocked silence. "Your Majesty! I grant you the fool was misguided, but committing treason wasn't his intent. Surely taking his life would be

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"Please," Derand interrupted, holding up one hand. "My main reason for announcing that he would be executed was to keep my enemies from killing him and then blaming his death on me. I don't need the life of a fool - and foil - to make me feel like a king, so I'm going to release the man into your custody. But - " and with that word Derand looked directly at the chief priest, " - I refuse to allow him to remain in the Federated Kingdoms. You're to have him pack what possessions he has and leave at once, and if he's found anywhere in Arvin by next week he will be arrested and hanged. Is that clear?"

"Eminently clear, Your Majesty," the chief priest agreed with heavy relief, bowing more deeply than ever before. "Allow me to offer my sincere thanks for your very great show of mercy and wisdom - and for taking the trouble to guard the life of a fool who first tried to take your life. May Drassar smile on you for all the days of that life."

"Thank you," Derand said with a smile. "I'll want all of you to tell your associate priests and acolytes what happened with this man, just to be certain it doesn't happen again with someone else. And now I have a more pleasant announcement. I've finally brought home the woman I married when we were both children, so I now have a wife and queen. But the ceremony we went through was many years ago, and now we'd like to repeat that ceremony with all our friends and vassals present. I'd like to have someone officiate who represents all the gods, so please do what you have to in order to choose someone for the job. I know it won't be easy, but I have

confidence that you'll find a way. Thank you for coming."

Derand left the room with even more commenting going on than there'd been when he arrived. If he'd chosen one of the priests to represent the rest, nine kinds of hell would have broken loose. Now the unsavory job of choosing had been put into the hands of those who would have screamed, and they would find a way to cooperate. If they didn't and Derand had to do the job for them after all, they'd have absolutely no grounds for complaint.

"That's one headache taken care of," Listan murmured as they walked along the hall. "Now we can pay attention to all the rest."

"One of the rest should already be done," Derand murmured back. "Were the pigeons sent out with the invitations to my guests this morning?"

"Just as you ordered, my king," Listan agreed. "The messages read, 'Wedding ceremony and games to be held. Do come.' I know you chose the wording yourself, but ... It sounds as if you're giving them the choice about attending."

"In a manner of speaking, I am," Derand answered with the amusement he felt. "If I'd sent messengers to all of them with beautifully drawn proclamations I could have required their presence, but pigeon messages are too ... informal for that kind of formality. At least three of the five would have decided they had to be insulted, and I don't need that kind of trouble right now."

"But what if two or more decide not to come?" Listan fretted. "How can we know that your enemy won't be one of them?"

"Don't worry, my friend, none of them will stay away," Derand said with a clap to Listan's shoulder. "Since there's nothing for them to be insulted about, they'll realize that staying away while everyone else attends would be political suicide. And there's also the games to consider. Whichever of them has the winning fighters will also have added prestige, at least until the next games are held. All that means even the enemy will realize that he can't stay away."

"I sincerely hope you're right, my king," Listan said, then braced up as he pushed aside the worry. "We found another four intruders dressed as your guard, but they fought to the death rather than surrender and be put to the question. Three kitchen workers and two general servants are missing, I'm told, new men who were hired without real recommendation. I'd like to think that that's the lot of them, but somehow I don't believe it."

"It's possible that some of our own people have been bribed," Derand said, no longer amused. "Get together with Potry and find out from him who among the servants and cooks could be bribed - or threatened. Make sure all the servants' families are safe and not being held hostage, and at the same time do the same with our fighters. With this kind of behind-the-back kind of sniping, anything and anyone could be a weapon against us."

"I hate to say it, but you're right, my king," Listan said after letting out a deep breath. "And I've already gotten some of the workers started on putting up tents for the fifty fighters each of your kings will bring with them. We'll hold the games in the back meadow near the brook, with seating available at every game site. What about food and drink?"

"Let the townspeople set up booths and stands or circulate with carrying trays," Derand said, having already considered the question. "Get a list of those people and what they'll be offering, and use the list for three purposes. The first purpose will be to let you give each provider some gold to get started, making it possible for them to do business. And when they're given the gold, they're to be told that some people will be paying them with chips of wood instead of coin. The chips are to be kept track of, and after the games can be turned in for silver or gold."

"And those are the chips you mean to give out in the poorest section of the city!" Listan exclaimed with revelation. "When you had the chips made up and told me they were meant for the poor, I had no idea what you meant. And I thought you didn't like the idea of charity."

"I don't," Derand agreed, stopping near a bell pull and pulling it. "The chips will be charity for some, but for others they'll be a means of achieving independence. If, after the games, anyone shows up here at the palace with a chip, he or she is to be found some kind of job that pays in coin. The people who get the chips are all to be told that."

"So the ones who are worth saving will use some of the chips for a good time, but will save at least one," Listan said with a nod. "The rest will just be interested in that good time, and by not saving a chip they'll eliminate themselves without us having to do it. I like the efficiency of that idea."

"Another reason for the list is to see what's going to be sold," Derand said after nodding agreement. "If there's plenty of food to be offered and not enough drink of all kinds, we want to know about it beforehand so the imbalance can be eliminated. And then there's the third and most important reason..."

"To make sure it isn't someone in our enemy's pay who sets up to ruin the occasion," Listan finished when Derand just let his voice trail off. "That was my first thought when you talked about keeping track, and I had another thought as well: we'll have to make sure that the games aren't sabotaged in some way that makes it look as if we're out to cause the kings to appear foolish or stupid. I have a feeling that not many of us will be enjoying this very joyous occasion."

"I have a feeling that your feeling is right," Derand said just as sourly as Listan had spoken before turning to the servant who had answered his ring. "Ask Potry to bring a tea service to the small conference room, please, and ask him to make sure there are extra cups."

The servant bowed and hurried away again, which let Derand continue to lead the way to the small conference room.

"I'm going to start making all kinds of lists," Derand said to Listen, who walked beside him again. "Every idea we get will go on the main list, and that way we'll be able to see what we're doing - and not doing. After the main list is done, we'll start minor lists for all the categories. We don't have much time before my vassals start to arrive, so we can't afford to waste any of the time."

"In two days the first of the kings ought to start to arrive," Listan said, nodding. "I hate to tell all those petitioners that you won't be holding court, but -"

"But I will be holding court, and this afternoon," Derand corrected, walking through the doorway into the small conference room. "I decided to wait until after lunch because we had these other matters to take care of, and also because I want Seea with me. I intend to turn her loose on those petitioners to see if she can't whittle down their numbers even a little."

"Should you be interested in a wager, my king, I have gold that says the queen will make headway that ... we've never been able to."

Derand smiled to himself at the way Listan had carefully said "we" instead of "you." It was Derand himself who hadn't been able to cut down the complaints brought to him in the same easy way he cut down enemies on the field of battle, but Listan was far too smart to actually say that.

"You'd better withdraw that offer of a bet, Listan, or I'll have you arrested for theft," Derand answered dryly. "Of course Seea will make things better, and if she does well enough the job will be hers for good. Eventually I may be left with nothing to do but put my feet up while reading one of the books I've never had time to get to. Or

going fishing with you and some of the others."

"If that's your plan, my king, I wish you luck with it," Listan responded with a badly swallowed grin. "I take it your primary plan is working as well as you'd hoped?"

"If you're talking about my plan to make Seea stay with me, I'm still hoping," Derand admitted with a sigh. "She and I are getting along better than we used to, but she still thinks I'm pretending to care about and for her. I'm afraid to think what will happen when she finds out I really do love her."

Potry entering with the tea service saved Listan from having to say anything, a rescue that Listan was obviously very grateful for. Not that Derand blamed Listan. What did you say to a man who'd just announced that he was afraid his wife would find out he loved her?

Derand sighed to himself before asking Potry to take a cup of tea to Seea where she battled with his commanders. As soon as he poured a cup of tea for himself, Derand settled down to make that list he'd mentioned to Listan. Having to concentrate on the list let him forget about fears that most men were lucky enough not to have...

Elissia entered the small dining room to find Derand already there. He did a double-take when he saw her smile and got slowly to his feet.

"Does that smile mean what I hope it does?" he asked, using one hand to seat her beside him. "Things actually went well with my battle commanders?"

"No, things actually went rather badly, but strangely enough I enjoyed myself," Elissia answered as she sat at the table, surprisingly speaking the truth. "I suppose I enjoyed all the nonsense because I knew it didn't matter what those men thought of me. And it was also fun when most of them were forced to change their minds."

"I'm delighted to hear that most of them managed the trick," Derand said as he sat again. "How many of them didn't?"

"Two, the minimum number necessary for maintaining an unpopular stance," Elissia answered while reaching for the tea pitcher. "Each one supported the other's blockheaded stubbornness, so they were both able to ignore reason. I saw Listan on the way here, and I gave him their names when he said he's now supposed to look into what else they may be doing."

"Good," Derand said as servants came forward to offer various dishes. "When he has something to report, he'll let us both know. And I hope you haven't made plans for after lunch. I'm due to hold audience for petitioners, and I'd like you to go with me."

"No, I haven't made any other plans," Elissia said slowly, suddenly curious and the least bit suspicious. "You want me to sit and watch you hold audience?"

"Actually, I want you to participate," the man answered, very busy with pointing out what he wanted to eat. "I know you have experience watching your father hold audience, so you may be able to figure out what I'm doing wrong. Every time I turn around there are twice or three times the number of people shouting for my attention. I want to hear about it if people are having legitimate problems, but so far I haven't found anything but petty squabbles. Am I wrong to expect people with real problems to come forward?"

"There's more than one answer to that question," Elissia said, her suspicion turning into interest. "The first part ought to be answered once I see how the audience goes, but I'll need Listan to look into a second part. That second part revolves around how people arrange to have an audience."

Derand looked away from his filled plate long enough to give her a raised-brow glance.

"You have to be talking about the chamberlain in charge of reviewing petitions," he said, surprise also behind his tone. "Do you think the man is using bad judgment?"

"It's more likely that the man is taking bribes," Elissia said, now giving more attention to her own meal. "If only those with silver or gold are allowed an

audience, of course you'll have very little more than petty squabbles. The people with real problems probably can't afford to pay for the privilege of appealing to you. Didn't your father ever explain things like that to you?"

"When my father told me the facts of life he somehow left out that one," Derand replied with a sigh. "As you can see, I have very little experience with being a king. But I'm willing to learn, so the miscreants had better enjoy themselves while they can. I now have someone to help me find them out."

Elissia glanced at him to see that he'd gone back to eating after making that very determined statement, so she did the same. If she'd thought he meant what he'd said she would be feeling flustered, but the man was only pretending to be glad she was with him. There was nothing wrong with that, and there was even something very not wrong. She wasn't likely to get bored waiting for their major plan to go into effect...

As soon as lunch was over, they went into the audience room. There were two thrones up on a dais the way there usually were in an audience room, but the very large chamber was more packed than any Elissia had ever seen. The chamberlain in charge of granting audiences must be rolling in wealth, but that was easily taken care of. The scribe Elissia had arranged for took his place to one side of the dais while Derand led her to the thrones.

Someone with a very loud voice announced that High King Derand and High Queen Elissia were now sitting in audience, and then there was something of a babble of surprise before the first petitioners came forward. Each of the men had brought someone to speak for him, and that was the first thing Elissia put a stop to.

"Just a moment," Elissia said, interrupting the first man who'd begun to cite very old law supporting his patron's stance. "I think the king would rather hear from the petitioners themselves, who will each state the problem as he sees it. But before you begin, gentlemen, be advised that your statements will be taken down by that scribe and checked on by investigators. If anything you say proves to be false, you'll be charged with perjury and properly punished. Now, who wants to go first?"

The two patrons stood and stared openmouthed at Elissia, and then they begged to be excused so that they might gather the necessary facts to present to the king. Elissia let them go, of course, and when the dust settled there were a lot fewer people waiting to be heard.

The next people to come forward represented themselves, and the one who began an explanation of the disagreement was quickly interrupted by the other who disagreed with the way the disagreement was being presented. Elissia let the squabbling go on for no more than a moment before she called a halt.

"You'll each take turns telling the scribe a brief description of your disagreement," she said once a guard had rapped both men on the back of the head to gain their attention. "Again, you'd better be careful of what you present as a fact, because an investigator will look into your claims. If any of them prove false... Well, I think you already know what will happen. And if you ever dare to start a fight in the presence of your sovereign again, I'll personally see to it that some sense is flogged into you."

For the second time Elissia saw widened eyes and opened mouths, especially since she'd been doing nothing to hide her anger. If these people had no idea how to act when they came in front of their king, they'd quickly learn or quickly hurt.

It took a couple of minutes to get the combatants over to the scribe, and then other names were called. When no one stepped forward another set of names was called, but again there was no response. Name after name was

called without anyone appearing, but there were still quite a few people in the audience room. Finally Elissia ran out of patience for those who'd changed their minds about bothering the king with their nonsense.

"All right, that's enough from the prepared lists for today," she announced, seeing that no one waited with quivering eagerness to step forward. "Is there anyone in this room who needs the king's help but who doesn't happen to be on the list?"

There was a surprised mutter again, but finally a man stood up and tentatively raised a hand. Elissia nodded to a guard, and the man was helped through the crowd to stand not far from the dais.

"I'm not used t' fancy talk, ma'am, High Queen, so I hope you'll forgive me bein' rough," the man got out, sounding really nervous. "All I need's a bit more time t' pay that there improv'ment tax, is all, 'cause I really gotta put in them channels in th' fields. Don't wanna lose all m' crops if'n the drought comes this year."

"Improvement tax?" Derand suddenly echoed, sitting up straight on his throne. "There's no such thing as an improvement tax. Who told you there was?"

"Man came by 'bout a month ago, man with fighters ridin' with 'im," the farmer answered, now looking confused. "Said we gotta pay th' tax no matter whut we do around the farm, an' if'n we don't we's gonna lose th' place. Some paid a'ready, but I ain't got th' silver right now - "

"All right, listen to me carefully," Derand said, speaking softly and gently to the farmer. "There's no such thing as an improvement tax, so someone is trying to steal from you and your neighbors. First I'll need you to tell me who's already lost silver to those thieves, and then I'll send some men with you to go hunting for the miscreants. We'll get this straightened out, so don't you worry about it. Listan! Take this man and get someone moving on protecting the farmers."

"Yes, my king," Listan, who had entered a number of minutes earlier, answered immediately. He took the farmer along with him amid surprised and eager conversation from the onlookers, and once the farmer was gone Elissia saw that a woman had taken the man's place.

"Excuse me, Your Majesty, but my parents also have a problem," the woman said, her voice suggesting that she spoke out in spite of being really frightened. "They won't come here themselves because they can't afford to pay to be heard, but I thought it might be possible to speak to someone..."

"Needing to pay to be heard won't be a problem for much longer," Derand told the woman, obviously struggling to speak gently rather than to growl. "Tell me now why your parents wanted an audience."

It turned out that someone wealthy was trying to force the woman's parents to sell their property, just as had been done with others before them. Elissia sat back as the woman was questioned before being sent to the scribe, then she watched with satisfaction as a few more people came forward with legitimate concerns.

Derand had started out letting her do all the talking before he took over completely, but that was perfectly all right. She'd gotten rid of the deadwood so he could have the pleasure of actually helping people in need. If he had to put his life on the line to be king, and he did, the least he deserved was a time of this kind of enjoyment.

Other people were being pressured by the same man who was after the parents of the first woman, so Derand finally ended the audience. First he told those people left to give their names to the scribe and they'd be heard at the next audience, and then he sent fighters to arrest the man who was trying to build his own little kingdom. He also sent for the chamberlain in charge of making audience appointments, and those were two meetings Elissia really looked forward to attending...

Elissia had time for only one cup of tea before the man who had until now been responsible for granting audiences was dragged into the room. He was a tall, thin man whose face suggested it usually wore a supercilious expression that was, at the moment, nowhere to be seen.

"Y-Your Majesty, I don't understand what's happening!" the man stuttered out when he was shoved forward to stand in front of his sovereign. "If you wanted to see me, you simply had to send word and I would have - "

"Pettard Railsley," Derand said, making the words sound like hovering doom. "How long have you been in charge of accepting petitions for audience hearings?"

"That's Lord Pettard, Your Majesty, and I've been the chamberlain in charge of audiences for more than a year now," the man answered, letting part of what was probably usual arrogance return as he straightened his clothing. "As the audience room is always quite full, it can hardly be suggested that I've been derelict in my duties."

"Who made you a lord?" Elissia put in before Derand could say anything else. "I ask only because you were so quick to correct your king."

"It was the king's predecessor who made me a lord, Madam," Railsley responded stiffly, not even bothering to look directly at Elissia when he spoke. "Now, Your Majesty, as I said - "

"The correct mode of address when speaking to the High Queen is 'Your Majesty,'" Derand interrupted, ice in his voice as well as in his stare. "And the High Queen has made an excellent point. Titles granted by my predecessor are null and void unless ratified by me, and I don't remember confirming you as a lord."

"Queen?" Railsley squeaked, suddenly aware of his blunder - as well as shocked

over what had been said. "I apologize, Your Majesties, I had no idea - But of course I was confirmed by you, Your Majesty, right after the coronation, along with several others - "

"The only titles I confirmed were of those men who helped me in the wars," Derand stated, still staring coldly at Railsley. "I know the names of every one of those men, and yours isn't among them. How much have you been charging people to be allowed an audience?"

"Your Majesty, the amount is minimal and is used only to weed out those who aren't sincerely in need of help," Railsley protested, now sounding wounded over an unjust accusation. "The coppers are turned over to your treasury, of course, and I've had a strict accounting kept. I can have the scribe in charge of the accounts make a report -"

"So you hand over copper and keep the silver and gold for yourself," Elissia drawled from where she sat holding her teacup. "What a lovely arrangement - for you."

"I most certainly do not!" Railsley snapped, taking a moment to glare at Elissia before changing to an expression that appealed to Derand for help. "Your Majesty, I have no idea what this woman - the High Queen - has been telling you, but I assure you that it's most certainly not true. I am a loyal subject and would never - "

"Why don't we get some of those supposed petitioners in here and ask them how much they paid?" Elissia interrupted to suggest, forcing herself not to laugh aloud. "If I'm imagining things, talking to the people who didn't get their payment's worth today ought to be enlightening."

"I - No!" Railsley yelped when Derand's expression suggested he was going to approve the idea of asking the petitioners. "Untrustworthy people like that will lie simply for the pleasure of seeing an innocent man accused of a crime he didn't commit! But - what did the queen mean when she said there were petitioners who didn't - I mean, weren't petitioners heard today?"

"Yes, petitioners were heard today, and for the first time they had real problems," Derand said, back to staring coldly at Railsley. "Those others just wanted to be able to say they were at court with the king, didn't they? That's what they paid for, the privilege of wasting the king's time, while those who were truly in need of help were shoved aside."

"What help peasants imagine they need is totally unimportant," Railsley spat, gesturing away what Derand had said. "It's those with titles and wealth who matter, those of my kind, and those who matter will never allow themselves to be ignored. It will take some doing on my part to repair whatever damage has been done, but I'll find a way to manage it. By tomorrow everything will be back to normal - "

"No, you fool, they will not be back to what you're idiot enough to consider normal!" Derand growled, making the stiff-necked Railsley jump and pale. "You're under arrest, and the main charge against you will be the very ordinary crime of theft. Every copper you have to your name will be confiscated, along with whatever property you now own. When you're finally given your freedom again you'll be a bare-assed beggar, Railsley, one of the peasants you think so little of. But don't expect to be welcomed by them with open arms. They have much better taste than to welcome someone like you. Guards! Get him out of here and find him a cell in the dungeons."

Railsley began to scream and throw a tantrum, and the guards had to drag him out of the room. Elissia drank tea until the man was gone and the door to the room closed behind him, and then she shook her head.

"I've never been able to understand people like that," she said, watching Derand pour himself his own cup of tea. "They seem to think that having a title means living well and doing as you please. How do they miss the fact that right is always linked with responsibility, at least for anyone with intelligence? If you don't take proper care of the people who make it possible for you to live well, you can't expect to go on living well."

"The key word you used was 'intelligence,'" Derand answered after sipping at his tea. "When your greed is so strong that it blocks out thought of everything else, any intelligence you may have is immediately turned useless. We still have that man Jivlian Hoid, the one buying up property, to see, and then you and I are going to take some time for ourselves. We're supposed to be newlyweds, in effect, and it's time we acted like it."

Elissia realized that Derand meant to add support to their pretense, which was necessary if the plan was going to work. She just wasn't comfortable not knowing the details of what he had in mind, but before she could ask a guard entered the room.

"My king, the merchant Jivlian Hoid has been brought," the guard announced. "Do you want to see him now?"

"Yes, I certainly do," Derand answered, putting aside his teacup. "Have him brought in."

The guard nodded and stepped outside, and a moment later a fat and sweating man in very expensive clothing was dragged into the room. Behind him walked a woman who was dressed just as expensively, and the way she held herself said she was allowing everyone around her the favor of her presence. She wasn't a particularly beautiful woman, Elissia noticed, but her complete self-possession made her look beside the point.

"Jivlian Hoid," Derand said, again making the name sound like a proclamation of doom. "Have you been enjoying yourself forcing others to give you what belongs to them, Hoid?"

"Excuse me, Your Majesty, but my husband has done nothing illegal or wrong," the woman said before Hoid could do more than babble out something about being innocent. "I'm Valda Hoid, and all my husband's business deals are completely aboveboard."

"That's not what some of his victims are saying," Derand responded, doing nothing to soften his tone. "When you

threaten people into doing business with you, the deals can't in any way be considered legal."

"But I haven't threatened anyone, Your Majesty!" Hoid protested, looking totally confused. "I won't try to claim that I didn't make a nice profit on my latest deals, but that's what I'm supposed to do. I offered less than what the various properties were actually worth, but if the former owners didn't need my gold they would have refused to sell. Claiming now that they were cheated isn't unusual when people recover from whatever troubles caused them to sell in the first place."

It was difficult to doubt that the man was telling the truth as far as he knew it, and that made Elissia stop to think. Derand also seemed unsure now, so Elissia decided to get into the discussion.

"But that doesn't explain the complaint of someone who hasn't sold yet," she pointed out slowly, watching Hoid as she spoke. "The people involved don't want to sell their property, but they're being pressured into making the deal."

"Forgive me, Madam, but why would I do that?" Hoid asked, still obviously very nervous. "If I forced people into selling, they'd be able to complain to the king and I would lose everything I had. Acting that way makes absolutely no sense."

"It would make sense if you'd noticed that ordinary people weren't being allowed

access to the king," Elissia mused aloud, her attention now on Valda Hoid. The woman had very briefly allowed herself to be intensely amused by what her husband had said, and that made Elissia suspicious. "For how long a time did your wife attend audiences, Merchant Hoid?"

"Oh, Valda didn't attend for long," Hoid began just as his wife snapped, "Don't answer that! What I do and don't do is no one's business but my own!"

"Ah, now I see the way of it," Derand said, glancing at Elissia with a smile before returning his attention to the people in front of him. "Mistress Hoid decided that her husband's business practices were foolish and unnecessary, so she went about making things better - obviously without telling him what she was doing. My people will take the names of the men you hired to bully those who were reluctant to sell at your husband's price, Mistress Hoid. After that I'll have scribes go through your records, Hoid, and you'll have to return all the property that was sold to you because of the threats. You do understand now, I hope?"

"Yes, Your Majesty, I understand," Hoid said in a hollow voice as he stared at his furious wife. "I just don't believe this can be happening. Valda, how could you?"

"How could I what?" the woman snapped, still furiously angry. "How could I turn you into a man of wealth instead of letting you go on in your piddling little usual ways? If you don't appreciate what I did, I do!"

"We'll see how much you appreciate what you did once you're made to paid for it," Derand told her, gesturing to the guard. "Take that woman to a cell in the dungeons until I decide what her punishment should be."

"Don't be ridiculous," the woman scoffed just before two guardsmen took her arms. "I'm a woman, so you can't - No! Let me go at once!"

The woman's words turned to screams as she was dragged out, and the fat merchant actually took a step after her before realizing what he was doing.

"Please, Your Majesty, please be lenient with her," Hoid said after turning back to Derand, agony in his voice and eyes. "She doesn't understand that she was causing harm with her actions! She was just trying to help me!"

"No, actually she was trying to help herself," Elissia said when it was clear that Derand was having trouble

refusing the man's pleas. "She doesn't care about anyone but herself, and if you can't see that then I feel sorry for you. If the king is lenient with her she'll just feel free to try something of the same again, which can't be allowed. There are innocent people to consider, after all."

"Yes, of course you're right, Madam," Hoid said in a dead voice, all hope gone out of him. "I'll just - go home now, if I may, and make things ready for her eventual return. She'll really need me then..."

Hoid bowed and then left the room, a pathetic picture of desolation. Elissia watched him go, then shook her head.

"Talk about your horrible examples," she said after finishing the tea in her cup. "That's what can happen if you end up loving someone who doesn't love you back. There ought to be a way to let everyone in the world see him - to save others from the same terrible fate."

"Yes, the poor man's fate is terrible, but I doubt if people would take him as an example for their own lives," Derand answered after a brief hesitation. "Love does turn people blind, after all... And now we can take that time for ourselves that I mentioned earlier."

"Just a minute," Elissia said as the man offered her a hand. "What exactly will we be doing?"

"We'll be taking a ride through our very private gardens," Derand answered, an odd smile curving his lips. "I've heard some of the servants wonder why I haven't taken you through there yet, so we definitely have to go."

"Yes, of course," Elissia responded as she let him help her up from the chair. If people were discussing the matter it had to be taken care of, but why people would be talking about their not visiting gardens was a curious point...

Even more curious was the fact that Derand led her, not outside, but to stairs leading upward. Then she remembered that she'd have to change her clothes to go riding, and was glad she hadn't made any foolish comments about the direction they were taking. The prospect of being alone with Derand had turned her foolish as it sometimes did, a reaction she would have thought would be gone by now...

When they reached their bedchamber, though, Derand kept her from ringing for maids to help her change.

"You're probably thinking about changing into a riding skirt or trousers," he said when she raised her brows in surprise. "Since I've already arranged for a sidesaddle, different clothing won't be necessary. But something else is necessary,

even though I know you won't enjoy it."

"What sort of something else?" Elissia asked, instantly suspicious. "Just going for a ride shouldn't require any special preparation."

"This won't be an ordinary ride in an ordinary place," Derand said, his expression sober and calm. "We'll be in what's called The Lovers' Garden, and we'll be expected to act appropriately. No one else will be really close, but we'll still be under observation from a distance. That means we have to take care of your ... problem before we start."

"You've got to be joking!" Elissia stated, appalled by the mere suggestion. "You expect me to ride a horse with that thing inside me? Do you have any idea what the time will be like for me?"

"I know it won't be pleasant, but what choice do we have?" he countered, still patient and calm. "We're supposed to be newlyweds who are hungry for each other, and if you don't really feel that way someone is bound to notice. We can keep the horses to a walk and that should make things a bit easier. So let's get it done and the time will be over with that much sooner."

Elissia found herself babbling a protest that made absolutely no sense as Derand went to his wardrobe to get that awful bead. The method she'd found to keep her private feelings really private had turned around and bitten her, and her mind refused to come up with an argument that would save her. She did still need the camouflage for her feelings, but

"You're being really sensible about this and I'm proud of the way you're supporting our plan," Derand said, suddenly beside her again with a chair. He sat in the chair and had her over his lap before Elissia could do more than babble again, and then her skirts were up over her back and head. She felt his hands at the ties of her underdrawers, and half a moment later the underdrawers were down to the middle of her thighs. Two heartbeats later that horrible bead was being put inside her, giving her no choice but to gasp at the sensation. A thought occurred to her then and she began to speak, but she'd hesitated just a little too long.

"Ow! No! Stop!" she gurgled out as her bottom was smacked hard five or six times. "Stop doing that!"

"Yes, yes, it's all over now," the monster assured her in a soothing voice as he began to replace her underdrawers. "The bead does best together with a good spanking, but you haven't done anything to be punished for. That's why I gave you

only a few small pats, just enough to help. No sense in doing something if you don't do it right."

"Pats," Elissia muttered as he pulled her skirts back down and then helped her to her feet. The sting in her bottom called him a liar, and there were too many layers of clothing in the way for any rubbing to be effective. And that damned bead had already started to work on her...

"You're in for a treat now that I think you'll really enjoy," Derand said as he wrapped her arm around his and then led the way out of the bedchamber. "These gardens are more unique than any you'll have seen anywhere else. Just watch."

Elissia expected him to take her downstairs again, but instead he turned in the direction that took them more deeply into the apartment. They walked for a good minute in what should have been the wrong direction, the movement doing its usual damage to Elissia's self possession, and then they turned a corner to find six guards in black leather standing in front of a door. When the guards saw them one stepped back to open the door, allowing Derand to urge Elissia out first. She stepped outside and then just stood staring with her mouth open.

"These gardens were created for no one but the king and his queen," Derand said from behind her as she looked around at incredible beauty. "The entire area is braced as strongly as the palace itself, so the weight of the earth and the trees and everything else isn't likely to cause the gardens to collapse. Even riding along the bridle paths doesn't cause a tremor. I know, because I've done it."

Even as he spoke, Elissia found it hard to look away from the incredible expanse of grass and flowers and trees. The grass and flowers were close to the door they'd come through, only a few small, ornamental trees standing in the midst of flower beds. Larger trees could be seen in the distance, a distance that said the gardens stretched at least as far as the ends of the palace. The place was unbelievable, and then Elissia was being urged to the right of the door.

"Our mounts are all ready," Derand said, bringing Elissia's attention from the distance to the area right near her. Two grooms stood with two beautiful roan horses, the horse equipped with a sidesaddle standing next to a mounting block. That brought back Elissia's unhappiness, but she was being "helped" to her horse before she could say a word.

"These horses are stabled up here and are allowed to graze here as well," the monster said as he gave Elissia no choice about climbing the steps of the mounting block. "They were brought up here as colts, and that was hard enough. Bringing up full-grown horses would be possible but not very pleasant, especially for the horses. Up you

go."

As soon as Elissia's bottom came in contact with the saddle she knew she'd been right about not wanting to do this. Throwing her right leg over the braces and putting her left foot into the stirrup did nothing to make her position more comfortable, not even allowing her to raise up more than an inch or so. By the time she discovered that she also discovered that the monster was mounted and ready to go, and when his horse led off, hers followed.

Elissia was able to keep silent for a time, at least until a glance over her shoulder showed that the grooms had gone back to wherever they'd come from. Their being alone let her look at the monster, who had slowed his horse until he rode to Elissia's left.

"I really can't bear this," she choked out, having found that the few smacks she'd been given made her squirm on the saddle. That squirming made the bead in her bottom even worse, and she was rapidly losing control of herself.

"You're doing it for a good cause so you will be able to bear it," the monster disagreed softly, his hand coming to touch her cheek gently. "The gardeners aren't very close, but even seeing us from a distance will let them spread the word about how much in love we are. And that's the point to all this, isn't it?"

He'd taken her right hand, and after asking his question he raised her hand to his lips without moving his gaze from her face. Elissia closed her eyes in defeat, unable to say even one more word. The way he touched her and kissed her and spoke to her... She'd never have guessed that the man would be this good at pretending, and now the time with him threatened to be much more painful than she'd expected...

The horses continued to move sedately for another couple of minutes, and then they passed a last flower bed before an open stretch of grass. As soon as the horses saw the open grass they began to trot, and if Elissia had been any worse a rider she might well have fallen off. In no more than an instant she wished she'd fallen off, and it was all she could do to get enough control of herself to finally pull her horse back to a walk. By then the open stretch of grass was behind them, and they were among flowers and bushes and trees again.

"We have to stop right now," Elissia said when Derand turned his horse and rode back to her. "If we don't then I'll probably start to scream and foam at the mouth!"

"Well, we can't have you doing that," the monster said, very obviously keeping himself from showing any amusement. "There's a nice little bower just ahead, and it's made for brief rest stops. Come on, I'll show you where it is."

He turned his horse and led off, completely ignoring Elissia's having said now. Under other circumstances she would have dismounted by herself, but she'd been stupid enough to let herself be given a sidesaddle. As she reluctantly stayed in that torture saddle and let her horse follow Derand's, she swore she'd never be this stupid again.

The bower Derand had mentioned wasn't very far, but it also wasn't quite as close as he'd suggested. By the time he dismounted and came to help Elissia down, she was nearly beside herself.

"Yes, I know, but we'll make it all right," he murmured as he held her in his arms once she stood next to her horse. "We'll make everything all right."

His head bent and he kissed her then, and in spite of her burning need Elissia couldn't help but return that kiss. She wanted to kiss and love the man Derand pretended to be, but she'd have to settle for the kiss alone. Also loving a pretend man would have been pitiful, and Elissia couldn't bear the idea of being pitiful.

The kiss lasted until Elissia couldn't keep herself from squirming hard again, and then Derand took her hand and led her to what he'd called a bower. A narrow opening in a ring of tall bushes led to a padded bench shaded by the

branches of a nearby tree, and when they reached the bench he had her lean down on it with her forearms. Her skirts were quickly thrown over her head and her underdrawers taken down to her knees, and then she heard the sound of leather being moved.

A moment later Derand was presenting himself to her, making it very clear how eager he was. Elissia cried out as he entered her, her need so high that her body spasmed as soon as he was inside her. By the time her mind reeled back from the relief it had needed so badly, she found that she was well on the way to being that badly in need again. The man inside her was stroking hard and fast, bringing her body sensations that simply couldn't be ignored. And she couldn't stop squirming, it just wasn't possible...

Quite a lot of time passed with Elissia barely knowing where she was and then, suddenly, she found she wasn't where she'd thought. Her skirts were down again and she sat on Derand's lap, but her underdrawers hadn't been pulled back up and the bead hadn't been taken out of her bottom.

"What - what's happening?" she asked, trying to move out of the hold of two wide arms around her. "How did we - I mean, I thought we were - "

"I think you must have gone into a brief swoon," Derand said, keeping those arms firmly around her. "One minute you were moaning, and the next you'd gone limp. Just sit still for a while until I can be sure you were complimenting me rather than showing signs of a problem."

"I'm perfectly all right, so you can let me go," Elissia said when it was clear she couldn't free herself. "If something were wrong I'd know about it, and there's nothing to know. Aside from - "

"You have no idea how relieved I am to hear that," he said, then moved her even closer and kissed her. Elissia had been about to add that she wanted that bead out of her and her underdrawers pulled back up, but the kiss refused to allow her to speak the words. And with the bead still inside her, it wasn't long before she was forced to return his kiss with passion. She drowned in the sensation of softly demanding lips on hers, and then she nearly choked.

"Shhh," the monster said without actually taking his lips from hers. His right hand had found its way up under her skirts, and his toying fingers made her squirm even more than the bead was doing. With her underdrawers still down he'd had no trouble reaching her womanly parts, and in no time at all her body was engulfed in flames.

The monster kept the kissing and toying going until Elissia was ready to scream at the top of her lungs, and only then did he let her get up and move to leaning on the bench again. This time he entered her slowly and carefully, starting to stroke slow before increasing the pace. Elissia accepted it all in squirming bliss, and when her body found release for the third time, his body joined hers.

"You're ... amazing," the monster panted just before he withdrew from her. "It's almost possible for me to believe that you're really enjoying my lovemaking. But of course you're not, you're just going along with the plan. Please excuse me for daydreaming out loud."

By the time Elissia was fully back to herself, the bead had been taken out of her and her underdrawers were up and tied again. Once her skirts were down she was able to straighten up, but she didn't say a word while Derand went for her horse. The bench would have to serve as a mounting block, and she'd be able to climb up on it with Derand's help...

It's almost possible for me to believe that you're really enjoying my lovemaking, he'd said, his voice wistful and faintly filled with longing. But that was just the pretense making him feel things he didn't actually feel, she knew, so Elissia did them both a favor and pretended she hadn't heard what he'd said. Once they learned who the enemy was, she would be out of this man's life for good.

They rode back to the palace entrance, dismounted and gave the horses back to the grooms, then Elissia went for

a bath while Derand left to see to something or other. Maids helped Elissia into the bath, then left when she said she wanted to soak for a short while. As soon as they were gone Elissia let the tears come, tears she couldn't have stopped even if her life had depended on it.

This second kind of release would let her join Derand for dinner without making a fool of herself for wishing life could somehow be different...

Chapter 13

Derand spent the next morning discussing arrangements for the games that would be part of the "wedding celebration" that his subject kings had been invited to. All the kings knew he meant to hold "games" instead of indulging in constant warfare, but he hadn't yet had an opportunity to show them what the games would be like. Most of the kings expected to sneer at whatever they were shown, and Derand couldn't allow that to happen. He had to get them interested and involved, personally as well as through their fighters. It was almost time for lunch, but Derand and Listen and two of Derand's battle commanders were thinking about ignoring the meal when a guard came to say Derand had visitors.

"Visitors?" Listen echoed when he heard the guard. "Who would be coming to visit now? None of the kings could have made it here this fast..."

"Instead of trying to guess, let's go and see," Derand said as he got to his feet, then he turned to the battle commanders. "You men keep working, but have some food brought in. You can't do your best if half your mind is on how empty your belly is."

The two men chuckled and agreed to send for food, so Derand and Listen left the room. The "visitors" had been stopped at the front entrance of the palace, a security precaution that would not cause trouble when the kings began to arrive. Men who knew all the kings would be stationed at the front entrance, but at the moment

"I'm relieved to see that you aren't taking matters lightly, Derand," King Ostrin said from beside his good friend King Almis. "The safety of you and my daughter can't be slighted in any way at all."

Along with Derand's father and Seea's were the two queens and Seea's brother. Gardal grinned at the surprise he had to see in Derand's expression, but didn't try to push forward to greet his friend first.

"You're all wonderfully welcome, but what are you doing here?" Derand finally managed to say after laughing out his delight. "We weren't expecting anyone for at least another day."

"We decided to surprise you," King Almis said in his normal voice, then stepped forward to add more softly, "And we didn't want to present separate targets for assassins. If we're all together, we can watch each other's backs."

"Good idea," Derand said heartily, even though he wasn't completely sure he agreed that the idea was quite that good. "I sent fighters to escort all of you..."

"And they almost found themselves in a fight," Gardal said as he also stepped forward. "When we ran into them we weren't completely sure that they were from you, but their captain had those 'tokens' you sent to identify them. A small wooden box for my father and mother and me, and a dagger for your father and mother. The captain didn't know what those things meant, but we did."

"That was the idea," Derand said, clapping Gardal on the shoulder. "And since you're here in time for lunch, I'll have you shown to apartments and then we can take the meal together once you've refreshed yourselves."

"Is Elissia resting?" Queen Liminia, Seea's mother asked as Derand began to gesture forward some of the servants who had appeared. "I'd like to see her, but if she's resting..."

"Actually, your daughter is working rather than resting," Derand said, speaking to King Ostrin as well. "Yesterday she helped me find out that those of my people with legitimate problems weren't being allowed an audience with me. She appointed a scribe to take down the details of some of those problems, and we learned this morning that once word spread that real problems were finally being addressed, even more people showed up. The scribe had had to send for two others to help him, and a lot of paper was filled up. I was busy this morning with organizing the games that will be held during the celebrations, so Seea is taking care of the lists made. She's arranging them in order of severity, and we'll start to look into them this afternoon."

"No, it's all right, Liminia," King Ostrin said as he patted his wife's shoulder. The queen had gone wide-eyed over what Derand had said, a typical reaction for the too-gentle woman. "Elissia doesn't share your view of matters, so I'm certain she's really enjoying what she's in the midst of. She is queen here now, so the troubles of the people are very much her business."

By then the servants had come forward to lead the royal visitors to their apartments,

but Derand still had time to look toward his father with his brows raised. King Almis shook his head in answer, then joined his wife in following the servant assigned to them.

"No, your father didn't tell my father what the real situation between you and Elissia is, but he did tell me," Gardal murmured from where he now stood to Derand's left. "Have you made any progress in straightening out that mess?"

"Not really," Derand answered with a sigh, remembering how quiet Seea had been the night before. And she'd been so deeply asleep when he'd finally gotten to bed that he hadn't had the heart to wake her... "She really seemed to enjoy thinking that I didn't love her, as though a burden of some sort was gone from her shoulders. Now... Now I don't know how she feels, and if I didn't have so much to do I'd probably be going crazy. But busy or not, I may go crazy anyway..."

"Maybe when I talk to her she'll tell me something you can use," Gardal said, echoing Derand's sigh. "If I thought she didn't love you as much as you love her I'd step back and mind my own business, but I know she loves you. That's why I can't understand the reason she refuses to believe in your own love."

"I - made a bad mistake with her," Derand admitted, keeping his voice low. "She doesn't know how things work in Arvin, and I didn't want her to get hurt or killed because of inexperience. After all, people are still out for my blood, and if she hesitates in obeying me during an attack... Well, to make a long and stupid story short and stupid, I tried to get her to obey me completely in all things."

"Oh, you didn't," Gardal said with ridiculing disbelief as Derand began to lead him and Listan toward a small sitting room. "No one who's spoken to my sister for even five minutes would be dim enough to think - She didn't let you bully her into agreeing, did she."

"No, she didn't," Derand said, replying to the flat statement rather than answering a question. "And as she pointed out, I'm still alive because she refused to agree. An assassin was in the process of strangling me when she put a dagger in his back, something she wouldn't have done if she'd agreed to obey me completely."

"Of course not," Gardal said with a nod as they entered the meeting room. "Obeying someone completely means making no decisions whatsoever of your own, everybody knows that. Didn't things get better when you changed your mind about her obeying you?"

"We ... had words again once the assassin was dead," Derand said, yanking on a

bell pull rather than looking at Gardal. "She said that any man who had saved my life would have been rewarded with anything he asked for. She'd saved my life twice, and I hadn't even offered her a thank-you. I - turned into a

fool then and demanded to know what she wanted as a reward, and she - said she wanted her freedom. Since I said I'd turned fool, I might as well admit that I agreed to grant her that freedom."

"Oh, Derand," Gardal said with such heavy disappointment that Derand flinched on the inside. "How could you say that no matter how angry you were? Oh, wait a minute... What she asked for must have also hurt like hell. Now I understand..."

"So do I, but all that understanding doesn't help one damned bit in solving the problem," Derand said, turning to look at his lifelong friend once more. "I'm waiting eagerly for any suggestions you'd care to make."

"Well... There should be all sorts of things you can try," Gardal answered lamely, gesturing with one hand. "I'll make a list and get back to you with it."

"Do you think holding my breath while I wait would be a good idea?" Derand asked, the sarcasm matching what Gardal would have said in his place. "I've been thinking about using chains on her if nothing else works, so you might as well put that on your list. And here's our tea, which ought to help us wait for your parents and mine to be ready for lunch."

Two servants accompanied by Potry were bringing in a tea service, and it was Potry who had the two servants drink some tea before he led them out again. Derand had once offered Potry the position of chamberlain, but Potry had turned him down saying that that kind of responsibility just wasn't for him. He'd accepted gold for his loyal service, though, but rather than retire as he could have he still worked in the palace. If he ever did retire, Derand would definitely miss him...

"My father will be ready a lot sooner than my mother," Gardal said as he came forward to help himself to the tea. "For some reason my mother has these really odd ideas about what a woman is and should be. Not to mention what women should do. She'll probably descend on Elissia and coo over the way my poor sister is being forced to do such terrible things as make decisions... Damn. I wonder if that's it."

"What are you talking about?" Derand asked from where he stood behind Gardal, waiting his turn at the tea. "And would you mind stepping out of the way so Listan and I can also get some tea?"

"Sorry," Gardal said, taking his filled cup and moving to one side. "What I meant was, maybe our mother's attitudes have affected Elissia more than a little - in an opposite way. My sister loves our mother, but she also seems to make a point of doing nothing the same. My mother has always seemed incapable of making any decisions at all, so - "

"So my bright idea to keep my woman safe made her think I was trying to turn her into a copy of her mother," Derand said, the disgust in his voice completely self-directed. "That goes all too well with what my father pointed out, that I wasn't accepting Seea as she was. But I still don't see why that would make Seea want to leave me. She's had no trouble refusing to listen to me until now."

"My king," Listan said, his voice thoughtful enough to draw Derand's attention. "Could it be... Can it be that the queen is afraid to stay with you for the very fact that she does love you? If you asked her to do something she considers horrible for the sake of your mutual love, she might not be able to refuse. A fate like that... Personally I think I'd be more terrified than afraid."

"By the gods, so would I," Gardal said, startlement turning to immediate agreement. "But if that's true, and it certainly sounds like it, we're worse off than we were a minute ago, Derand. How can you possibly convince her that you'll never put her in that kind of a bind? And how can you say it and mean it when we all turn foolish every now and then? We're human, after all..."

"I think I'll give up the throne and hide out in a cave for the rest of my life," Derand said, one hand over his eyes

to hide sight of a world he'd lost all control over. "The thought of doing something terrible and horrible to the woman I love is more than I can stand, but it could happen. Yes, that's definitely the answer I was looking for: running away... "

Painful silence was the only response his words elicited from the other two men, which told Derand that neither of them could see any more of a way out of the horrible mess than he could. Derand might have stood like that for quite a long time, but a knock at the door and Listan's immediate permission to enter changed things. Derand took his hand from his eyes in time to see a guard enter the room.

"My king, that miscreant collecting 'tax' money from the farmers and his false fighters have been captured," the guard announced, heavy satisfaction in the man's tone. "They've been brought here to the palace, and are at your disposal."

"Oh, I'll dispose of them all right," Derand growled as he put his teacup aside and headed for the door. "But first I'll get some answers out of them. How nicely cooperative of them to get themselves captured just when I wanted someone to take a bad temper out on. Where are they?"

"In the prisoner holding area behind barracks three, my king," the guard answered as he moved aside to get out of Derand's way. "It was thought you might want to make use of the ... questioning facilities there."

Derand didn't answer as Listan and Gardal scrambled to keep up with him, the guard bringing up the rear. The idea of torture made Derand shudder on the inside even more now that he'd gone through it twice himself, but he couldn't afford to be squeamish when it wasn't only his own life on the line. If it was possible to get the answers he needed another way, he'd use that instead of torture. But if the captives refused to speak...

The prisoner holding area was secure and well guarded, and the first thing Derand did was announce a bonus in gold for the fighters who'd captured the criminals. The men cheered, of course, and once they'd shouted out their thanks Derand was able to go and take a look at the fish they'd netted. The definitely poor fish...

"A cell-full of living proof that clothes definitely do not make the man," Listan said as he looked over the dross in black leather. "My mother makes a better fighter than any of them, and I've been told that they didn't even try to resist being arrested."

"Trying would have just gotten them killed and they obviously knew it," Gardal said from next to Listan, also examining the supposed fighters. "What are you going to do with them, Derand?"

"I haven't decided yet," Derand answered, having ignored the many for the one. The man he stared at was arrogant even in capture, sitting on the floor of the cell and leaning easily back against the wall as he ignored the man studying him. His pose said he had nothing to worry about, which was definitely odd...

"Let's take that one next door," Derand said after a moment of consideration, pointing to the man he'd been looking at. "We might as well be comfortable while he answers our questions."

"There's nothing to answer," the man said with a shrug that didn't quite hide his amusement as a guard began to unlock his cell. "I was out to collect as much money as I could without getting caught, but those idiots I hired refused to fight while I slipped away. Now you'll make me give back what I collected, and then will probably throw me out of the kingdom. Well, there are plenty of other kingdoms to try... Hey, easy there!"

The guard had pulled the man to his feet and now dragged him out of the cell past Derand. There was still something ... off-key about the man, something Derand couldn't quite put his finger on. Too bad he couldn't send for Seea to see what she thought, but giving the woman more stuff for nightmares would not be a very good idea. This time he'd just have to manage without her...

Three other guards joined the one with the captive in tow, and all four were needed when the man got his first look at the room next door. The heavy wooden table decorated with straps and chains clearly told was what in store for the prisoner, and he tried to resist being put on the table and into the straps and chains. His struggling was a waste of time, of course, and when the guardsmen finished and stepped back, Derand entered the room and gestured the guards out. Listan and Gardal had followed Derand into the room, neither of them looking very happy.

"Now that we're alone, let's try that story of yours again," Derand said to the prisoner once the door was closed. "Who paid you to make trouble in my kingdom, and why were you stupid enough to believe them when they told you you'd get out of this with a whole skin?"

"I - don't know what you're talking about," the man said, his arrogance and self confidence shaken only a little as he strained a bit against the leather straps around his wrists. "No one paid me, and I wasn't trying to make trouble. All I wanted was as much silver as I could get, and that's - "

"And that's a lie," Derand interrupted, showing how little patience he had left. "While you were being brought in here I did some thinking, and one important question came to me rather quickly: If all you collected from the farmers was coppers - and that is all you got, along with an occasional bit of silver - how did you expect to pay those 'fighters' of yours and still have anything left for yourself?"

"I - wasn't going to pay those idiots," the man said with only a heartbeat's worth of hesitation. "Just because they thought I would doesn't mean - "

"We were told that they and you all carried silver as well as copper." Listan was the one to interrupt this time, his tone as hard as Derand's had been. "And even idiots would know that you wouldn't be able to pay them silver if all you collected was copper. But they were still riding around with you, and with fairly full purses. Stop wasting our time and tell us the truth."

"I've already told you the truth," the man maintained, no longer pulling at the straps on his wrists. "And we both know that you won't be torturing me, so just let me go back to that cell until you're ready to throw me out of the kingdom."

"What makes you think we won't be torturing you?" Derand asked, suddenly knowing the true answer to his question. "Is it because you were told that after being tortured myself I won't allow torture to be used on anyone else?"

"Oh, so you are the king," the man said, his amusement clear only in the look in his eyes. "I thought you might be no more than one of his fighters... I didn't know you'd been tortured, Your Majesty. Did it hurt much?"

"More than you can possibly imagine," Derand answered, letting his voice go dead with the memory. "You see the hellish things that are about to be used on you, but you can't free your hands and feet to protect yourself. The torturer comes closer with a ... blade, say, and at first you don't feel it when that sharpened edge moves across your skin. The fear plunging all through your body keeps you from the pain to begin with, but suddenly you become aware of a burning shriek where the blood is beginning to flow from. The pain is getting worse by the minute, but the torturer doesn't care about that. He uses that blade on you a second time - and in the same place. That's when you start to understand why men scream their throats raw under torture..."

"That - that really sounds - terrible, Your Majesty," the man got out, all amusement gone along with most of the arrogance. "But knowing what it's like has to mean that you won't let anyone else be tortured. I mean, how could you justify something like that, especially to yourself... "

"Do you really think my king is more worried about you and your good opinion than about the safety of his loved ones?" Listan asked when Derand just smiled faintly at the man. "You're less than nothing to him, and he doesn't

have to justify anything to anyone. You - "

"He's not hearing you, Listan," Derand interrupted as he saw the captive start to pale. "Let's get our men in here and then he can know what I'm talking about. But tell the men not to stop what they're doing even if he immediately decides to tell the truth. Nothing teaches a man the error of his ways more than not being allowed to change his mind - "

"No! Please!" the captive screamed as he started to pull at the straps again. "He said I'd never have to face torture of any kind, and that makes him a liar! Only fools keep their word to a liar, and I'm no fool! It was King Paltin who sent me to make trouble in your kingdom, King Paltin!"

Derand stared at the struggling captive for a moment, then looked away.

"Get the men in here, Listan, and give them the orders I just mentioned," Derand said, pretending he saw nothing of Listan's startlement and Gardal's upset. "And also tell them that this one won't be easy, so they can't afford to play with him. There won't be much left when they're done, but that's - "

"Damn you," the captive said, speaking bitterly to Derand after his struggles abruptly stopped. "You're not doing anything the way you were expected to, but that still won't help you. If you were able to take it, then I can take it. And it was King Lovar who sent me."

Derand studied the man again, then gestured his two companions out of the room with him. Listan and Gardal were looking confused and annoyed as well as disturbed, and Derand didn't blame them.

"Well, now we know that torturing him will be a waste of time," Derand said after blowing out a breath of vexation. "He'll name every one of the kings in turn over and over, and even if we think he's broken we won't be able to know for certain that he isn't avenging himself in advance by begging us to believe that the last name he speaks is his employer. Just have his throat cut and let that be an end to the matter."

"Yes, my king, I'll see to it immediately," Listan said before moving off toward a group of guardsmen. Gardal watched him go, then joined Derand in heading back to the palace.

"Obviously Listan is as relieved as I am that there won't be any torturing done," Gardal said after a moment of silence. "The only thing is, how can you be sure that one of the others doesn't know who's behind all this?"

"In order for one of the others to know something, he'd have to be as associate of the one we questioned," Derand explained, privately reflecting that Gardal didn't know the meaning of the word relieved as well as he did. "If that man had an associate among the ones in black leather, the others would have unconsciously drawn away from the associate in the cell in an effort to distance themselves from whatever would be done to him. Did you notice any one of those men sitting alone?"

"No, they were all clumped miserably together," Gardal agreed with a look of surprise. "I hadn't understood what that meant but now I do, and I'm really impressed with how clever you are. But I still don't understand why you didn't bother to ask that man's name. Once he's dead we'll never know who he was."

"If you ever have to have someone tortured, you'll be happier if you don't know the man's name," Derand said, the closest he could come to an explanation. "Now we'd better get back to where they're probably waiting lunch for us."

Gardal's exclamation showed that Derand's friend had forgotten all about lunch, but now that he'd been reminded he increased his pace just as Derand did. They both hurried to rejoin Derand's guests, but Derand doubted that he'd have the stomach to eat much at all...

The inn had been cleared of other guests, so the only occupied room was theirs. There were guards out in the hall,

but they were picked men and even they weren't very near. The two people had eaten their meal before coming to this room, and once the door was closed behind them it began.

"Get out of those clothes instantly!" she snapped, treating him the way he deserved to be treated. "I've had to wait much too long to give you the next installment of the punishment you've earned!"

"Yes, mistress, I obey immediately," he said at once, suiting actions to words. His swordbelt came off first and then his boots, and a pair of moments later his finery lay piled on the floor. He himself knelt beside the clothing, his head down and his shoulders rounded.

"You disgust me," she said as she walked back to him from the trunk she'd gone to. "You're supposed to be a king, supposed to be completely in charge of everything and everyone, but you still jump to obey when your master calls!"

"It's simply a matter of politics, mistress," he begged, trying to make her understand. "The others will all be at this celebration the High King is holding, so staying away would be - impolitic."

He'd almost said "foolish" rather than "impolitic," a mistake that would have cost him dearly. He was already in for it, which meant he didn't need to add to the punishment unnecessarily.

"You were a fool to allow that man to defeat you in battle," she growled, letting him hear the sound of the switch she'd gotten from the trunk striking her hand. "I told you that you had to win, that you had to be High King, but you disobeyed me. Have you any idea how long you're going to pay for that disobedience?"

"I tried, mistress, I really did!" he begged, already knowing she'd refuse to believe

him. "The man is gifted with extraordinary talent in strategy and tactics, and that's why I lost to him. But I did do as you instructed and sent men to assassinate him. With any luck at all he'll be dead before we reach his palace."

"Luck," she said, disgust dripping from every word. "I talk about planning, and you talk about luck. Take the position you're best suited to and do it fast!"

He didn't waste an instant bending forward and putting his forehead to the floor, his arms folded across his middle. The pose put his backside in the position she wanted it, and she didn't waste a moment either. The switch struck him with a loud "crack!" that left a line of fire all across his seat, but he didn't voice the shout of pain he wanted to make. He wasn't allowed to make noise, and wouldn't be allowed that release for quite some time.

"You pitiful excuse for a human being!" she snarled, a second and third stroke of the switch adding to the fire of the first. "You promised me all of Arvin to do with as I pleased, but I haven't even been able to do as I please in our own kingdom! If that fool found out he'd lead the others against us, because he's the High King rather than you! As long as that state continues, the punishment I'd be giving others will be yours along with your own. Only by displacing that fool will you change that, and I'll make sure you don't forget."

"I won't forget, mistress, I swear I won't!" he choked out, writhing to the constant strokes of the switch. The flames now burned his entire seat, and the pain would get much worse before the punishment was over. Today's ride had been pure hell after last night's punishment, and tomorrow's ride would be even worse. He had to do something to let him go back to the milder punishment he'd been given at first, he just had to! If that meant the death of Derand Du Bahr, then so be it. There was a limit to how much a man could reasonably take...

But that limit was passed to the accompaniment of the switch striking his seat. It kept on and on, and when he finally found it impossible not to wail and beg, the slashing strokes came even harder to punish the disobedience. When tears came to his eyes he made sure not to let them be seen. If she saw the tears, it would go even harder for him...

Chapter 14

Elissia was surprised when she walked into the small dining room to find a crowd waiting. She'd expected it to be another day at least before people began to arrive, but here were Derand's parents and her own!

"Elissia, my dear, we've missed you," her father said, coming over to give her a gentle hug. "You look fine after all those adventures you and Derand have had."

"Oh, my poor child, you must be exhausted to trembling," her mother said in that ... helpless way of hers as she patted Elissia's cheek. "Someone really must speak to Derand and explain to him that women aren't meant to be imposed upon so terribly. Sit down, dear, and your father will have the servants bring cool cloths for your head."

"I've been sitting long enough and my head doesn't need any kind of cloths," Elissia said as her father turned to a bell pull. She'd thought there would be more time before this particular scene had to be gone through, but since there wasn't... "Actual, productive work is more enlivening than exhausting, Mother, something you'd know if you ever tried it yourself. No, I take that back. For you, work would be exhausting, not that you'd ever get any of it done."

"Elissia, for shame!" her father exclaimed as her mother put a hand to her throat and acted as if she were about to faint. He quickly put an arm around his wife and helped her to sit in the chair behind her before turning back to his daughter. "How dare you be so rude to your mother, young lady?" he continued, as angry as he ever got. "She'll hear an immediate apology from you or I'll know the reason why."

"You should already know the reason why, Father," Elissia said, grimly going on with it. "I've kept quiet for most of my life, fighting silently against nausea because I lived under your roof, but those days are over. How can you encourage her in that ridiculous act without gagging?"

"Your mother isn't acting, child, she's simply very delicate," her father said, anger receding in the face of needing to explain something. "If she had the choice, don't you think she'd be just as robust as everyone else?"

"She does have the choice, and she chooses to play the limp, helpless female," Elissia countered, reluctant to finally get the words said. "For a long time I thought that Mother was the way she is because she was taught to be like that, but I've since changed my mind. She uses her little act to manipulate you into expecting nothing from her, so she's free to do only as she pleases. She's always tried to make me do the same just to camouflage her own actions, and that's what I'll never forgive her for. Her rotten way of life is more important to her than I am."

Elissia left her father open-mouthed and silent and went to get herself a cup of tea. Behind her she was aware of King Almis moving in her father's direction, and then Queen Rildin was beside her to her left.

"You're feeling hurt and betrayed, but you mustn't," Rildin said very softly, putting a gentle hand to Elissia's shoulder. "Your mother has been 'delicate' for so long that she probably believes the act herself by now. She went pale when she heard what you said to your father, but instead of fainting she turned thoughtful. I sincerely think she never meant to cause you harm - or to lose your love. The act worked for her, so she fully expected it to work just as well for you."

"All of which means she was too wrapped up in her own wishes and wants to notice that I'm not like her," Elissia countered, for once adding sugar to the tea she poured. "If you really care about someone, you do what's best for them rather than what's best for you. I know you're trying to help, Rildin, but I've already insulted two of my guests so there's no reason not to try for a clean sweep."

"You must have had a really bad morning to be in such a foul mood," Rildin responded with a short laugh. "Is it possible that my son is working you too hard?"

"Working hard has nothing to do with how bad my mood is," Elissia said with a shake of her head as she turned to Derand's mother. "I started out annoyed that that fool Railsley kept people with real problems away from their king, and then I started to get more deeply into what those problems are. One family almost lost a child because they couldn't get help."

"What do you mean, almost lost a child?" Rildin asked, her own teacup stopped half way to her lips. "Was the child sick and in need of a doctor?"

"It's the people involved who are sick," Elissia answered with a shake of her head.

"The child's father was out of work for a while, so he had to borrow money to keep his family fed. He's a craftsman so he did find another job, but the man who loaned him the money refused to wait for the money to be repaid. His bullies took the family's oldest son as repayment, and the fighters I sent to get the boy back were only just in time to keep the boy from being sent out of Arvin to where slavery is legal. They also took the rest of the children being sent at the same time, then put the moneylender under arrest for kidnapping. I can't wait until he faces his king during audiences this afternoon."

"Oh, Derand will have his heart!" Rildin exclaimed, furious as well as outraged. "I can't believe anyone would think that he could get away with something like that!"

"He's been getting away with it for years, so why would he expect things to change?" Elissia countered, still furious herself. "It may be possible to get back some of the other children he's sold, but certainly not all of them. And what has all this time as a slave done to the ones we do get back? I get sick just thinking about it..."

"What's wrong?" King Almis asked, coming over to his wife. "What are you two getting so wild about?"

Rildin quickly explained what she and Elissia had been talking about, and Almis's expression turned grim.

"No, Derand won't have his heart," Almis said to his queen, his hand supportively on her arm. "If Derand is as smart as I know him to be, he'll send this moneylender into the same slavery he sent those children to. That would be true justice."

"Oh, look, Derand and Gardal are coming in," Rildin said, pointing to the door. "Let's speak to our son right now, Almis. If we don't I'll get indigestion from whatever I eat."

King Almis nodded and joined his wife in going toward their son, which let Elissia sip at her tea. The morning would have been bad enough if the moneylender had been the only blight involved, but he hadn't been. There was more waiting for her to tell Derand about, but after lunch would be soon enough. No sense in his appetite getting just as ruined as hers had been.

"That's cruel, El," Elissia heard, which made her look up to see Gardal shaking his head at her. "Treating your loving brother like a stranger and not even offering him a hug. How could you?"

"Today's the day I chose to be cruel to everyone," Elissia answered, knowing well enough that Gardal was teasing. "Aren't you glad you weren't left out?"

"There are some things I don't mind being left out of," Gardal countered with a grin. "So how come you're over here all alone with Mother and Father over there? They should still be bothering you about everything from how you look to what you're wearing."

"Speaking my mind for once seems to have stopped the usual flow," Elissia said, making no effort to look over at their parents. "Don't you ever get tired of the way she acts, Gardal, or of the way Father always lets her get away with it? Or are you just too chivalrous and noble to say anything?"

"It's not for me to criticize my parents," Gardal answered, now looking extremely uncomfortable. "My life has been more than pleasant because of them, and eventually I'll even be given a throne. Can't you just concentrate on the good things when you get an urge to ... speak your mind?"

"What good things?" Elissia countered, making no effort to avoid Gardal's gaze. "Are you talking about all the time I wasted being taught to be a 'woman of station' no matter how stupid I said the lessons were? All the times Mother just couldn't quite find something nice to say about whatever I was doing because she wouldn't have done the same? Maybe you mean the times Father felt he had to apologize for me because I wasn't a sweet, mindless, bit of fluff. And then there's the way Father married me off as a child, just because he wanted the marriage. You're right, Gardal. I have an enormous amount of good things to remember."

"El, you sound even more unhappy now than when we were in Ramsond," Gardal protested with pain in his voice as Elissia remembered to sip her tea. "Tell me what I can do to make things better for you, please, tell me something!"

"Everything possible is already being done," Elissia said, too depressed even to reassure the brother she loved. "As soon as we find out who's sending assassins, I'll be free to go where I please. I don't yet know where that will be, but it certainly won't be back with Mother and Father. Being buried alive would be kinder than that."

"All right, I know that this 'time of celebration' is part of the plan to catch Derand's enemy," Gardal said in a soft voice after running a hand through his hair. "Mother and Father weren't told, but I was, and I see something that could ruin the plan. Your not getting along with your parents doesn't fit with how blissfully happy you're supposed to be."

"Sure it does," Elissia said, privately shaking her head over Gardal's lack of imagination. "Part of the bliss I supposedly feel will be for the fact that I don't have to go back to live with my parents again. Any number of people will understand that motive even if you don't."

"El, if you do leave Derand the way you claim you mean to, I can't see Father letting you do anything but come home," Gardal said after something of a hesitation. "You're still his daughter, after all, so no matter what you say to him you won't - Or is that what you had in mind when you suddenly decided to get all those complaints off your chest? Are you making sure that he'll simply close his eyes and pretend he doesn't know what's going on?"

"Am I supposed to have forgotten how quick Father is to forgive and forget?" Elissia asked with a sound of ridicule that ought to throw Gardal off completely. "If you don't mind, I'd like to be considered a better tactician than that."

"Then what are you trying to do?" Gardal demanded, a touch of short-tempered annoyance behind the words. "When you do something you usually have some kind of plan in mind, and I'd like to know what it is this time."

"You mean I'm not allowed to just lose my temper like any other human being?" Elissia countered at once, her tone sharp. "You can but I can't, is that it, brother? Well, excuse me all to pieces for overstepping myself, and let me assure you that it won't happen again - very often."

And with that Elissia walked away from him, almost as outraged as she'd pretended to be. To think that a full grown woman would be expected to obey her father's wishes about her life rather than her own... ! That nonsense had always had the ability to set her off, which made it very useful right now. It gave her an excuse to be less than blissfully happy, a break she really needed at the moment...

Elissia was able to take one more swallow of tea before a servant announced that lunch was ready to be served. The table that could hold fourteen people easily had been set for the seven who were present, which happily put Elissia at one end with Derand at the other and their guests in the middle. Elissia let herself be served only a moderate amount of food, but it was still too much for her feeble appetite to handle. So she ate what she could,

then sat back with fresh tea to wait for everyone else to be finished.

Oddly enough, it seemed that no one had the kind of appetite they were supposed to have. When the meal was through, Elissia sent a servant to get the notes she'd made from the scribes' reports, then handed the pages to Derand when they were brought.

"I've already heard about the kidnapping, but the rest of this looks almost as ugly," Derand said after glancing over what she'd written. "Two men who constantly get drunk and beat their wives and children. A new 'guild' of fishermen formed that's trying to keep everyone else from fishing in the river. People robbed of everything they have and no one even looking into the thefts... We've got a long afternoon ahead of us."

"I think you're also going to have to do something about the current group of city guardsmen," Elissia said with a mirthless smile. "From what people have said, they're collecting pay for sitting around and drinking all day when they're not chasing women who want nothing to do with them."

"I've already sent some of my men to watch them for a while," Derand said with a wry nod. "That should let us know if any of them are worth keeping - and if any of them ought to be charged with some sort of crime... Are you feeling all right? You look ... tired."

"I don't feel tired, I feel impatient," Elissia said as she glanced around the room. Their guests were talking as they moved toward the door, apparently on their way back to their apartments. "I want the waiting to be over with and the main part of the plan to start, but you can't expect people to get here by magic. You have to wait for them to arrive by normal means, and who knows what will happen until they do arrive."

"Meaning you expect the attacks against me to stop once our guests are here," Derand said, and Elissia could feel him studying her. "Yes, now that I think about it I have to agree. The enemy won't want it to look like I'm a victim instead of a villain, so I won't be a target any longer. We have no choice but to wait for the attacks to stop while hoping nothing effective will be done until then, so let's fill some of the time in the most constructive way we can."

He offered her his arm, so Elissia took the arm and let herself be escorted to the audience chamber. Everyone stood and bowed or curtsied when she and Derand entered, but not everyone sat down again afterward. The sight of the same scribe entering and setting up sent a number of people out of the room in disgust, causing Derand to make a sound of amusement.

"It looks like some of the 'petitioners' thought that yesterday would be considered a mistake," he murmured to Elissia as they got more comfortable on the thrones. "They seemed to expect that the man they paid would set me straight on who was supposed to be granted an audience and who should be ignored. I wonder how they made such a mistake."

"Most likely they spoke to that fool Railsley before he was arrested," Elissia murmured back. "If they'd had any brains they would have demanded their money back instead of letting him talk them into being patient. Now they're out of luck."

"I'm probably going to charge Railsley with being an accessory to every crime we should have known about but didn't," Derand added just as softly. "So let's get started with seeing what he's guilty of."

He turned his head then to nod at the fighters who had a stout, greasy man in shackles to one side of the room. The man was dressed in very expensive but rumpled clothing and wore rings on almost all of his fingers, and he looked completely outraged. Elissia knew that this had to be the moneylender, and she watched carefully as he was manhandled forward and forced to bow.

"This man is Oldio Fazon, a fool who considers himself a law unto himself," Elissia said fairly loudly into the

buzz of comments from the other people in the room. "He pretends to lend money to help people out, but in reality he's only helping himself. He kidnaps children and sells them into slavery."

"I most certainly do not!" Fazon flared out at once, his indignation clearly growing stronger. "My clients are lucky that I have a friend who's willing to repay their loans for them if he's sent children to work out their parents' debt as servants to him. That isn't slavery or even kidnapping, so I respectfully demand an apology!"

"Respectfully demand," Derand echoed with an odd kind of amusement as he stared at the man. "You have your ridiculous story all ready, so the idiots on the thrones of your kingdom should simply nod with understanding and let you go back to doing as you always have. And since you have been doing this for quite some time, that brings up a question: if the children are only supposed to be working off a debt, how many of them can you produce to show that they were returned home once the debt was repaid?"

"Why - why - there aren't any because the debts haven't yet been paid off," Fazon said, obviously thinking fast. "And I haven't been doing this for years, only for a short time, so it's perfectly understandable that none of the children are back yet."

The man began to preen where he stood, clearly proud of the way he'd found out of the trap, but before Elissia could call him a complete liar someone else did it for her.

"You lie like the disgusting slime you are!" a woman called from the back of the chamber before stepping out where she could be seen. "Seven years ago you took my oldest son to repay the loan my husband was already paying back, just not fast enough to suit you. Losing our son killed my husband, and our son hasn't been seen since!"

"She's the liar! Fazon snapped, the look in his dull little eyes showing how furious he was. "For some reason she hates me, so she's taking this opportunity to lie about me! She - "

"That's enough!" Derand ordered in a voice so loud that Fazon was left with his mouth hanging open and no words coming out. "That woman isn't the only one to accuse you, and how long you've been taking people's children isn't an issue. Doing something that vile even once would condemn you, and you've already admitted to committing the crime more than once."

"But it isn't a crime!" Fazon screamed, suddenly losing all control of himself. "I paid good gold to make sure it wasn't considered a crime, so you can't change things now! Who do you think you are to barge in here and tell honest merchants what they can and can't - "

"Honest merchants?" Derand interrupted in a roar, again drowning the stupid man out. "You're as honest as I'm a delicate poetry lover, but the main point is that I'm your king! That's who I think I am, and I believe I can prove the contention. Guards! Take this man and make him tell you the names of everyone involved in his disgusting crime, including his bullies, whoever he paid off here in Holdisond, and the man he sent the children to. Once you have him wrung out, arrange for him to be sold into slavery. But not through his own contact, because that man will be too busy answering questions for my fighters to have the time to sell him properly."

Fazon began to scream as he was dragged out, but his screams weren't easily heard over the cheering of most of the people in the chamber. There was also a smattering of applause, but when Derand held up one hand the cheering and applause changed to respectful silence.

"I'm told that that man was just about the only moneylender in the city," Derand said as he looked at the people who had shown him how pleased they were. "Since people do need to borrow money in times of difficulty, I've decided to take Oldio Fazon's wealth and put it to good use. Until some honest moneylenders can establish themselves, anyone who needs to borrow money can apply to the chamberlain I'll appoint to oversee the matter. If you get a loan you will pay interest, but not in an unbearable amount and no children will be part of the matter."

Please tell all your friends that their families are no longer at risk."

The cheering and applause was louder now, and Elissia enjoyed it at least as much as Derand obviously did. He'd clearly used lunch to do some thinking, and the results of that thinking would be to the benefit of a lot of people in his city.

Elissia had arranged for the head of the new "guild" to be brought to the audience, and that was who Derand called for next. The man had looked smug and complaisant to begin with, but after seeing what had been done with Fazon his expression had changed to one of worry. When Derand told him that he couldn't keep people from fishing in the river themselves rather than being forced to buy from the members of his "guild," the man didn't even argue. Elissia saw that the man was smarter than Fazon in that he knew when to give up his attempted thievery. If he tried to keep on with the nonsense, the next time there would be more than a warning given to him.

When Derand called for the abusive drunks to be brought in, instead of two there were seven men pushed and shoved forward. Elissia had told the fighters to bring in any other nasty drunks they might come across, and they'd obviously taken her at her word. The seven men were dirty and disheveled and unsteady on their feet, but it seemed that an effort had been made to sober them up. They weren't completely sober, but they seemed able to follow most of what was going on.

"You men are a disgrace to yourselves and to this city," Derand stated in a growl that made most of the fools flinch. "If you have a problem you try to solve it, you don't get blind, stinking drunk in order to forget about the problem instead. You men will be kept under arrest until you're completely sober, and then you'll be told again what I'm telling you now: you're forbidden to take even a single drink for a full month.

"If you drink anyway you'll certainly end up drunk again, but the next time you won't simply be sobered up. You'll be taken to a work gang and worked until you drop for six full months, and only at the end of the six months will you be given one last chance. If you stay sober you'll stay free. If you don't, you'll go back to the work gang for good."

Derand let the mutters and moaning run through the group for a minute, then he held up a hand again.

"Before I forget, let me add something to what I've already said. Any of you who manage to stay sober for a month are not being told that they can then get drunk again any time they please. If you can't handle drinking only in moderate amounts, you won't be drinking at all. And if you do go back to drinking anyway, you'd better pray that no one in your family has an 'accident' during the time. If they do,

you won't be free of the work gang in a mere six months. Get them out of here now."

The guards forced the stunned men out of the room while Elissia listened to the murmurs of the people attending the audience. Some of the private conversations sounded worried, but most of them sounded delightedly relieved.

Other people with problems were called forward then, and one of them was a woman who wanted her marriage ended. Elissia hadn't made a point of mentioning the matter to Derand because she'd wanted to know what he would do without having been given time to think of something beforehand. If Derand felt cornered he certainly didn't show it. He simply asked the woman if she was sure she wanted the marriage to be set aside, and when she answered firmly and calmly that she did he allowed it.

Another two hours went by while fairly serious matters were taken care of, and then Derand called a halt for the day. There were only a few people heading for the scribe as Elissia joined Derand in leaving the room, which was a relief. Tomorrow morning would hopefully be more pleasant than this morning had been...

Derand went off about his own business, so Elissia returned to their apartment and read until it was time to get dressed for dinner. Her aim was to avoid their "guests" as long as possible, and the effort proved to be a success.

She was left alone until she had no choice but to join everyone in the dining room, and then she was actually left to drink tea in peace until Derand himself appeared. A moment later dinner was announced, so she took her place at the table and did her best to eat enough to keep herself alive. Everyone else did better than that with the excellent meal, so their mood had apparently lightened.

The after-dinner conversation was friendly and touched on nothing serious but Derand's handling of the moneylender cum slaver, something his parents had managed to see for themselves. No one seemed to notice that Elissia didn't join in any of the talk, at least until she and Derand went to their apartment to get ready for bed. When Elissia walked into the bedchamber after her maids had left, Derand looked up from where he sat.

"You were very quiet during dinner and afterward," he said as he put aside the glass of wine he'd been holding. "Is that because of the words you had with your parents earlier today?"

"I also had words with Gardal," Elissia said, stopping half way across the room. "Didn't he mention that as well?"

"Instant counterattack is sometimes a good strategy, but not always," he commented, looking at her very directly. "In this case, for instance, I haven't been distracted from the knowledge that you behaved very badly. The way you spoke to your mother was inexcusable. If you had a complaint, you should have made it in private."

"What good would it have done to start any of the arguments in private?" Elissia countered, having expected Derand to mention the matter. "Until now it could be thought that I loved my family fiercely, so they were walking targets for assassination. Once word gets around that I resent them more than love them, killing them will seem more like a favor to me than a terrible blow. Even if the plan doesn't work like that even though it should, they won't be any worse off than they were."

"So you were trying to protect them without making it look like a deliberate effort," Derand said, a brief expression of annoyance crossing his face as he stood. "If there are any more assassins still around your plan might work, but in the meantime what about your parents' feelings? Don't you think your words felt like a knife plunging into their chests?"

"My parents aren't as delicate as all that, and I didn't say anything that wasn't true," Elissia muttered, turning away as Derand got closer. "I love my mother and father because that's what children do, but every now and then I wonder how much they deserve that love."

"Since they didn't murder you in cold blood while you were still a child, they've earned all the love you can give them," Derand said from behind her right shoulder. "You weren't an easy child to live with, and if they made a few mistakes with you they can be excused on the grounds that they're only human. They never deliberately tried to hurt you even when your safety was involved, but you made no effort to return the courtesy. That particular lack of effort has earned you an effort on my part."

And with that his big hand closed around Elissia's left arm, a prelude to his dragging her to the nearest chair. Elissia hated the way her struggling meant absolutely nothing in the face of his strength, and then he was sitting down and pulling her across his knees.

"Let me go!" she demanded even as her sleep ensemble skirts were thrown forward over her back and head. "You have no right to do this to me, not for any reason!"

"You're not the only one able to think around here," the monster responded as he kept her from pushing back to her feet. "What you said to your parents and brother

-guests of mine - was rude and insulting, and I would not be expected to let you get away with it no matter how much I loved you. I hope for your sake that your plan does work, because you're about to pay the price of that plan right now."

Elissia gasped when the bead was quickly pushed into her bottom, but then the gasp turned into a howl when the first heavy smack reached her. The first smack became three, four, and then five, six, and seven, and by then Elissia's howls were even louder. The monster's hand felt like wood as it struck her bottom again and again, warming her seat to the level of the flames already rushing around her body. She wasn't being allowed to protect her bottom with a hand and she wasn't being allowed to squirm free. All she was being allowed was to get the spanking the monster had made up his mind to give her.

By the time the last of the heavy smack-smack-smacking fell on her seat, Elissia had long-since started to cry. The monster had obviously been really furious with her, and the spanking he'd given was one of the worst she'd ever gotten. Part of the writhing she did was from the terrible need screaming inside, a need that the throbbing, burning ache in her bottom wasn't quite able to push out of her awareness.

And then, before he let her up, he did something really cruel...

Chapter 15

"What - what are you doing?" Elissia asked hoarsely between sobs. "No, please!"

"I'm showing you the same consideration you showed to your parents," the monster answered as he tied her wrists together in front of her with thin material that was very soft but also very strong. He'd first pulled off her sleep ensemble, but that was hardly what might be considered a comfort. "Tomorrow you'll be given the chance to apologize for what you said, but the choice of whether or not to apologize to your parents will be entirely yours. If you decide against making the effort, you'll know exactly what you have to look forward to again tomorrow night."

By now he'd pushed her back to her feet and stood, so he was able to pull her toward their bed by the end of the material tied around her wrists. Elissia was desperate to rub at her terribly spanked bottom, but she wasn't being allowed to do that. Instead she was thrown into the bed on her back and the end of the material was tied around a decorative spoke in the headboard. She raised her aching bottom from the bed as quickly as possible by using her feet, but a moment later the position wasn't as much of a benefit as it had been at first.

The monster slipped out of his wrap as soon as she was tied to the headboard, and now he put himself between her knees. She gasped when he began to enter her, needing him inside her so badly that she nearly demanded he hurry, but she'd forgotten what his use was like after a hard spanking. She choked and squirmed helplessly as he began to stroke in and out, the touch of his body almost making her think she was being spanked again.

But that bead in her bottom did its usual job of making her forget about everything but the way her need was being seen to - which had to be why the monster had used the thing. He'd wanted her to respond to him helplessly and completely, disallowed the choice of refusing him the least little thing. Elissia wanted to rage at being treated like this, but her own body refused to allow that. She quickly turned mindless with the pleasure she was being forced to feel, and the time went on even longer than the spanking had. After her body spasmed with release again and again and again, Elissia fell instantly asleep once the monster withdrew.

And awoke in the morning, alone in the bed - but still tied!

Derand finished his morning chores faster than he thought he would, considering that he'd taken over Seea's job of reviewing the requests for assistance that the scribe had taken down yesterday. There were a lot fewer problems listed than the day before, but there still remained some that needed attending to.

But that was for later, when audience time came around. Right now he intended to take a pleasure break, one he would normally have taken this morning after waking up. But when he woke up still angry over how Seea had treated her parents, he decided to put off the time for a short while. A short while that ought to add to the repayment Seea was owed for the pain she'd given King Ostrin. Derand was more than just fond of Ostrin, and

the man hadn't deserved to be treated badly no matter what the reason.

Derand paced along the hall toward his apartment, more than a little disturbed that Seea would choose such a cruel way to protect her parents. She hadn't been the easiest child to raise, something she ought to be well aware of, so the fact that she had issues from her childhood should be balanced against the issues she'd caused. Gardal, caught in the middle, had been very upset, and that had added to Derand's anger.

The dozen fighters Derand had left in front of the apartment were still as alert as when he'd placed them there, and Derand dismissed them before entering. Leaving Seea tied to the bed with one of Waysten's toys meant she wasn't in a position to defend herself, so Derand had had the apartment closely guarded. Soon the guards would no longer be necessary, since he meant to release Seea as soon as he eased her. The bead would have her really worked up by now, but none of what he'd done to her would disappear with her need, he knew. Things were still going badly between them, and he had not even a single clue about how to make them better.

When he entered his bedchamber, Derand could hear the sound of movement in the bed. Seea would have awoken to find herself in the unpleasant position of still having an aching bottom that needed to be kept from complete contact with the bed, but shifting around to ease her bottom would have encouraged the bead to make free with her reactions. By now the woman must be squirming uncontrollably, and walking over to the bed showed Derand that he was right.

"Well, well, what have we here?" Derand drawled as he stopped to study a very unhappy Seea. "Can this possibly be a woman who's anxiously looking forward to making an apology at lunch?"

Seea simply closed her eyes rather than answer him in words, most likely because the words she most wanted to speak would earn her another spanking. But she wasn't refusing to do as he wanted her to, and he'd said she would be given the chance to make the decision freely about how they would spend their time tonight. That meant he didn't need any words from her to get on with what had to be done, so he put his swordbelt aside, opened his leather trousers, and then put himself between her legs.

The first touch of his manhood to her need brought a moan to Seea's throat, a moan that increased in volume as he slowly put himself inside her. Her helpless squirming set his own blood on fire, trying to force him into stroking her fast and hard, but he had more control than that.

Once he was as deeply inside her as it was possible to go, he put his hand to her bottom before he began to stroke slowly in and out. She yelped at the touch and tried to escape it, her squirming becoming even more delightful than it had been. When she couldn't escape the touch of his hand she made a sound that could only be called angry surrender, then seemed to lose herself to what was being done to her.

Derand kept control of himself for only a short while, and then he let go and gave Seea and himself everything they both needed. The concept of time disappeared from Derand's awareness, returning only when he found release and lay down on the bed beside Seea. He spent a couple of minutes getting his breath back, and then he pulled up his trousers again before he removed the bead and then untied Seea.

"You have plenty of time to dress for lunch," he said as she sat up on her hip and began to rub her wrists. "Take a bath and think about what you'll say as part of an apology, assuming you decide that that's what you want to do. We won't start lunch without you, so don't be late."

Derand went into the bathing room to wash the bead before he put it and the restraint away in a place Seea wasn't likely to find them, then he left the apartment. He didn't miss the fact that Seea still hadn't said a word to him, but this time it seemed to be seething anger rather than depression behind her silence. Derand tried to consider the anger better than the depression, but the internal argument didn't quite convince him. Each reaction was as bad as the other, since both meant trouble for him in some way...

"My king?" Derand suddenly heard, the words louder than what could be considered normal. "My king, are you angry with me for some reason?"

"What would make you think I was angry with you?" Derand asked as he turned back to Listan, who stood about three feet behind him. "And why didn't you come all the way up to me instead of stopping back there?"

"My king, I didn't 'stop' here," Listan said as he closed the distance between them. "I came from the other direction and greeted you when you reached me, but you just kept going without saying a single word. Is it wise to let yourself become this distracted right now?"

"It's never wise to become this distracted, but I haven't had a choice in the matter in quite some time," Derand answered, silently cursing himself for a fool. "If you don't know when I stopped having the choice, Listan, you haven't been paying attention. Was there something you wanted to talk to me about?"

"Yes, my king, there is," Listan agreed, his face showing sympathetic understanding. "The city guardsmen we've been watching... The news isn't good. Out of the three shifts of ten men each, a total of four actually make some effort to do their job. One on the eight to four shift, one on the four to midnight shift, and two on the midnight to eight shift."

"Only four men out of thirty who actually try to do the job," Derand said disgustedly with a shake of his head. "I wondered why there were so few men on each of the shifts, and now I know: It doesn't make sense to pay more men to do nothing. Tell me, Listan, why didn't we know about all this sooner? Why did it take bringing a tornado into the city to find out what was being mishandled?"

"When we first got here, the last of the war took all our attention," Listan answered with his own headshake. "After that we were involved with cleaning up the remaining loose ends, so we made the mistake of believing that your predecessor here had things running smoothly. I feel certain that we would have found the trouble as soon as we began to settle in."

"Maybe you're right," Derand said, not really believing the words he spoke. "But whichever way it would have gone, right now we're heading in the proper direction. If you haven't already done so, assign twenty-five fighters to each of the shifts. Their first assignment will be to arrest most of the men they're replacing, but I want to be there when we take the present shift. Let's get the necessary men together -along with those who did the watching - and take care of the matter right now."

Listan nodded and led off, and it wasn't long before he and Derand and the

necessary men were mounted and heading for the city guard post in the middle of the city. And that was another thing Derand suddenly noticed that was wrong...

"Listan, assign some men to look into putting guard posts in the various segments of the city rather than just one post in the middle," Derand said as they rode. "Get a map of the city and use it to figure out where the posts ought to be. The current arrangement is downright stupid."

Listan's brows rose as he realized that Derand was right, and his nod was on the distracted side. Derand knew that Listan was already making plans, so the problem would certainly be taken care of as fast as possible.

They dismounted and left their horses a street away from the current guard post, then went the rest of the way on foot. Instead of disappearing, the people they passed on the street watched them curiously, and some even started to follow at a small distance. Derand took the reaction of the people as a good sign, and made no effort to chase them away. They needed to know that their new king was serious about making the city a decent place to live, and showing them was a better idea than simply telling them.

Derand had already given his orders, so when they reached the large, blocky stone building that was the guard post his men spread out to surround the place. One of the men who had been watching the guardsmen was dressed in ordinary clothing, so he was the one who would go inside while Derand and the others took their turn at watching. There was no sense in letting the current guardsmen claim there was some kind of mistake about their being arrested, not when it was possible to arrange the necessary proof.

An open window in one side wall was the position Derand chose for himself even while he mentally shook his head over such sloppiness. A proper guard post shouldn't even have had windows let alone open windows, but at least the nonsense would soon make no real difference. He and Listan stood to either side of the window, and Derand was able to look inside as his man in ordinary clothes entered hesitantly.

"I'd - like to report a robbery," the man said after a moment to the room at large. Nine men sat around in various poses of relaxation, most of them drinking something a lot stronger than tea, five of them playing cards. They were a scruffy-looking bunch, and most of them ignored the man who had asked for help. One of them, who was seated at a small table writing something, put his pen aside, got up, and walked toward the "ordinary citizen."

"Maybe I can help you," the guard said, sounding tired and almost hopeless. "Do you know who it was who robbed you? Did they take something you can prove is yours?"

"Shut up and sit down, Roblen," one of the others slurred as he lurched to his feet. "I'll take care a this... How much money you got, fool? No, never mind, just hand it all over. And if it ain't enough then I'm gonna bust you up some to teach you better'n to come in here poor. We don't listen to scum like you for nothin', do we, boys?"

"No, sure as hell don't," and "Hell, no," and other like comments came from around the room along with laughter. The man called Roblen had taken a step back with anger seething in his eyes, but considering how badly he was outnumbered it was no surprise that he did nothing else.

"Well, scum?" the drunk demanded after emptying the bottle he held before tossing it aside to break in a spatter of glass. "You gonna pay, or you gonna get a beatin'?"

"Neither," Derand said through the window after signaling most of his men to enter the building. "This time you get the beating, but after that you won't get off as easy. Take them all alive."

The drunk had managed to focus on Derand with a scowl that was probably supposed to be frightening, and that was only the last of the man's mistakes. He never saw the fist thrown by Derand's fighter in ordinary clothes, but he staggered from the blow and went stumbling back toward the man Roblen. Roblen could have had no idea about what was happening, but even as black-clad fighters filled the post he reached all the way back with a fist and then sent that fist to connect with the drunk's jaw. The drunk dropped like a felled tree, and Roblen rubbed his knuckles with a grim smile on his face as he stared down at the man he'd hit.

Meanwhile, Derand's fighters were taking the other so-called guardsmen into custody. Two actually tried to draw their swords after jumping to their feet, but the weapons were only half drawn before there were points at their throats. One of the two swallowed hard before surrendering and the other cursed, but both chose not to fight. It wasn't long before all the prisoners were being put in chains, and by then Derand and Listen had left the window to enter the building. Derand looked around for his man and the one called Roblen, but both men had disappeared and the door to the back of the building stood open.

"Where did Fallis and that last guardsman go?" Derand asked after looking around. "I hope the guardsman didn't run off thinking he was about to be arrested. I need him to find a decent guard force..."

"There's Fallis, my king," Listan answered, pointing to the open doorway. "And he seems to have another prisoner."

Even as Listan spoke, Fallis came back through the doorway dragging an unconscious man by the collar of his tunic. The prisoner wasn't Roblen, though, but before Derand could ask about the man his question was answered. Roblen followed Fallis slowly, his arm around a girl wrapped in a blanket. The girl was trembling as she got as close to Roblen as she could, but she wasn't crying.

"We were able to stop him before he did more than force her to take her clothes off," Roblen said when he saw Derand's eyes on him and the girl. "I don't know who you are, sir, but if you'll have some of your men take this little girl home I'll be able to surrender."

"You're ready to surrender, but only now, after you saved an innocent girl," Derand said while most of his men glanced at Roblen with approval. "Even if I hadn't already made up my mind, this would settle the matter. Instead of surrendering, I'd rather you volunteered to recruit more men like yourself for the guard force. The ones who have had the job until now won't be available after today."

Roblen looked so stunned that many of the fighters around him laughed, but the laughter was another gesture of approval. Fallis had turned over his unconscious prisoner to the fighters who were chaining up the rest, and now he showed his own smile.

"Your Majesty, as soon as the men started to enter, that Roblen gestured to me and began to run for that door," Fallis said in a soft voice. "There's an area with a cot near a bunch of cells back there, and when I got through the door I found Roblen beating the hell out of that uniformed garbage. The garbage had made the girl strip naked, and all her clothes were cut to ribbons and scattered around. I know that scum was going to rape the girl, but happily he decided to enjoy her terror for a while first."

"And that let us keep it from happening," Derand said with a nod of approval. "Or, to be more accurate, it let Roblen keep it from happening. If the other three men you and your group found for us are half this good, Fallis, we should have no trouble at all building a guard force that will shine."

"Two of the three should be almost as good," Fallis said with a judicious nod. "The third ... isn't what can be considered leadership material, but he still keeps himself away from the others and tries to do a decent job. It might be a good idea to reward those four, my king, to show what an honest man can earn by staying honest."

"That's a very good idea, so Listan, please see to it," Derand said. "Right now I've got to get back to the palace to join my guests for lunch. If you like, Listan, you can have the men drag this dross along in chains. It won't hurt for the people to see that they don't have to be more afraid of the guard than of the thieves preying on them."

"I'll see to it, my king," Listan said, who had already signaled to some of the fighters. "Your escort back to the palace is ready to leave."

Derand stopped himself from telling Listan that he didn't need an escort, and simply led the fighters outside and back to the horses. He didn't enjoy having what amounted to baby-sitters, but until he found out who his enemy was it would be stupid to take chances. And when the first of the guardsmen were dragged out in chains, the cheers coming from the watching people lightened Derand's mood to the point where he reached the horses almost whistling.

Riding back to the palace didn't take long, and Derand reached the small dining room to discover that he was right on time for lunch. He stepped inside - and the smile died on his face when he saw what was going on. His parents and Seea's were ... more clumped together than standing with each other, an odd arrangement that suggested something other than a pleasant time. The servants in the room wore the perfectly blank expressions that said they'd been witnesses to a scene that they were going to pretend had never happened - at least while they remained in the room. Gardal hovered around the clump of their parents as though uncertain about what to do, but when he saw Derand he turned and quickly strode over.

"Well, I think I can safely say that you've done it now," Gardal growled without preamble, not even a hint of friendliness to be seen in his expression. "I'd ask if you were ever going to learn what my sister is like, but the question doesn't seem to have relevance any longer."

"What are you talking about?" Derand demanded despite the fact that deep inside he had a really terrible feeling... "Does this ... strangeness have something to do with Seea?"

"This ... strangeness, as you put it, has everything to do with Elissia," Gardal responded, his lowering stare accusing. "You did something to her to force her into apologizing to our parents, and it's too bad you didn't get to hear that apology."

"Don't tell me she just added to the insult she gave yesterday," Derand groaned out, rubbing his eyes with one hand. "I don't believe - "

"Oh, don't worry, she didn't say anything that was an insult," Gardal returned, still really angry. "What she did was apologize, for not being the daughter our parents would have preferred, for being a disappointment to everyone in reach and hearing, and even for being born in the first place. She apologized for reaching the point of actually hating our parents for having married her to a monster, and she apologized for having decided never to speak to or see any of us again. After that she left without letting any of us stop her, and in a little while what she said will be all over the palace. If complete chaos is what you wanted to accomplish, allow me to congratulate you. You succeeded."

Derand kept his eyes closed as his insides turned over, knowing perfectly well that it wasn't chaos that Seea had caused. Her strategy had accomplished two things, both at the same time: her parents and brother would no longer be targets even if they'd been of interest to assassins before now, and Derand had been thrown to the wolves. That "blissfully happy" charade they were supposed to be in the midst of had been completely destroyed, right along with the reason for his vassal kings to stay when they arrived. If they all turned around and left before he found out which of them was actively after his blood, well, that was just too bad...

"You used to take my advice a bit better than this," another voice put in, and Derand opened his eyes to see that his father had joined him and Gardal. "That girl was so chokingly furious and bitter when she spoke to us that I'm surprised she was able to utter a word. Ostrin almost collapsed from guilt and grief, and Liminia actually forgot to be delicate. Gardal here went so pale I thought he would pass out, your mother almost had hysterics for the first time in her life, and I - I had some thoughts about my son and liege that I won't repeat at the moment. I just hope you'll live to regret your mistake."

Derand felt a very strong urge to defend his actions with Seea, to claim that he'd simply punished her for doing something wrong. What stopped him was the realization that he'd been warned more than once about getting in the middle of Seea's relationship with her parents, but had ignored what he'd been told and instead had tried to impose his opinions in place of hers. And worst was that he hadn't even tried to talk to her first, not really...

"Yes, I noticed that I've been left hanging in the wind," Derand said to his father after taking a deep breath. "It doesn't matter whether or not she had reason to do it, the fact remains that it's done. Obviously it's not a good idea to get on the wrong side of a master strategist no matter who that strategist is. I'd better go and talk to her."

"I'd be willing to bet that she's going to hold you to that promise you made her," Gardal said, now looking more worried than angry. "Do you have any idea where she intends to go?"

Derand shook his head before walking away, having noticed the same change in his father's expression. They'd all realized that if Seea made up her mind to leave the way she had in Ramson... Instead of thinking about that, Derand hurried.

Derand found a group of maids leaving the apartment when he reached it, which hopefully meant that Seea was

still inside. He crossed the sitting room quickly and entered the bedchamber, then stopped with his hand still on the door. The first thing he saw was the dagger in the sheath he'd given Seea sitting on a table only a few steps away. The second was Seea herself, now wearing breeches and a tunic, seated in a chair across the room sipping tea. Her gaze rested on him where he stood, but she didn't say a word. That meant the first move was up to him...

"All right, I was wrong to mix into something that was only tangentially my business," he found himself blurting as he walked closer to her. "The only excuse I have is that I was thinking about my own parents, and now things have been made worse rather than better between you and your family. I made you apologize, and now I'm making myself do the same. I'll even speak to your parents if you like..."

Derand let his words trail off, hoping she would take him up on his offer, but no such luck.

"I want something in writing to show that you've put the marriage aside," she said, giving him the chance to notice that she looked only in his general direction, not really at him. "And as quickly as possible, please. I'd like to be on my way well before dark."

"On your way to where?" Derand couldn't help asking as his heart began to curl up and die. "Where do you expect to go all alone?"

"That information comes under the heading of my own personal business," she responded, nothing of actual inflection in her voice. "Since I'm not needed around here any longer, I'm free to go wherever I please."

Not needed here any longer, she'd said, and the words rang in Derand's head like a death bell tolling his coming end. He'd pushed her one time too many and obviously too far, and now she was holding him to his word. She wasn't running off secretly the way she had once before, she was demanding what she'd been promised and then would leave with dignity.

And it was all his fault, his fault, his fault...

Chapter 16

Elissia was still furious when she left the dining room, so furious that she had no trouble ignoring the calls of Gardal and King Almis. They wanted her to wait so they could "talk to" her, but what they really wanted was to talk at her. Well, she'd had enough of people telling her what to do. From now on the only one she would be listening to was herself.

And that would be done as far away from Holdisond - and its king - as she could get. Every time she thought that the man was finally seeing her as someone who had the right to her own opinions and decisions, he did something to prove just the opposite. No matter how much freedom he seemed to be giving her, it was only enough freedom to do something he wanted done. In all other respects she was nothing but his tool, his possession, his slave, a female.

The stab of pain Elissia felt in her chest at that thought was absolutely ridiculous, but that didn't stop it from hurting terribly. She'd thought that knowing he didn't love her would be enough for her to enjoy her time with him, but she'd been lying to herself. She hated the monster for treating her like a slave, but even that couldn't kill the mindless love she felt. She loved a man who cared nothing about her or her feelings, and being completely disgusted with herself made no difference. If she had even half the intelligence she claimed she did, she would have let that assassin put a final end to her torment.

But she'd stupidly defended her life, and now was paying for that stupidity. It was fairly obvious that she'd been hoping for a change in the monster, a fantasy that would include their living happily ever after, but it was time to grow up and admit that the fantasy would never come true. Instead of waiting for something that wasn't going to happen, she would take to the road and let reality catch up. No matter what that ended up being...

Getting back to the apartment didn't take long, and the girls were there to help her out of the gown just as they'd been told to be. Her mood was too obvious for them to try any smalltalk, so she was into the breeches, tunic, and short boots she'd picked out in no time. She'd taken off the dagger to dress in the breeches, and wasn't foolish enough to put it back on. Instead she put the weapon on a table near the door, then turned her back on it in the same way she would soon turn her back on everything else around her.

A pitcher of tea and cups had been delivered while she was away, so Elissia poured herself a cup and sat down to drink it while the girls put away the clothing she'd taken off. Once the girls were done they curtsied and left, and now there was nothing for Elissia to do but wait for the monster to arrive. It would take a bit of time to get the last thing she would ever ask of him, and during that time she would pack the few things she meant to take with her.

Only one sip later Elissia was surprised to see the monster entering the room. He must really be in a hurry to tell her how much he disapproved of her actions again, but instead of striding arrogantly toward her the way he usually did, he stopped in the doorway with his hand still on the door.

"All right, I was wrong to mix into something that was only tangentially my business," he said suddenly, then left the doorway to walk slowly toward her. "The only excuse I have is that I was thinking about my own parents, and now things have been made worse rather than better between you and your family. I made you apologize, and now I'm making myself do the same. I'll even speak to your parents if you like..."

Hearing such strange words from the monster put Elissia slightly off balance, but then common sense came to her rescue. He'd noticed that his reason for having the other kings stay as guests had disappeared, and now was trying to turn things around again. Well, that was too bad about him because it wasn't going to happen.

"I want something in writing to show that you've put the marriage aside," she said, completely ignoring his latest attempt to manipulate her. "And as quickly as possible, please. I'd like to be on my way well before dark."

"On your way to where?" the monster asked after a definite hesitation, his voice sounding odd. "Where do you expect to go all alone?"

"That information comes under the heading of my own personal business," she responded, firmly refusing to let herself believe that he actually cared. "Since I'm not needed around here any longer, I'm free to go wherever I please."

A very soft sound came, almost like an involuntary gasp of pain, making Elissia look at the monster without thinking. She'd been trying to avoid looking at him directly, having no interest in adding to her own pain, and what she saw almost made her gasp in shock. Tears were running down the man's face, and he didn't even seem to be aware of them.

"I want to refuse but I can't," he said in a very soft and ragged voice, and it was clear that now he looked at something other than her. "I thought I could be the kind of husband you need and deserve, but I'm too much of an idiot to do the thing right. There's paper and ink in the desk in the sitting room. You'll have your something in writing in just a couple of minutes."

Elissia watched him turn and walk out of the room without understanding what had just happened. He'd admitted that he didn't love her, so why would he be crying over having failed at something that he hadn't been seriously trying to do? The question plagued her in a very odd way, and then another question displaced the first and made the situation a good deal worse.

Could he possibly have been lying about not loving me? she found herself asking silently. If he'd continued to insist that he did love me I probably would have turned and run. The only thing that made me agree to go along with his plan - to stay with him - was to be told something I could believe. But tears tell their own story,

especially from a man like him. He didn't even cry when they were torturing him...

It was impossible for Elissia to keep from closing her eyes, but the darkness wasn't as soothing as she usually found it. It was perfectly plausible for the man to lie about not loving her, to pretend that they were just going through the motions of being happy for the sake of the plan. His own ability in strategy and tactics couldn't be denied, but he couldn't have seriously hoped to accomplish anything. He never stopped to think about what he was doing when he dealt with her, and that blind spot ruined every good intention he might have had. Elissia had thought that love was the most important point between them, but obviously she'd been wrong...

Elissia opened her eyes after a few minutes of being alone with her bleak thoughts, and a moment later Derand came back through the doorway. All evidence of his tears was gone, and he held a piece of paper in one hand.

"All signed and sealed," he said, gesturing with the piece of paper. "Give it another minute or two to dry, and then you can put it wherever you like."

Elissia got up and took the paper, read it to be sure she was really being given her freedom, then looked up at the man who had kept his word.

"It would never have worked between us," she said, hearing the heavy weariness

behind her words. "You're part of this world of ours, raised to live as other men live, but I can't live the way other women do. If it's any comfort to you, the failure is mine rather than yours."

"When you find failure you can't fix or change, it doesn't really matter whose fault it is," he said, his dark gaze clinging to her face. "A capable man would have been able to give you what you need, to make you feel loved and wanted instead of at odds with the world. I wish I'd given my word to provide you with complete understanding rather than freedom. If I had, this might have worked out differently."

"Since complete understanding would mean letting me do things my own way without interference, you'd never have been able to keep that word." Elissia smiled faintly at the idea even as she shook her head. "You're so used to everyone obeying you without question that you can't help expecting the same from me as well. When you notice that I'm not doing what everyone else does, you try to force me into the proper mold. Anger gets the better of you, you decide to teach me a lesson, and then - disaster."

"You know, you're right," he said, eyebrows high with some kind of revelation. "It is anger over your actions that makes me act like a fool. If I flatly refused to let myself get angry no matter what you did, we'd have no trouble avoiding that disaster you mentioned."

"Of course we would," Elissia said, seeing no point in starting another argument. "I've been thinking, and when the others kings arrive you can still get them to stay if you invite them to a party in celebration of your newfound freedom. I'll be gone, of course, so - "

"Wait just a minute," he said, sudden enthusiasm chasing away the air of defeat he'd been wrapped in. "I think you know by now that if I give my word I'll keep it, so I do give my word not to get angry. Now all you have to do is agree to stay while I prove we can make things work between us."

"Are you really silly enough to believe that your anger is the only problem I have with you?" Elissia countered, unsurprised to find that he was still in there trying. "All you have to do is smile while you punish me, and your word will stay untarnished. If you think I'm stupid enough to have missed that point, I resent your low opinion of me."

"All right, then I'll extend my word to cover not punishing you," he came back immediately. "If that's what you need, then that's what you'll have."

"No matter what I do, or how outraged you get?" Elissia asked with a sound of ridicule. "You obviously have no idea what you're saying, so let's just forget - "

"No!" he interrupted again, his hands suddenly on her arms. "I know exactly what I'm saying, and I give my word not to punish you no matter what you do and no matter how angry or outraged I get. Punishment of any and all kinds will never be given to you again. Now will you agree to try one more time?"

Elissia stared at him, seeing the intense need and frantic desire clearly in his eyes. Right now he refused to admit that nothing would ever come of their association no matter what he promised, but she'd gotten tired of lying to herself. It was perfectly clear that she'd never have this man for her own, but he still had to learn that truth. Oh, well, the idea of riding around aimlessly all alone hadn't been that attractive anyway; she might as well save herself the trouble while she helped him to understand as clearly as she did. After that there were the vials of that special tea...

"Sure, I'll try one more time," Elissia finally answered, wondering if she sounded as tired as she felt. "Are you ready to look like an absolute fool?"

"Damn, I'd forgotten about that," he said, delight instantly changing to chagrin. "After your performance earlier in the dining room, there are only two ways we would still be together: either I beat you into submission or I let you walk all over me while I crawled. Are you sure you wouldn't be willing to pretend to be - "

His words broke off at her wry smile, showing he knew well enough how successful she would be at acting submissive. The act might hold up for an hour or two, but after that it would almost certainly fall apart. She hadn't been silly enough to give her word about not getting angry, and one spark would have been all it took.

"All right, yes, we'll have to think of something else then," he agreed, but not happily. "Let's get you into a gown again and then we'll go back and have lunch while we consider what that something else ought to be."

"That won't work," Elissia immediately pointed out, stopping him as he took a step toward her wardrobe. "I said I never wanted to see or talk to any of them again, so I can't go back as if nothing had happened. My family should no longer be considered targets, and I want to keep it like that."

"Yes, of course," he muttered, only the smallest trace of a growl behind the words as he stared at something other than her. "But you still have to eat, so I'll have a meal brought up. I have to get back to my guests, otherwise I'd join you... You'll be ready after lunch to join me in holding audience?"

"Only if you're willing to have me go as I am," Elissia said, watching him closely. "Not to mention being willing to have people snickering behind your back. If I wasn't beaten into submission then I came out on top, and it isn't reasonable to expect that I'd pass up a chance to show my victory to the world. Is that really what you want?"

"No, you're right ... again," he said, and then the most gruesome smile appeared on his face. "I really do need to leave now so I'll see you later."

He actually performed a quick bow before turning and striding out, and Elissia waited until she heard the sitting room door close before she went to put away the paper she'd been holding. The ink was completely dry by now so she folded the paper carefully and put it away not far from where the vials of tea were, then went back to her chair and drinkable tea.

"He really does hate to be disagreed with even if he's wrong," Elissia murmured to the tea in her cup with a sigh. "Or maybe I should say, especially if he's wrong. He gave his word too hastily, making no effort to think the matter through, so it only took heartbeats before he began to regret what he'd done. And he hates the fact that he can't even get angry over having made the mistake. This last effort he wanted so badly isn't even starting right, so it ought to be over fairly quickly. Which will most likely be lucky for both of us... "

Elissia finally swallowed the tea she'd been talking to, then sat back to wait for the meal she had no true appetite for.

Derand managed to close the door to the hall rather than slam it, but that was the only victory he was able to claim. He felt like a small boy whose nurse had smilingly allowed him to climb a tree - when she knew damned well that he'd never even get to the first and lowest branch. That woman was a better tactician than he, but only because he was so emotionally involved in this war. He'd known that without having his nose rubbed in the embarrassing truth, but she'd done it anyway...

He slowed the stalking rush his pace had become, at the same time forcing himself to admit the truth. The situation he was in the midst of now was his fault rather than Seea's, so blaming her for his shortsightedness was nothing more than adding insult to injury. Even if she had been more direct than tactful in pointing out his mistakes. Once he saw what he hadn't seen earlier, it had been all he could do not to explode in all directions

That was when three men with daggers jumped out at him, probably considering his distraction the perfect time for attack. But Derand hadn't stayed alive through the wars solely because of luck and the presence of fighters all around him. He might walk past a friend without consciously seeing him, but enemies were another matter entirely.

His boot slammed into the attacker on the right, his target the man's privates. A choked gurgle sounded as the man went down, but Derand had stopped paying attention to someone out of the fight. The other two were being a little more cautious, but that didn't save them. Derand's dagger had instantly appeared in his fist, so he slashed at the one who had been in the middle while using his left forearm to block a similar slash from the man on the left. The middle one jumped back, a stupid move that gave the fight to their supposed target.

As soon as the middle attacker jumped back, Derand let his slash continue on to the man on the left whose knife arm he'd blocked. His blade plunged into the man's body with nothing to stop it, and that was two down. Derand turned to the third and last, but the man had backed up even more and then turned to run. Unfortunately for him there were fighters rushing up from all directions, and one of the ones behind the survivor hit the man in the mouth with a hilt-filled fist. The last man went down to lay unmoving, and that was the end of the attack.

"It should be possible to question at least two of these fools once they're conscious again," Derand told his men as they all stared at the three bodies. "Make sure nothing happens to them until we find out who hired them."

Various words of agreement came from all directions, so Derand crouched near the one he'd stabbed and cleaned his dagger on an edge of the man's tunic. The rest of the tunic was wet with the man's blood, and it wasn't likely that he'd be available for questioning long if at all. Well, those were the risks you ran when you took a job as an assassin...

Listan ran up just as Derand straightened, so Derand was able to leave the matter in Listan's hands and continue on to the small dining room. His mood had improved considerably, thanks to the three who had attacked him, so he was able to enter the dining room with an easy smile on his face. All his guests looked up from the various chairs they sat in, but none of them spoke.

"It's past time that we sat down to lunch," Derand said, gesturing toward the table that stood set and waiting for them. "My queen prefers to take the meal alone in her apartment, and that reminds me. Potry, see to having a meal sent to her, please."

Potry bowed and hurried out of the room, his expression as blank as that of the rest of the servants. No one yet knew what had happened between him and Seea, but as soon as her meal was served that would change. Realizing that ruined most of Derand's newly improved mood, and then his father and Gardal were near him again.

"Derand, what did you do to the girl to make her unable to join us here?" his father asked at once, a worried

expression in his eyes. "I'm trying not to intrude, but - "

"Well, I don't care if I'm intruding," Gardal pushed in belligerently. "What did you do to my sister this time?"

"I meant what I said," Derand answered the both of them, not quite looking at either man. "It was Seea's decision not to come back here with me, even though I wanted her to. She pointed out that her coming back here would be worse than awkward, and I was forced to agree."

"Forced to agree," Gardal echoed, his eyes narrowed with suspicion. "Did she overpower you with main strength, or did she use her sword to disarm you?"

"I - got her to agree not to leave by giving my word that I would - never get angry with her or punish her again," Derand grudged in a mutter, knowing that his skin had probably darkened with embarrassment. "I don't regret having made the promise, but keeping my word isn't going to be easy."

"If you're telling the truth then you have my deepest apologies, brother," Gardal said, now staring at Derand in a disbelieving/sadly believing way. "Not to mention my deepest condolences. I can't imagine associating with Elissia for more than five minutes without wanting to hit her with something or even strangle her. How did she rope you into a promise like that?"

"Believe it or not, I had to talk her into letting me promise," Derand said with a sigh. "She was all ready to walk out, and I was at my wits' end. You don't think I made a really bad mistake, do you?"

Derand's question was aimed at his father, who hadn't yet said anything beyond his opening remarks. He stood silently as he stared at his son, and then he showed Derand a smile that was more frightening than supportive.

"Of course you didn't make a mistake, Derand," his father said with hearty assurance. "Your major aim was to keep her here, and you accomplished that. Everything else will fall into place behind that success."

When Gardal added enthusiastic agreement to what Derand's father had said, Derand knew for certain that he was in deep trouble...

The rest of the day dragged out in a way that reminded Derand of deliberate torture. The people who came to the audience had to be listened to one at a time, and then solutions had to be found to their problems. Those in the audience noticed that Seea wasn't with him, of course, and a small buzz of speculation went around before it silenced itself. The people who came forward seemed more hesitant and frightened than they ought to be, as though Seea's lack of presence undermined their assurance.

When the audience was finally over, Derand had to force himself to walk out of the room rather than run. He'd expected other people's problems to distract him from his own, but the ploy hadn't worked. And neither did going over the final preparation for the arrival of his vassal kings and their fighters. He kept wanting to make sure that Seea really was still in the palace, still in his life, and not riding off somewhere. The fact that he was supposed to be told if she left the apartment didn't matter; he kept remembering how easily she'd gotten out of the palace in Ramsond without anyone noticing...

When it was finally time to dress for dinner - which gave him a legitimate excuse to return to the apartment - he felt much better. If he'd come back sooner it might have looked as though he didn't trust Seea to keep her word, and that wasn't true. He used the second bathing room to keep from getting in her way, and when the tub was full he got into the beautifully warm water. He had enough time to soak for a while, and there was no sense in passing up the opportunity.

As soon as Derand's eyes closed he began to picture what would happen later, when he and Seea returned to their apartment and were ready for bed. She would be as reluctant as always to have the bead put into her bottom, but

knowing that the bead would help her to respond in the necessary way she would say nothing when he gently put her across his knees.

He would first raise the skirt of her sleep ensemble to bare her lovely behind, and then take a moment to run his hand over its luscious curves. The sight of her buttocks always aroused him, and once he separated her cheeks and put the bead inside her he would probably find it as impossible as ever not to smack that bottom four or five times to satisfy his cravings - and to get her started properly. Helping the bead do its job added to his own pleasure in more than one way.

She would protest over the smacks and the way they made her feel, of course, but Derand would stand her up and sooth away those protests with a kiss. Her body would move against his while their lips met, adding to his arousal as his hands moved over that body. The kiss he began would end rather quickly when he began to take her out of her night clothes, and once she was bare he would throw aside his wrap and lift her into his arms, then carry her to the bed.

When he put her squirming body down he would follow it closely, starting another kiss that she would have no choice but to join. He would kiss her and touch her until her squirming grew even wilder, and then he would taste her nipples for a while. The feel of his lips on her breasts would make her moan, faint desperation in the sound caused by the knowledge that she would have no easing until he decided to give it. She was still too new at the sharing of bodies to understand that the stronger her need to begin with, the more pleasure easing and release would bring.

He would wait until her moans began to turn a bit shrill before he knelt between her legs and parted her thighs. His own raging need would touch the softness of her womanhood, feeling the moisture flowing from her as a bright signal of her readiness. Her breathing would be fast and hard as he began to penetrate her, the added tightness caused by the bead making him want to moan. But he would remain silent while he listened to her sounds of anticipated pleasure, at the same time feeling her body welcome his with heat and throbbing.

Entering her slowly would make her squirm even harder in protest, sending flashes of intense pleasure through his body. Once he was as deeply inside her as it was possible to be he would lean down and take her lips again before starting to move himself in and out in the rhythm she was so desperate for. Her hands would be like claws in his back as she mewled because of the bead, forced to feel things she had no hope of ignoring. His stroking would slowly grow faster and harder, faster and harder, her breathless screams of pleasure urging him on to the very end of his strength.

When he would no longer be able to hold off his own release, she would most likely join him in a final explosive release before lying strengthless and limp by his side. Hopefully she would fall asleep before he had his breath back, and then he would be able to put her under the quilts just as she was. Her waking up to find the bead still in her bottom would give him a wonderful chore to wake up to, and he would see to it happily before they began their new day.

But tomorrow would have to be done differently from the way today had gone, Derand decided as the delight of his imaginings began to fade. Today Seea had shown that she'd stayed on her own terms, which hadn't done his image any good. Tomorrow she would have to agree to rejoin their guests, if only to keep Derand from looking like a pussy-whipped puppet. His vassal kings would almost certainly

start to arrive tomorrow, and the weaker he looked the more trouble he would have with them.

Derand sighed as he sat up and began to wash. He would have to explain the situation to Seea before they began to make love, and as practical as she was there weren't likely to be any protests over the decision. Then would come the lovemaking itself, a time when she wasn't able to argue what he said and did. If only he could find something to make her act like that when they were out of bed. At least during times of disagreement...

Derand left the bath and dried himself, then dressed in a leisurely way. During that time he occupied himself with guesses about what kind of gown Seea would choose to wear tonight, and how well that gown would go with her red hair and green eyes. So far she hadn't worn anything that didn't suit her perfectly, unless you counted those breeches and tunics... Clothing that would let her ride easily out of his life... Clothing he was beginning to hate intensely...

When Derand was completely dressed he walked out to the sitting area and toward the bedchamber, and it took him a moment to notice that one of the maids stood in front of the bedchamber door looking nervous. The observation made him frown, which unfortunately increased the girl's nervousness.

"Excuse me, Your Majesty, but I have a message from Her Majesty the queen," the girl said really fast as she curtsied two or three times. "The queen asks to be excused from attending the formal dinner tonight, since she ordered in an early dinner and means to go to bed as soon as she finishes eating. She asks if you would pass on her regrets to your guests..."

The girl's voice trailed off in a half question because Derand had closed his eyes and stood rubbing them as he fought to keep from cursing aloud. Seea was using today to show that she was staying in the palace on her own terms, and it wasn't like her to do a job half way. She might also be testing his resolve to keep his word, to see how far she could go before he proved he'd been lying...

"Tell the queen that I'll pass on her regrets and that I wish her a good night's sleep," Derand said with as little growl in his voice as he could manage. "I'll certainly see her tomorrow..."

Since the girl flinched with every word Derand spoke, he gave up on saying anything else and simply headed for the dining room where his guests waited. Tomorrow would be another day, and all he had to do tonight was try not to make blood enemies out of his father, Gardal, and King Ostrin... Tomorrow he might have a real enemy to face, a thought that actually brought a smile of sorts to his face...

Chapter 17

Elissia left instructions that she wasn't to be awakened early, so it was almost midmorning before she started the day. While she washed and dressed she felt the urge to ask if the High King had destroyed anything or anyone the night before, but being that flip wouldn't have been a good idea. She hadn't been trying to flex some new-found power last night, she'd simply been trying to avoid any new problems.

Not that trying was likely to do any good. Derand might or might not understand that her new role had demanded that she play high and mighty, and that was the main reason she'd gone to bed early. If she'd gone to dinner instead, she would have had to rub everyone's nose in her victory.

"And if the other kings start to arrive today, putting their liege lord into a towering rage won't be the best of moves," Elissia muttered as she finished dressing. Since she wore breeches and tunic again, she hadn't needed the help of any of the girls. "We have to find out who's behind the attacks as soon as possible, and then we can see about our private affairs. Assuming there are any left to see about once this nonsense is over..."

The breakfast Elissia had ordered was waiting when she finished dressing, so she sat down and ate slowly while she thought about how she ought to act now that she'd "gotten her way." She would have to show a certain amount of smugness and high-handedness, but not toward Derand. That would add a complication they didn't need, since the man's mind had to be clear to work on their problem.

But everyone else would be fair game, all but her parents and brother. Them she would have to ignore as she'd said she would, and that just might make things easier for her. She'd bared too much of her deepest feelings to take any of it back even if she wanted to, and things would never be the same with her family again. She was glad she'd spoken her mind, even though there was the faintest twinge of guilt flitting ghost-like around her mind...

Elissia came back to the world she lived in to find that she'd finished all the food in front of her. She'd eaten only fairly well the night before, so she must have been hungrier than she'd thought. Well, it didn't really matter...

"Your Majesty, word was just brought that more guests are arriving," one of the maids said after coming back from the hall door. "Would you like help now in changing your clothes?"

"I won't be changing my clothes," Elissia said, voicing a decision she'd made earlier. "If I'm supposed to be the High Queen of Arvin, it's time I began to make a few changes in the way things are done. It's stupid for women to constantly tie themselves into uncomfortable clothes just because that's the way it's been done until now. If any women like to wear gowns all the time they'll be free to do so - as long as the rest of us are just as free to wear what we prefer. Do you see anything wrong with that attitude?"

"Me?" the girl squeaked, apparently trying to decide between being amused and being nervous. "I doubt if anyone would listen to my opinion, Your Majesty, especially the High King. Wouldn't it be better to ask him what he thinks?"

"It would be silly to waste time asking," Elissia said with a faint smile as she got to her feet. "The king won't hesitate to make his opinion perfectly clear, so all we have to do is wait. Please ask the guards to let me know when the first of the new guests have arrived."

The girl curtsied and then hurried to the hall door, and Elissia took a fresh cup of tea with her to sit near the opened windows. It was a fairly nice day out right now, but gathering clouds suggested that it would be raining well before dark. Which, in turn, could mean that their guests would decide against dragging their feet in order to get to shelter before then. Wouldn't it be fun if they all arrived at the same time and no one was able to make a special entrance...?

That amusing thought ended up being a prediction rather than a joke. Word was brought to Elissia that, one after the other, all five of the kings and their retinues had entered the city and were approaching the palace. She had had a thought not long after finishing breakfast so she'd sent for Listan, and the man hadn't taken long to show up.

"Your Majesty," Listan had said with a hasty bow. "I beg your pardon, but I don't have much time right now. The other kings - "

"That's why I sent for you," Elissia had interrupted with one hand raised. "It might

be a good idea to provide an 'honor guard' of fighters along the route the kings will take to get here to the palace, as well as having plainly dressed people here and there on the streets. Avoiding an incident is a better idea than trying to cope with one after it happens."

"Your Majesty," Listan had said with a much more respectful bow. "You have my deepest thanks for having interrupted my other duties. Please don't hesitate to waste my time again if you have any other unimportant ideas."

The man had been grinning while he spoke, and then he'd left at a run. Elissia had hesitated before sending for Listan, thinking that Derand had surely already thought of the possibility that his guests might also be in danger of attack. But Derand was being distracted by everything going on around him, so it was a good thing she'd decided to make sure.

The last of the kings reached the palace in time to freshen up before lunch, so that would be the first meal they would all share. It was already beginning to rain out, and that probably meant the "games" Derand had mentioned would wait until tomorrow to start. Elissia stood and stretched, then went to find out where lunch would be taken - and incidentally to let Derand know what to expect from her.

Elissia was told that lunch would be served in the main dining room, and that was where she found Derand. He was speaking to some of his fighters before his new guests showed up, and when he saw Elissia he finished up with the fighters and came over to her.

"It's a good thing you thought to suggest that 'honor guard' to Listan," he said in a soft voice at once, giving her a smile. "There were men ready and waiting to disrupt the arrival of my guests, but only two actually got to try before my men quickly had them in hand. The others were taken even before they tried anything, but they'll probably be as much of a dead end as the ones from yesterday. Those three were hired by a man in a mask, and they have no idea who he is... Aren't you going to change for lunch?"

Elissia wanted to ask what three from yesterday, but Derand's question distracted her.

"Lunch is too informal a meal not to ... prove my independence, so to speak," she answered just as softly. "Don't forget that I'm supposed to be feeling smug and in complete control now, so I'll be kind of ... high and mighty with your guests. You won't let it upset you too much, will you?"

"You're worried about helping me to keep my word?" he asked, a really odd smile now on his face as he looked down at her. "That's more than decent of you, and I really appreciate the effort. And I can see the logic in what you said, so no, I won't let your act bother me too much."

"Good," Elissia said, his smile making her feel ... almost uncomfortable. "But I have a question. You said something about three attackers from yesterday, and I was wondering - "

"Uh oh, here they come," Derand said suddenly as the doors to the dining room were opened. "Time to get started with your act."

Their guests were streaming into the room, so Elissia had to admit that he was right. She'd simply have to remember the question and ask it again later, since right now she had something more pressing to give her attention to.

The people who strolled in were dressed better than the average man and woman, but it was clear that most of them still wore their traveling clothes. And there were only four couples, along with men who were probably advisors or bodyguards. They spotted Derand at once, of course, and let their stroll bring them over to him.

"Your Majesty," one of the associates said when they were close enough, pausing to give a fairly good bow that the other men copied only to a small extent. The women curtsied, but not very low. "You summoned your kings and they have arrived."

"But one of them seems to have lost his way," Derand observed after nodding just a little. "I'm glad the rest of you didn't have the same difficulty, my royal lords and ladies."

Most of his audience chuckled at that, giving Elissia the impression that they really were amused by the comment, and then the dining room doors were opened again. A couple followed by someone who looked more like a secretary than a fighter came in, and Elissia couldn't keep from staring at the two.

The man was old enough to be the woman's father, but she held to his arm in a way that said she was his queen. He was tall and lean and looked hard and strong despite the heavy gray in his hair, but he also looked distantly uncomfortable. He still wore what were obviously traveling clothes along with the jeweled band around his brow that the other kings also wore, but the woman had clearly taken the time to change into a magnificent peach and gold gown. Her blond hair had also been done in an intricate way, and the gleam of diamonds was enough to make everyone squint.

"King Derand, how lovely to see you again," the woman called even before they'd joined the earlier group, her

smile devastating. She was a really beautiful woman, and when her husband paused to give Derand a fairly good bow she produced a curtsy that was more invitation than a show of respect. But Elissia had been able to see that the woman hadn't enjoyed the idea of having to curtsy, and had only done so because the gesture served her own ends.

"My royal guests, I welcome you all to my home," Derand said to the group at large, giving Elissia the impression that he was very deliberately ignoring the blond woman. "It delights me that you've all agreed to join me in my time of happiness, and now I'd like to present you to my queen, Elissia."

Eyebrows rose and sounds of surprise were murmured when Derand gestured to Elissia. Obviously the newcomers had assumed that Elissia was a servant of some kind, and most of them had barely noticed her. Now they were being told that she was High Queen and above them, and most of them didn't seem to know what to say. Most of them, but not the flashy blonde.

"Surely you're joking," the woman said almost at once after sounding a short tinkle of laughter. "The high queen has to be an impressive woman, not a - a - "

"Not the opposite of a clotheshorse?" Elissia asked pleasantly when the woman groped for a word that would describe her feelings without being too insulting. "Clothes don't really make the man or woman, my dear, they just show which of us is overly absorbed by appearances. Someone like that simply announces to the world that in their opinion shallowness is the only way of life."

"Dressing properly is the way you show respect for those around you, my dear," the woman came back at once in a sweet voice that did nothing to hide the glint of heavy anger in her blue eyes. "Weren't you taught anything in the shack you grew up in?"

"It was a palace I grew up in, dear," Elissia returned just as quickly, filling her tone with condescension. "That's why outer trappings do nothing to impress me, which obviously can't be said for you. Even if the poverty of your beginnings make you overdo it now, you should have learned at some point that ostentation is more insulting than simplicity when you're among your peers."

"Enhancing your beauty is never insulting for a woman, something you would have learned if you'd had any beauty to enhance," the blonde snapped, then a nasty smile came to curve her full lips. "What's really bothering you is the fact that Derand finds me more attractive than he finds the stick he was forced to marry as a boy. Step away from him, stick, and let a real woman stand by his side."

And with that the fool of a woman actually began to move toward Derand! Another woman might have gotten flustered by the blonde's outrageous nerve and simply stood where she was, but Elissia had lots of experience with not letting herself be stepped on. Without hesitating for more than a heartbeat Elissia moved quickly in front of Derand, who very wisely hadn't yet said a word.

"That's High Queen stick to you, peasant girl," Elissia said, insulting the woman in a way she would never do with an ordinary woman. "If my husband ever decides he wants someone else in my place, he's perfectly capable of saying so himself. If that day comes I'll certainly step aside, but until then no one will stand beside my husband but me. Why don't you go and offer to open your legs for some of the other men here instead of bothering a man you so clearly embarrass."

The blonde gawked from where she'd stopped short, red tingeing her cheeks. She seemed to think that no one had noticed the way she'd been coming on to Derand, or at least that no one would actually mention her actions. The other men in their audience all looked pained, but the women seemed to be having trouble keeping themselves from laughing out loud.

"I think a short break in the introductions would be appropriate right now," Derand said from behind Elissia as

the blonde's husband came up to take her arm and pull her a small distance away. "There are servants arranged around the room with various drinks, my friends, so let's take advantage of their presence before we go to table."

All the men but the blonde's husband quickly agreed with that idea, and a moment later they joined Derand in heading for the nearest servant with a drink. Elissia was about to look for the servant with tea when the other women suddenly stepped closer to her.

"I'm Hileen, and my husband is Paltin," the woman said with a wide, friendly smile on her plainly pretty face. She had brown hair and eyes and a fairly decent figure, but not quite as good a figure as the blonde. "I'd like to thank you for finally giving Kaylea the taking down she's deserved since Monil was foolish enough to marry her. The man is out of his mind with love for her, and flatly refuses to keep any kind of check on what she says and does. Monil can't help but know that Kaylea wants to marry your husband and become high queen, but he can't even refuse her that."

"Women in love are most often a lot more practical than men in love," Elissia agreed with an answering smile for Hileen. "And now that I've had a minute to think about her, I really doubt that Kaylea is from common stock. If I had to bet on the point, I'd put my gold behind the likelihood that the woman comes from a noble family that somehow lost all their money."

"Oh, you're really good!" another woman exclaimed as she joined the growing inner circle more completely. She was smaller than both Elissia and Hileen, with black hair, green eyes, and a pixie-like beauty. "I'm Sissile, my husband is Lovar, and you're incredibly good, Elissia. Yes, Kaylea is from a noble family that was practically living in rags on the streets until Monil married her, but how did you know that?"

"Mostly I knew from the way she dismissed my calling her a peasant girl," Elissia answered, oddly enough beginning to enjoy herself. "She clearly knew that everyone was aware of her noble background, so she was able to dismiss the charge of being a peasant without even thinking about it. But she obviously has something driving her to gain the most prominent place she can reach, and if she isn't common born then she must come from a family that embarrassed her."

"She doesn't seem to realize that her behavior is more of an embarrassment than loss of money can ever be," Hileen said with a shake of her head. "She's waved herself under the noses of all our husbands, laughing when she proved she's more attractive than the rest of us. We all wanted to put her in her place, but our husbands were too concerned with politics and 'propriety' to let us do it. How on earth did you know that Derand would choke trying not to laugh rather than get mad?"

"As long as I'm not risking my life, Derand doesn't mind when I defend him," Elissia answered with a small chuckle. So Derand almost choked trying not to laugh... "I saw how he ignored Kaylea's behavior, probably to keep from insulting her husband, so - "

"No, I will not keep quiet!" Elissia heard Kaylea shout, the words interrupting what she'd been saying as the disturbance drew everyone's attention. Kaylea was talking to her husband, obviously replying to something he'd said. "That stupid female insulted me! Are you just going to stand here telling me to calm down, or are you going to do something about that insult? You claim to be a man so I demand that you prove it!"

Another man might have flinched at the slashing caused by Kaylea's words, but Monil just stared at his wife sadly before drawing a deep breath and then letting it out. For an instant Elissia expected Monil to turn in her direction, but when he turned toward Derand instead she knew what had to be done. She hurried away from the other women just as one of the ones who had been silent was about to speak to her, distantly noticing a flash of annoyance touch the woman's face. Well, she'd have to apologize later; right now there was something more important to do.

The men all watched Monil approaching them, and it was perfectly clear that Derand wasn't laughing any longer. He obviously knew that Monil was about to challenge him, and stupid male honor would force him to accept that challenge. It was a good thing Elissia wasn't a male and just as stupid... By moving quickly she was able to stand herself in Monil's way before he got close enough to Derand to speak his challenge.

"Don't you dare!" she growled, fists on hips as she glared at a startled Monil. "If you have any feelings at all for that infantile female you call a wife, you'll stop right this instant!"

Monil seemed to realize that he'd have to run Elissia down to get past her, and he obviously wasn't quite ready to do that. He paused a few feet away as he frowned at her, so she quickly shook her head at him.

"How can you do so badly with someone you claim to love?" Elissia continued, fighting not to make her words unintelligible through rushing. "When you really love someone you do what's best for them, not what's best for you. Or don't you understand that?"

"I'm in the midst of trying to defend the honor of the woman I love, Madam," Monil responded, his voice sounding like gravel shifting. "Since that is best for her, I ask you to step aside so - "

"No, you're not doing any such thing," Elissia interrupted at once. "You're not trying to defend that brat's honor, you're just adding to the brattiness of her behavior. If you challenge Derand and he kills you, what do you think will happen to her? He won't marry her, you know, even if I'm not here to stand in the way. You may consider her perfect, but every other man in this room knows the real truth. None of them would have her even on a bet."

Monil frowned again with skepticism strong in the expression, but then he glanced past Elissia to the men who stood somewhere behind her. What he saw made him stare at the group of men with disbelief, and it wasn't necessary for Elissia to turn and look to know what was happening.

"You've just discovered that what I said was true," Elissia went on, her tone now more gentle. "The other men here aren't looking at Kaylea with love, and because of that they can see her as she truly is. There's something terribly wrong when a woman that beautiful isn't even a small bit attractive to men like these, and if you really do care about her you'll admit that truth."

Pain and confusion now filled Monil's expression, and he stared at Elissia as he fought some battle inside himself. He looked like the kind of man who didn't make friends easily, and Elissia could understand what he now had to be feeling. Then he drew himself up just a little and it was clear that he'd regained a certain measure of self control.

"And what do you consider the duty of a man who loves a woman?" he ground out. "Am I to simply stand by and allow her to be insulted?"

"When your behavior forces people to be less than pleasant to you, you aren't being insulted," Elissia said slowly and clearly. "Did you miss it when your wife called me a stick? In my place she would have screamed for her husband to avenge her 'honor,' but my own honor was perfectly untouched. Her calling me a stick didn't make me one, so what did I have to complain about? You have to remember that you don't get angry over a lie, because the lie can't touch you unless you let it. Getting angry over the truth is worse than useless because it is the truth. So in what way was Kaylea insulted?"

Monil parted his lips, probably to mention that "offer to open your legs for the other men" comment Elissia had made, but he was a man of honor. He knew well enough that his precious wife had been offering herself to Derand, and instead of speaking Monil closed his mouth and clenched his jaws.

"Did she really think no one noticed what she was doing?" Elissia asked gently when Monil remained silent. "No one else said anything out loud because they didn't want to cause you embarrassment, but I'm not quite that polite

- or I'm more direct, whichever way you care to look at the matter. It's a lot more pleasant for you to give your wife whatever she wants, but is doing that really good for her? She's too much of a child to think things through in a proper way, so let me put the question to you: if you challenge my husband and happen to kill him, what do you imagine I'll do to you and your wife afterward?"

Monil looked really startled at Elissia's mild question, the expression in his eyes showing that he hadn't quite understood what Elissia was like. Elissia held his gaze without difficulty, and Monil slowly nodded his head. He understood now that he and Kaylea would not survive if he managed to kill Derand, and if he was the one who died then his wife would be on her own - and not on the throne of his kingdom. Kaylea would be deposed even before his body was cold, and then

"It's odd how a man can turn into a coward and never realize it," Monil suddenly rumbled, coming closer to flinching now than he had earlier. "When you love someone you really do have to consider them before yourself, otherwise your love isn't worth the breath you use to declare it. Thank you for speaking to me, Madam, and for keeping me from soiling my honor. My fealty is yours from this day forward."

Monil dropped to one knee and bowed his head, an action that shocked Elissia with its unexpectedness. The man was acknowledging Elissia as his sovereign, and everyone in the room seemed to understand that. Everyone in the room, that is, with one notable exception.

"Monil, stop yammering with that stupid female and get on with what you're supposed to do!" Kaylea ordered, coming closer as Monil rose to his feet again. "I was insulted and you can't let her get away with it!"

"If you think you were insulted, why don't you challenge me?" Elissia couldn't keep from putting in before Monil could respond. "Having someone else do your fighting for you isn't acceptable in Arvin any longer, so step right up and issue your challenge. As the challenged party I'll choose bows at twenty-five yards, and I'll bet your life that my arrow reaches its target first."

Kaylea stopped near Monil in startlement, then her expression changed to one of ridicule. She parted her lips to say something that would certainly have made everything worse, but her words were lost when Monil took her arm in a large, hard hand.

"Don't even think about accepting her offer," Monil growled, obviously angry. "I would bet gold on the fact that she can use a bow, whereas you would barely recognize the weapon. And I've come to the conclusion that I have been more concerned with my own well-being than with yours, but that's about to stop. I love you with all my heart, Kaylea, and I'm about to prove the claim."

"What are you talking about?" Kaylea demanded, trying to pull her arm out of his hand. "If you really love me, you'll do as I asked you to... Where are you taking me? What do you think you're doing? Monil, answer me!"

Elissia watched while Monil pulled his wife to the far side of the room to a chair. As he sat and put the woman face down across his knees, every servant in the room hurried to a door and out. In a matter of moments only guests were left, and when the door closed behind the last of the servants Monil nodded.

"Thank you, Derand, I appreciate that courtesy," Monil said, having no trouble keeping a struggling Kaylea in place across his lap. "As for you, wife, your very rude behavior was in plain sight of the people left in this room, so your punishment will be delivered in the same way. I should have put a stop to your excesses long ago, but I thought that allowing you your way would make you happy. I now see that if you were truly happy you would also be content, so I'll have to try something else to achieve that state in you. Let's see if this works."

Kaylea had been squawking like a chicken being plucked while it was still alive, but when Monil took her skirts and threw them over her head she suddenly began to wail. It looked as though the woman knew what was coming and was trying to avoid the punishment, but Monil ignored the pitiful sound as he untied her drawers and then

pushed them down to her knees. A moment later his big hand was spanking the bottom he'd bared, and Kaylea suddenly had something real to wail about.

"I found a great deal of interest in what you said to Monil," Elissia heard in a murmur, and then Derand was standing to her left. "Were you suggesting that a man who truly loves his wife ought to spank her on a regular basis?"

"I think you know I was suggesting nothing of the sort," Elissia murmured back, finding Kaylea's yowling protests really satisfying. "And it wasn't my suggestion that he spank the brat, so your contention doesn't hold water."

"We'll have to discuss the point at another time," Derand countered, amusement dancing in his dark eyes. "Right now I'd like to thank you for saving me from having to kill one of my kings. Monil is an excellent fighter, but his years would have worked against him if he'd faced me... Would you really have ordered him and Kaylea killed if Monil had killed me instead?"

"Since the situation won't come up, none of us will have to find out the answer to that question the hard way," Elissia answered with her own amusement. "How long do you think he'll keep on with the spanking?"

"Certainly longer than just a minute or two," Derand said, much of his attention on the round and reddened bottom under Monil's hand. "He'll want her to feel the punishment for a while, but he won't want to break her spirit. Another ten minutes or so, I'd say, and then we'll be able to eat."

Elissia nodded, then joined Derand in watching Kaylea getting what she deserved. Monil looked more unhappy than satisfied as his hand kept smacking the woman's backside, adding to the redness he'd already caused. It seemed clear that Monil wasn't enjoying what he was in the midst of, but that didn't stop him from doing a thorough job. His big hand kept hitting Kaylea's squirming bottom hard even though she'd started to cry, but Elissia felt no sympathy or pity for her. The woman had begged for what she was now getting, but...

But the time would have been more enjoyable if it had come after lunch...

Chapter 18

Derand stood beside Elissia and watched Kaylea getting a good, sound spanking, silently thanking the gods for keeping him quiet when Elissia first began to argue with Kaylea. He'd been more than tired of the way Kaylea constantly flaunted herself - especially at him - and so hadn't interfered when Elissia had immediately taken up the bratty woman's challenge. There had been a short moment of regret when he'd thought he'd have to kill Monil, but Elissia had handled that situation as well...

"I admire your taste in sweet, shy, helpless women, Derand," Paltin murmured from Derand's left, his tone very dry. "I used to think that Hileen was a handful, but your queen definitely outdoes mine."

Paltin was a man with brown hair and eyes who was nearly Derand's size, and luck had had a good deal to do with Derand's besting of the other man's forces. When Paltin had surrendered rather than lose any more fighters, Derand had been very relieved. Now he showed Paltin a small smile, which the other man echoed more widely.

"I'd say that Monil is a novice at the sport he's indulging in right now," Paltin went on in the same murmur. "He's making the effort well enough, but he's showing nothing of style or flair. It might be best if I have a few words with him later."

"It might be even better if we all leave well enough alone," Derand countered as dryly as Paltin had spoken earlier. "If Monil decides to challenge you to individual combat, I doubt if Hileen will do as well dissuading him as Elissia did."

"You could be right," Paltin conceded with an increase in his amusement. "I'm fairly good with a sword, but I suspect that Monil is better than I am. Ah! I think he's decided to end the lesson for now."

Derand had already seen that Monil's hand was no longer being applied to Kaylea's

round and squirming bottom, but instead was beginning to raise the woman's underdrawers back to where they belonged. Kaylea was sobbing now, but a few soft words from Monil lessened the noise the woman produced and then she was set back on her feet. Monil stood while his wife tried to rub at her bottom through layers of cloth, and the man showed nothing in the way of satisfaction.

"You all now have my wife's apology for the way she's been behaving," Monil said, his lack of happiness clear. "We'll excuse ourselves right now, and see you all again later for dinner."

Derand nodded his agreement and permission for Monil and Kaylea to withdraw, and silence continued in the room until the two were gone and the servants peeked in to see if they were supposed to come back now. Derand's gesture brought them streaming back in as quickly as his earlier gesture had made them leave, and his guests began to stir as well.

"I think it would be a good idea to have lunch before anyone else decides to provide us with entertainment," Derand announced, producing chuckling in most of his guests. "For now, just sit anywhere."

The carefully prepared seating arrangements had been ruined by the departure of three people, since Monil's aide had left not long after his king and queen. It would have been silly to stand on ceremony at this point, and Derand's guests apparently agreed. They followed Derand and Elissia to the table, the women sitting near Elissia's end, the kings near Derand's end, and the remaining aides in the middle. Derand still had to introduce his kings to Seea, but that could wait until after lunch.

The food was welcomed by everyone at the table, and Derand was delighted to find that the meal was still more than just edible. He really was hungry, and the relaxed atmosphere made the meal even more enjoyable. Everyone had been forced to put up with Kaylea's posturing to keep from offending Monil and possibly starting yet another war, and now that the need was no longer there everyone acted as if a burden had been lifted from their shoulders.

After the meal, Derand introduced the kings and their queens to Seea. Paltin grinned and kissed her hand while Hileen smiled with full approval. Vandrin strutted forward next to add his own hand-kissing, apparently expecting Seea to be flustered by his blond-haired and blue-eyed good looks as most women were. Seea didn't quite yawn in the man's face, and her smile was very warm for Vandrin's wife Tomia. The mousy little woman with brown hair and eyes was usually very quiet, so Derand was surprised when Tomia's return smile to Seea was clearly filled with amusement.

Lovar came next with his wife Sissile, his attitude one of near-disregard for the introduction. Lovar, a fairly large man with the same black hair and green eyes that his wife had, most often found interest in nothing but warfare. Socializing tended to bore him, but Sissile made up for his coolness by acting as if she and Seea were already good friends.

Sholon came last, which was to be expected. Sholon was husky and on the dour side, with dark blond hair and brown eyes. There didn't seem to be anything in the world he approved of, with the possible exception of going to war. That activity held his full interest, at least while he was winning. Once he began to lose, though, he also began to lose interest. His wife Blissie had auburn hair and dark eyes, and her seemingly perpetual air of annoyance was increased when Sholon simply gave Seea a small bow the way Lovar had. She herself offered a smile, but one that looked as if it were painful.

When the formal introductions were over, Derand stepped forward and put an arm around Seea.

"My friends, you've all had a long trip getting here so you must be weary," he said, looking around at his guests. "Since the rain is really coming down outside, why don't you use this afternoon to relax and refresh yourselves before we gather again for tonight's feast. My parents and my wife's are already here, and tonight they'll join us. Unless there's something one of you feels needs to be done or discussed right now? No? Then please take full advantage of my hospitality. Servants are waiting in the hall to guide you back to your apartments and to bring you anything you might want or need. Until later... "

No one seemed hesitant about accepting Derand's suggestion, and in a matter of moments they'd all left the room. Once the last of them was gone, Derand turned to Seea.

"So, what do you think?" he asked softly, watching her face. "Have you picked out any suspects yet?"

"I certainly have," she answered, making no effort to avoid his gaze. "I have five very definite suspects, at least four of them strong possibilities. How about you?"

"Unfortunately I'm in the same position," Derand grumbled, but not at her. "I know it was unreasonable of me to expect you to find the guilty man as soon as you were introduced to him, but for some foolish reason I thought you might. Well, you'll have a chance to see and talk to them again tonight at the feast. My father thought it would be a good idea if he and my mother and your folks didn't join us for lunch and possibly distract you. I wish his idea had worked a little better."

"It worked well enough," Seea responded, now looking thoughtful. "We can assume that the enemy was braced and prepared for lunch and the introductions, but later might be another story. We'll have to keep alert for a change in attitude, even if it's very slight. Now I think I'll go back to my apartment - "

"Sorry, my love, but we have a chore to attend to first," Derand interrupted, mostly to keep from having to chase after her. "It's time to hold the last audience scheduled before the festivities, and you have to be there with me. When I walked in alone yesterday, it felt as if every person in the room cringed and backed away. It seems the people consider you a buffer between them and their fearsome king, so if we want to hear about their problems you have to join me in listening."

Seea's brows rose as she studied his face, possibly looking for a sign that he was making things up, but since he'd spoken the absolute truth she didn't find that sign. No more than half a minute passed, and then she shrugged.

"Since it's the last time, there's no reason not to join you," she said, an odd smile curving her lips. "How do you think they'll feel about what I'm wearing?"

"They're almost guaranteed to be shocked, but there's a good chance they won't go so far as to lynch you," Derand responded, firmly ignoring her comment about a "last time." "If that opinion turns out to be wrong, do feel free to point out the error."

"Your opinion about whether or not I'll be lynched," Seea clarified, amusement behind the wry words. "All right, if they lynch me I'll be sure to tell you first that you were wrong. Shall we go?"

Derand bowed and offered her his arm, and she inclined her head before taking the arm. From the way she behaved she might have been dressed even more lavishly than Kaylea had been, which almost let Derand forget that she wore nothing but breeches and a tunic. A woman in anything but a gown still seemed wrong to him, but his not making a fuss just might get her back into that gown faster. At least he fervently hoped so...

There was a shocked silence when they entered the audience room, and then a babble of noise arose that had to be quieted by sharp rebukes from the guardsmen in the room. By then he and Seea were seated on their thrones, so the audience was begun. In spite of a lot of fluster the people did come forward more eagerly and confidently, which made Derand smile to himself. His new people had taken to his

queen a lot more quickly than they had to him, so it was now also his duty to make sure Seea stayed by his side.

The bad weather had thinned the usual crowd quite a lot, mostly leaving just those with really serious problems to present. The first two men to come forward hesitantly mentioned an outlaw band that was making travel through a certain wooded area very unsafe for anyone without a strong escort. Recently the band had also started to raid nearby farms, so the outlaws seemed to be getting bolder.

"If the area allows for it, you might give those outlaws someone to rob," Seea murmured to him when the man who had been speaking fell silent. "But don't give these people any details of whatever you intend. If I was in charge of those outlaws I'd have someone hang around here to find out things like that."

"So would I," Derand responded in a similar murmur, then he raised his voice. "Thank you for bringing the problem to our attention. We'll certainly look into the matter and take appropriate action. Who's next?"

The two men who had come to talk about the outlaws hesitated a brief moment before turning despondently and walking away. The words Derand had used usually meant a complete brush-off, something they'd wanted to argue before they decided they'd be wasting their breath. Well, the men might be disappointed now, but as soon as Derand's fighters caught those outlaws the people would feel a lot better.

The next three petitioners had personal problems, and Seea handled all three. Two of them were, in effect, complaining that fame and wealth hadn't fallen on them out of the sky, and Seea told them bluntly that if they didn't make their own efforts the gods weren't likely to do it for them. The two, one man and one woman, tried to prove they were trying by how much they prayed, but Seea refused to waste more time with them. She had the guards help the two to move on, and then listened to the third. That man had a legitimate problem, so she sent him over to the scribe.

The last petitioner was a merchant, whose clothing showed that he was at the very least well-to-do. The man started out hesitantly, as though expecting to be told that only members of the lower classes would be listened to, but his confidence grew when he wasn't interrupted. He also had a legitimate problem involving the business practices of certain merchants in adjoining kingdoms, and that was something Derand wanted to hear about. If there was actual trouble brewing, it might be headed off with a few words to whichever of his kings were involved.

With no other petitioners waiting, Derand was able to end the audience and take the merchant to a smaller room where they might talk while Seea returned to the apartment. The merchant, a heavy man named Astrof Lindera, turned out to be a good deal more shrewd and knowledgeable than his original hesitance had suggested he would be. Derand was given a good deal of information, much of it presented clearly as Lindera's opinions, a clarity that impressed Derand. He would have to do some checking, but if Lindera turned out to be as honest and intelligent as he seemed then Derand meant to make the man part of his government.

The private audience continued longer than Derand had originally intended, and suddenly it was time for him to dress for dinner. He thanked Lindera for coming forward and promised to be in touch, and then there was only one other thing for Derand to take care of. He'd have to go looking for Listan or send for him, he thought, but stepping out of the room showed him Listan in the hall and obviously waiting for him.

"My king," Listan said with his usual bow when Derand appeared. "The queen said you would want to speak to me when you finished with the merchant."

"How did I get along before she was with me?" Derand asked with a laugh as he gestured Listan into walking with him. "Yes, there is something I need you to take care of, namely a band of outlaws that have started to raid some of the farms. But their main occupation is robbing travelers who appear in their neighborhood without a proper escort, so the queen and I thought it might be a good idea to supply a victim or two for them. The best idea should

be to have the supporting fighters sneak into the woods first, so they'll already be in position when the innocent travelers are attacked. And make sure that word about the proposed venture doesn't get spread around. Since we don't know who any of the outlaws are, we won't know if any of them happen to be listening."

"If there's anyone with brains leading the band, there will be someone listening," Listan said sourly, making the opinion unanimous. "I'll make sure our preparations look like nothing more than some ordinary battle practice. Is there anything else, my king?"

"One other thing," Derand said, pausing next to the corridor leading to his apartment. "Have someone with common sense look into the background and dealings of that merchant Astrof Linder. I'm thinking about having him formulate our policies on trade, and I want to make sure he's as honest as he seems."

"I'll see to it, my king," Listan said with a bow before walking off, leaving Derand free to continue on to his apartment with all business taken care of.

Seea was using the main bathing room again, so Derand used the other and then dressed in an outfit he considered "finery." Brown silk combined with cloth of gold made him look expensively dangerous rather than ordinarily sinister the way black leather did. Derand didn't particularly like the outfit, but he'd reached a point where anything that wasn't black was a great relief. The day might come when he would be able to wear pink if he chose, but that day was still a long way off.

After closing a swordbelt around him that held a fancy jeweled sword instead of his usual, workmanlike weapon, Derand headed for the sitting room with the intention of waiting for Seea. Consider his surprise when he walked in to find her already there, obviously waiting for him. She wore the most breathtaking gown of gold with touches of light brown, her beautiful red hair threaded with more gold and jewels. Her gown was literally the opposite of his outfit, but before he could ask about that she showed a very amused smile.

"I hope you won't consider me bold for observing how ... lovely you look," she said, all but taking the last of the words out of his mouth. "You ought to dress up more often."

"My father warned me to be wary of flattery like that," Derand answered with the best scowl he could manage. "He said that women who told me things like that were after my virtue and most likely didn't mean what they said."

"Oh, but I assure you I do mean it," Seea said at once, her amusement increasing. "I'm a woman of honor, after all, so you can certainly take my word as to my good and honorable intentions."

"Hmph," Derand said with very clear doubt as he sent suspicion with his gaze. "We'll just see about that..." But that was as long as Derand could keep up the act. A grin broke through to banish his scowl, and he moved closer to Seea. "But now that you've brought up the subject of loveliness, allow me to return the observation to its source. And I'd like to know what made you choose that particular gown for tonight."

"I saw your servant laying out your own outfit and decided that a united front couldn't hurt," she answered with a small gesture of her head. "If your guests have heard any stories about our relationship, they ought to decide that we've settled matters to our mutual satisfaction. If not, we can always bully them into backing down."

"Please, madam, I would never even think of bullying my guests," Derand responded with injured dignity as he looked down at her. "If any bullying is necessary, you'll just have to do it alone. Shall we go?"

Seea laughed as she took the arm he held out, and they went to the dining room where all their guests would be. Derand was faintly worried about what would happen when Seea and her parents and brother were in the same room again, but nothing like a confrontation occurred. Seea simply acted as if her family wasn't there, and none of them made the effort to go to her.

Every woman in the room was beautifully dressed for the feast - with the single exception of Kaylea. She wore a very plain gown and nothing of jewelry, and her expression of misery said that the choice wasn't hers. Apparently Monil had decided to extend her punishment, which was rather wise of him, Derand thought. If the woman needed a reason not to offer herself to every man in reach, she now had two reasons to keep her to moderation.

Drinks and small snacks were being circulated by servants with trays, and Seea took a glass of white wine before going over to join the queens she'd met only a few hours earlier. Derand chose a glass of strong red before he made his own way over to the kings, and just as he reached them one of his fighters entered the room -hurriedly. Derand saw the entrance out of the corner of his eye and quickly turned as the fighter located him and strode over.

"My king, a private word with you, if you please," the man, Captain Hael Ventra, requested. Derand excused himself from his guests and took Hael aside, and once they stood alone Derand nodded for Hael to continue.

"My king, it's a good thing we were told to keep an eye on the fighters brought here by your guests," Hael went on in a soft voice. "We were expecting trouble from them, but instead we were there to keep trouble from happening to them. Men were hiding in the tents erected for their use, and once the newcomers settled down the men jumped out and attacked them."

"Were any of the fighters killed or badly hurt?" Derand asked at once, silently cursing whoever was behind these attacks. "And what about our own people?"

"None of ours was hurt, and only a few of the visiting fighters were bruised," Hael answered just as quickly. "We stopped the attackers in all but two instances, and in those two instances the fighters protected themselves. We were able to capture three of the attackers rather than kill them, but I seriously doubt if any of them knows anything worthwhile. They're more like hired thugs than skilled fighters."

"Question them anyway, and if you feel you have to be severe then do it," Derand said, hating the need to give orders like that. "Let me know if you find out anything, and Hael - my thanks to you and your men for a job well done."

"It's our pleasure to serve you, my king," Hael answered with satisfaction in both eyes and voice. "I'll send word if we learn anything."

Hael bowed before turning and striding out of the room again, and Derand was able to return to his guests. All five of the men watched him walk back, obviously wondering if Derand would pass on what he'd just been told. As a matter of fact he had to pass on what he'd been told, and not just to watch the men's reactions.

"I think you ought to know that someone is trying to stab me in the back instead of coming at me in direct challenge," Derand said as soon as he stood with the others again. "Both my queen and I have been attacked by assassins, and we even caught men who had been hired to attack you on your arrival here. For that reason I had a close eye kept on your fighters, and it's a good thing I did. Your men became the new targets, but the attacks were stopped and your men are unhurt."

"By the gods!" Paltin exclaimed along with sounds of surprise from the others, his outrage letting him speak first. "The foul coward was trying to ruin the games you've arranged, and if our fighters hadn't been able to participate we would have blamed you. Do you have any idea who the miscreant can be?"

"So far there hasn't been even a single clue," Derand answered, making no mention of the fact that he was fairly certain the man to blame was among those he spoke to. "If you've been wondering why I've had my fighters decorating all the hallways, that's the reason. But don't let the sight of black leather make you careless. There was even an instance when the attackers were dressed like my own men, and if one of my guests gets even so much as a scratch while under my roof... Well, we could find ourselves back to where we were before the truce agreements."

"Kill anyone who looks suspicious, that's what you have to do," Lovar put in, now looking less bored and more interested. "And definitely kill anyone who tries to attack. That ought to teach the fools."

"Capturing as many as you can is a better idea," Monil said as most of the others agreed with Lovar. "You can ask questions of the dead, but you can't expect to get any answers."

"So far we might as well be questioning the dead," Derand said sourly as the others considered Monil's suggestion. "Hirelings don't know their ultimate employer, only the intermediate man with the silver or gold. If we get very, very lucky we just may get our hands on that one. If we do... "

There was no need to speak the rest of that sentence, which the nods Derand got from the others told him clearly. If his men found someone with knowledge who didn't have the dedication of that "tax collector" he'd had put to death without using torture, breaking the man ought to be possible. It was just that torture was so unreliable a method of gaining information. If the man being tortured was strong enough, he'd be able to plant false information with his dying breath...

Derand's guests discussed the problem among themselves until dinner was announced, and then everyone went to the table. Derand had noticed Seea speaking briefly to Kaylea a short while earlier, and Kaylea had been left with a very odd expression. None of the other women had approached the beautiful blonde, but being excluded had to be normal for Kaylea. She herself never made any effort to join the other women, and she'd seemed determined to alienate every female in a five mile radius. Now, though, things had changed for her in a less than pleasant way, but Derand couldn't find any sympathy for the woman. After all but begging for punishment for so long, she couldn't complain now that it had been given to her.

The feast was a marvelous success, and no one but Seea's parents and brother retired early. But the kings and their queens and aides had traveled a far distance, so the partying didn't continue into the wee hours. When Sholon said it was time he and his queen returned to their apartment, the others decided to do the same. Derand's parents joined the general exodus, so he was free to take Seea to their own apartment just a few minutes later. They separated to change out of their finery, then came together again in their bedchamber once the servants were gone.

"I didn't want to ask you before I was sure no one could overhear us, but now I need to know," Seea said as soon as the door was closed behind the last servant. "What happened that got you men so agitated before we went to table?"

Derand, seated in a chair with a cup of tea near his hand, told her about the attack against the fighters his kings had brought with them. Seea listened carefully, then shook her head.

"I'm glad you and I both mentioned that possibility to Listan," she said after blowing out a breath of annoyance. "If the games you have planned were ruined, more than one of those men would use the excuse to go back to starting real wars... So which groups of men were the ones who were able to defend themselves?"

"By the gods, I was so angry I forgot to ask!" Derand exclaimed, suddenly realizing why Seea wanted to know. "The enemy would be unlikely to enjoy seeing his own men hurt or killed, so they could well have been told to stay alert even if no details or reasons were given them. I'll have to get us the answer first thing in the morning."

But one answer Derand knew he already had: he hadn't told Listan anything about guarding the visiting fighters, so it had been Seea's efforts alone that had done the job. He'd been just about to admit the truth, but something had made him keep the information to himself. Exactly why he felt like that he didn't know, but he knew better than to mistrust his instincts. Hopefully, the answer would soon come to him...

"You were watching your guests while you told them about what had happened, I know, so did you see anything

that made you suspicious?" Seea asked next. "Did any of them react in a way he shouldn't have?"

"Unfortunately none of them showed anything specific," Derand answered with a shake of his head. "Lovar was all for killing every attacker in reach to teach them not to try the same again, but Monil wanted to save as many as possible and put them to the question. First the others agreed with Lovar, and then they agreed with Monil. Did you notice any of them acting strangely during the feast?"

"They all started out looking kind of grim, but most of them managed to relax during the meal," Seea answered with her own small headshake. "I have the feeling I saw or heard something that I dismissed too quickly, but right now I can't think what it is. Maybe it will come to me after a good night's sleep. I wish you your own good sleep."

And with those words Seea looked at him, obviously expecting him to take his tea and go. Derand instantly found himself drowning in confusion, and the condition must have shown itself on his face.

"Since we're not married any longer, it would be improper for you to share my bed," Seea told him, but the words were more an excuse than an explanation. "I'm sure you understand the point as well as I do."

Oh, he understood, all right, but not the point Seea had mentioned. For some reason that had nothing to do with propriety, Seea didn't want to share his bed. Derand thought furiously as he rose slowly to his feet, knowing he couldn't go along with her excuse, and the proper counter to her attack came as soon as he began to consider the matter tactically.

"But we're supposed to be still married, and at this point in the game we have to be

careful about what we do," he said, keeping his tone mild. "It's necessary that we share a bed, even if we do nothing else but sleep. You can see that, I trust?"

Seea obviously wanted to argue his stance, but the flash of frustration in her eyes told Derand that she couldn't argue what was patently true. She hesitated a very long moment, then surrendered to the inevitable with a sound of annoyance.

"All right, then we'll share the bed for sleep," she stated, looking at him with less than friendliness. "You'll stay on your side, and I'll stay on mine."

Derand granted her the qualifying terms with a small bow of his head, keeping his smile completely on the inside. Then he went around turning down the lamps while she removed her robe and slipped into bed. With the lamps taken care of he made his own way to the bed in the dark, removed his wrap, then got in under the covers.

It took quite some time before Seea was deeply asleep, but Derand waited, not quite patiently, until she was. He waited an additional five minutes or so until he was certain that he wasn't mistaken, then he reached over and gently slid her over to his side of the bed without waking her. She was bound to protest what he would soon be doing, but with her on his side of the bed he'd be able to insist that she had come to him. Derand desperately needed to make love to his wife even if she thought she wasn't his wife any longer, and desperate need calls for desperate action.

Derand got her nightdress skirt moved all the way up to her waist before he took her gently in his arms. She actually snuggled up to him as though in encouragement, so he quickly put his left hand on her bare bottom before starting a kiss. Once their lips were together he slid the middle finger of his left hand between her nether cheeks, a substitute for the bead that he didn't dare use right now.

And Seea responded almost instantly! A moan forced its way from between her lips into his mouth as her body began to squirm, and then she was kissing him back with all the passion he himself felt. Derand let himself drown in that kiss only for a minute, and then he moved over that squirming body without taking his lips from hers or

removing his finger from her bottom. As soon as he was between her thighs he entered her, and her fingers clawed at his back as her body's motion matched the movement of his. Her mind may have rejected the idea of his making love to her, but her body most certainly didn't agree.

Derand made the time last as long as possible, but he finally had to join Seea's latest release. He touched his lips to hers a final time before withdrawing and lying flat on the bed again, trying to gather his mind together enough to remember the excuse he'd prepared for what he'd done. He waited for the accusations to start, but when they didn't come immediately he was taken over by exhaustion and sleep.

When he woke again in the morning he automatically reached out for Seea, only to find that he was alone in the bed...

Chapter 19

Elissia awoke feeling marvelous, but seeing that she lay more on Derand's side of the bed than her own brought back enough memories to change the feeling to depression. She'd thought she'd be able to trust herself having him in the same bed, but obviously she'd been lying. She couldn't be trusted to do the right thing and stay away from the man who had granted her freedom, a weakness that left her disgusted with herself.

Getting out of bed quietly enough to keep from waking him, Elissia went to her bathing room and saw to her morning ablutions without calling for any of the maids. While she washed and dressed she silently railed at herself for the way she'd behaved, her thoughts as sharp and bitter as bad tea.

How can you possibly pretend that you have even a shred of honor? she demanded silently of her shameless inner self. You know you can't stay here with him, not when you can't make up your mind about the least little thing and you take that problem out on him. Your only option is to get yourself out of the lives of everyone who cares about you, and the start you made with your parents and Gardal will see to it that they don't mourn your loss for long if at all. Why can't you manage to do the same with him?

Elissia had been trying to make Derand stop caring about her, certain that if she made him break his word about not getting angry with her he'd hate her for forcing him into being forsworn. But every time they talked she found herself being helpful, or gentle, or funny, just as if she expected to stay with him for the rest of their lives. Just as if she weren't a moody fool who would eventually turn any loving feelings of his into impatience and dislike if not actual hatred...

Finding that she was fully dressed in breeches, tunic, and short boots came as no surprise to Elissia. She hadn't been paying attention to what she did, so even finding herself standing half naked in the middle of the room wouldn't have been a surprise. She used to be a lot harder to distract, but lately the least little thing was able to take her attention away from what was important.

"And right now there are two things of importance that I can't afford to be distracted from," Elissia murmured as she picked up a brush and ran it through her hair. "The first is finding out who's behind the attacks, and the second is figuring out where to go when I leave here. If I can't find somewhere to go where I'll actually want to be, I'll have to choose my only other option..."

And although the idea of dying was frightening, the idea of continuing on in an impossible situation brought even more dread. How much easier everything would have been if only Derand hadn't killed that hunting cat about to leap on her in the woods...

"Well, good morning," Elissia heard Derand say from behind her, the words just short of being hesitant. "I wondered where you'd gone... Look, about last night - "

"It's all right, I know the ... incident was my fault," Elissia said at once, putting down the brush before turning to

him. "I apologize, of course, and I'll try very hard not to let it happen again."

He stood barefoot in his wrap and stared at her, just as though he couldn't think of what to say. There also seemed to be painful confusion in his eyes, which wasn't in the least surprising. When a woman first pushes you away and then forces herself on you, confusion is the least that can be expected.

"Look, I'm all ready so I'll wait for you out in the sitting room," Elissia said as she moved her gaze from him. "If I go to breakfast alone, it won't look right. Just ... take your time and don't rush on my account."

And with that she made her escape from the bathing room, more than relieved that he hadn't said anything or tried to stop her.

Derand found it impossible to do anything but stare as Seea hurried out of the room. For the second time he'd been all ready to defend himself from accusation, but instead of putting the blame for last night where it belonged, Seea had apologized as though she were at fault! His plan had worked even better than he'd hoped it would, but instead of feeling relieved and elated he felt

"Guilty, small, dishonorable, disgusted with myself?" Derand muttered, running down a list of only a few of the emotions raging around inside him. Seea was horribly unhappy, but instead of trying to make things better for her all he'd managed to do was get laid. If he'd made this poor a showing during the wars, he'd either be on the run as an outlaw right now or lying dead and rotting in a field somewhere.

"But how can I make things better for her if she won't tell me what the problem is?" Derand muttered again as he automatically started on getting ready for breakfast. "She made me promise things that I thought sure would be hell to stick with, but I haven't had a moment's trouble. She hasn't taken the least advantage - and now seems even more miserable than she was before. Why can't I figure out what's wrong between us? And how can I get her to tell me what's wrong if I find I can't figure it out?"

Derand felt as though he were knee-deep in quicksand and going down fast, so he paid attention to washing and shaving to keep from ending up in a screaming fit. Seea complained bitterly about it being a man's world, but if she threw a screaming fit no one would even blink. If he tried to take the same liberty, though, seven kinds of hell would instantly break loose. People might disapprove of women stepping out of their usual roles, but men who tried to do the same rarely survived the reactions of those around them. A man had to be a man at all times, other people's idea of what it meant to be a man. Talk about unfair...

Stopping for a minute to rub at his closed eyes gave Derand a chance to regain control of his rampaging thoughts. He couldn't believe he'd been about to complain about something that now made absolutely no sense to him. If he didn't find a way to settle matters between him and Seea fast, Arvin would have a babbling maniac as its High King. An unmarried babbling maniac...

That last unpleasant truth sobered Derand enough that he finished dressing in record time. Some small part of him was afraid that Seea would not be in the sitting room waiting for him, and when he walked into the room to find her quietly sipping tea he felt vastly relieved. She was still here, so it shouldn't be too late for him to find a solution to whatever was bothering her.

But now wasn't the time to start a personal discussion when their guests were probably waiting breakfast. So he and Seea walked to the dining room in what would, under other circumstances, be a close and comfortable silence...

Elissia walked into the dining room and almost stopped short in surprise. She'd been the least bit distracted on the way here, but surprise bordering on shock brought her back to her surroundings. All of Derand's guests were gathered in the room, but only three of the women, Kaylea, Tomia, and Elissia's own mother, were in gowns. The rest, including Derand's mother, were wearing breeches, tunics, and short boots like the ones she wore!

"Oh, oh, now you've done it," Derand murmured from behind her. "You've started a revolution, and if I'm not mistaken some of my kings are seriously considering calling in their fighters to help stop what they're apparently helpless against."

Derand was obviously teasing her, but it was almost more than Elissia could do not to flinch. The women in breeches looked absolutely delighted, but the men's expressions said they didn't quite share the enjoyment.

"Well, Derand, I hope you're happy," Derand's father, Almis, said morosely as the newcomers moved closer to the people gathered in the room. "This is what comes of letting women run wild, but you would let Elissia have her own way. Our whole world is being turned upside down, and all you can do is snicker behind your hand."

"I'm not snickering, Father, I'm laughing outright," Derand actually answered with a wide grin, shocking Elissia a second time. "I've discovered that although I prefer to see my wife in a gown, I prefer even more to see her happy. If it makes her happier to wear breeches instead of a gown, how am I harmed by that choice?"

"It makes you look like less of a man," Vandrin growled, for the moment forgetting about showing the world how handsome he was. "Tomia also tried to put on breeches, but I refused to allow something that inappropriate. My kingdom is run by a man, not by a woman."

"Worrying about how you look to others is what makes you less of a man," Derand countered at once, the look in his eyes belying his easy and gentle tone. "If you think that having my wife in breeches has taken anything away from my ability with a sword, you can test the theory later during the games. I've made provision for us as well as for our fighters, but right now I want some breakfast. Doesn't anyone else have an appetite this morning?"

There was a lot of grumbling - or giggling - agreement from the guests, but everyone did start to move toward the table. Derand's father looked less upset than he'd claimed to be when they first got to the room, which made Elissia study the other men as they took their places. If Almis had only been pretending to be upset, maybe one of the others was doing the same. After all, continuing with secret attacks was more important than thinking about some silly clothing...

"I really have to find some way to thank you, Elissia," Hileen said as she sat to Elissia's left. Proper seating arrangements had gone by the boards again, but no one seemed to notice or care. "Paltin was furious when he saw what I was wearing, but I haughtily pointed out that I was just as much of a queen as you were. When I demanded to know how many things Derand was allowed to do that my own husband wasn't, that settled the matter. I've always hated gowns, but never had the chance - or the nerve - to wear something else."

"Lovar grumbled as well, but this was too good a chance to pass up," Sissile bubbled in agreement from the chair to Elissia's right. "I wasn't sure I would enjoy wearing breeches, but once I tried them I discovered that they were marvelous. I only wish you'd set the new style sooner."

"Where in the world did you all find breeches to wear?" Elissia finally managed to ask. "I brought mine with me, but I doubt that you did the same."

"The palace servants found mine somewhere," Hileen answered with a dismissive gesture of one hand. "It's possible that some poor man will be found unconscious and naked in a corner, but as long as he doesn't demand his clothing back..."

"Oh, Hileen, you're terrible," Sissile said with a laugh while Elissia simply laughed. "The servants also brought me my breeches and tunic, and I had the impression they went to a man close to my size. Or, considering how good a fit the clothes are, they more likely went to a boy. But whoever the servants went to, they didn't look surprised when I made my request. It's nice to see how quickly they adapt to new situations."

"Servants in a palace had better adapt to new situations or they'll find themselves out on the street," Bliss put in

from Sissile's right, looking less annoyed to Elissia than she had yesterday. "I demanded breeches and a tunic, and when I got them and put them on, Sholon barely noticed. I've come to the conclusion that if I want his full attention I'll have to attack him with a weapon."

That comment brought more laughter to the women, even to Tomia, who sat dejectedly to Hileen's left. The mousy little woman obviously hadn't been able to do as the other women, which made Elissia feel sorry for her. But maybe, if the fool Vandrin faced Derand during the games, Derand would be able to knock some sense into the man's head. Tomia didn't deserve to miss out on what others were happily trying.

The servants were already bringing food to the table, so while those around her decided on what they wanted to eat, Elissia was able to consider another woman who had missed out. Kaylea sat next to Monil at the other end of the table, and the beautiful blonde looked horribly disturbed. It wasn't likely that she had been refused breeches, not with the way her husband felt about her; her being in a gown was probably a matter of the thought of breeches never entering her head.

Elissia sighed as she remembered what she'd said to Kaylea the day before. The woman had looked so horribly embarrassed at the feast that Elissia hadn't been able to stand it. So she'd walked over and said, "Don't think you're the only woman in this room who's had that same punishment. My guess would be that you have more than a little company, so just let it go. No one will torment you about what happened, you have my word on that."

Kaylea hadn't responded in any way, so Elissia had simply walked away again. It was perfectly possible that the blond woman had no interest in responding, or that she blamed Elissia for what had been done to her. Well, no matter. If Kaylea wanted to blame Elissia for things, there might as well be more calling for blame. Elissia spoke softly to a servant, then paid attention to her own breakfast.

"All right, my friends," Derand said in a loud voice once everyone seemed to be finished eating. "I think we have time for one more cup of tea before we attend the games. They'll start when we get there."

"That's the kind of schedule I can approve of," Almis said from his place beside Rildin, his queen. "You can all thank me later for raising him properly."

Most of the people at the table laughed, and that included Derand. It was nice to see that everyone was in such a good mood, Elissia thought. It's much harder to ruin a bad mood...

"I think one other thing needs to be done before we leave," Elissia said, her own voice just loud enough to reach the other end of the table. "Tramping all over the meadow will probably ruin the clothing of anyone in a gown, so I've arranged for breeches to be brought for those who didn't arrange for their own. Ladies, if you'll retire to the next room to change, we'll sip tea while we wait for you."

Tomia looked suddenly delighted, Kaylea frowned as she stared at Elissia - and Elissia's mother, Liminia, shocked and startled Elissia by rising to her feet. Never in a million years would Elissia have expected her mother to even consider wearing breeches, not when "delicate" usually required the proper setting. Distantly Elissia noticed that her father looked as shocked as she felt, and then her mother spoke.

"I do hope that one of those outfits will suit me properly," she said, apparently speaking to the world at large. "I would certainly dislike looking less ... appealing than the other ladies. Come, girls, and we'll see how well these servants have chosen."

Tomia rose at once, carefully making no attempt to look at her husband, and even

Kaylea got slowly to her feet. Elissia noticed that the servants weren't upset by having three women to tend rather than just two, which reminded her of her choice of words when she'd sent for more outfits. She'd asked the servant to arrange for breeches and tunics and short boots for those ladies still in gowns, and hadn't specified a number.

Luckily...

As the three women headed for one of the retiring rooms adjacent to the dining room, Elissia saw the way Vandrin glared in her direction. He'd made no attempt to keep Tomia from going with the others, but not because he liked the idea of seeing his wife in breeches. He'd obviously realized that Elissia had spoken as the High Queen, and on a subject that the High King had already supported her about. Vandrin had probably had second thoughts about facing Derand in any way at all, and had wisely decided not to make an already bad situation worse.

It didn't take very long before the three women emerged from the retiring room wearing their new outfits. Derand's mother Rildin began to applaud, and a moment later she was joined by her husband, the three women seated near Elissia, and a number of the men. Tomia laughed gently at the applause, Kaylea actually smiled, and Elissia's mother wore a look of ... delighted revelation, was as close as Elissia could come to interpreting the expression. A good guess would be that Queen Liminia had expected to hate the new clothing, but instead had discovered a wonderful facet of life that she'd previously known nothing about.

All three women were slender enough to look attractive in the clothing, and Tomia all but strolled back to her seat at the table. As she walked past her husband she let her gaze ... slide across his, and Vandrin ended up the next thing to wide-eyed. Their marriage had probably been a political arrangement, and the very handsome Vandrin must have resented having a plain and mousy wife. Now it seemed that the mouse was turning into a cat, and possibly even into a kitten. Tomia's gown had hidden her womanly curves, but the breeches didn't do the same.

Monil watched Kaylea reclaim her seat beside him, and the stern, humorless man was actually smiling. Elissia saw Monil take his wife's hand and raise it to his lips, and Kaylea's smile now looked more ... enthusiastic, as if she really meant it. She looked incredibly good in the breeches, but the only man she paid any attention to was her husband.

Elissia saw her father Ostrin rise from his seat to "help" his wife back to her own chair, the most ridiculous look of concern on his face. From his expression you'd think that his wife had just done something really dangerous, and he couldn't keep himself from making sure that she was all right. Annoyance flared in Elissia over that ridiculous reaction, and oddly enough she wasn't the only one to feel that way.

Her mother also seemed to be briefly annoyed, and she sat down without accepting the "help" that was being offered. Gardal, Elissia's brother, sat not far away and seemed to be fighting to keep from laughing.

A good deal of chattering and commenting went on around the table, and Derand let it continue for a moment or two before he stood up.

"Our fighters are waiting to show us just how good they are, so let's not make them wait any longer," he said with a smile as he looked around. "And remember, we don't have to do nothing but watch. If we like we can join in, so let's go out and command the games to begin."

Everyone seemed more than ready to go along with that suggestion, and the table was quickly abandoned as servants appeared to lead the way with bows of respect. Elissia saw that Derand seemed to be waiting for her, and when she walked up to him he took her hand.

"That last idea of yours was inspired," he murmured as he urged her toward the door everyone was using. "Instead of having factions, disagreements, and unhappiness, we now have a happier, more unified group. I'll admit I never expected Vandrin to give up his stance so easily, but Tomia does look like a different woman now. And speaking of different women..."

Elissia smiled wryly when his words simply petered out, knowing exactly what he wasn't saying.

"If anyone had asked me, I would have said the world would end before my mother gave up her filmy gowns,"

Elissia said with a shake of her head. "Talk about not expecting something... But it's really odd. My father tried to treat her like a martyr, and I don't understand why she didn't let him do it."

"I think ... possibly your mother expected to feel like a martyr, accepting the clothing change as a response to what you said to her," Derand mused as they walked. "She might have meant to shame you into apologizing when you saw how valiantly she was trying to change - and not managing to, of course - but something happened when she put on the breeches. What that something would be I don't quite know."

"What that something would be is a sense of freedom," Elissia said slowly, the revelation coming in the same way. "I think you're right about what she intended, and then, for the first time in her life, she experienced what doing something 'unacceptable' felt like and it was a good feeling. My father knew what she was supposed to be doing and contributed his part, but she was too deeply into exploring the new sensations to appreciate his effort. If she does change her outlook and actions, he'll probably go into permanent shock."

"He'll get over the feeling eventually," Derand assured her with a gentle laugh. "When a man spends his life taking care of his 'very delicate' wife, seeing her in a different light can be upsetting. But that doesn't mean he also stops loving her, so they shouldn't have a problem if she does change her attitudes. Wait and see."

Elissia nodded and let the subject drop, but she wasn't counting on having a different mother to contend with. The habits of a lifetime are very hard to break, so any changes could well be temporary...

Derand maneuvered himself and her to the front of the crowd, so they were in the lead as they left the palace. The meadow where the games were to take place was crowded with people, but right now there weren't any city residents included. Elissia had learned that the first day or two of the games would be just for the visiting royalty, and only later on would ordinary citizens be allowed to watch. But there were certainly a lot of fighters in black leather everywhere, and they seemed to be wearing colored scarves tied to their left arms...

"Those scarves are meant to identify real fighters from intruders," Derand murmured, obviously having seen where her attention had gone. "The different colors mean something very specific, and anyone wearing a particular color will be arrested if he isn't doing what his armband color says he should be doing. But the system isn't guaranteed safety, so make sure you stay alert."

Elissia nodded as she continued to look around, making no effort to find out what the various colors of the scarves were supposed to mean. If the wrong person happened to overhear the details, the entire effort would be ruined. Besides, there were plenty of other things to take a person's attention, like the different areas that were roped off. And the first roped off area they were heading for held six men, all of them with what looked like wooden swords in their hands.

"The fighters from your various kingdoms will be paired off," Derand said to the group at large once everyone stood around the roped-off area. "Each man will fight three times during the day - assuming he doesn't lose two fights in a row. If he does then he's disqualified, and won't be asked to fight a third time. Tomorrow, the winning fighters will be paired off with an equal, depending on whether they won two fights or all three. Again there will be three fights for each man who doesn't lose the first two fights, and then we'll have fewer winners to continue to the next round."

"I don't see any of your fighters ready to join in," King Lovar commented as he looked around. "Are these ... games just for your ... loyal subjects?"

"My men have already gone through the process among themselves," Derand answered with what looked to Elissia like deliberate amusement. "When the six best among your fighters prove themselves, that's when they'll face my men. The final contest will be held on the last day of the games, and there will only be a single event. The same holds true for hand to hand fighters, mounted fighters, archers, and axe men. We'll also hold races of

different kinds, like men on foot or mounted, and then we'll go to the handicapped races. A scout has to get back with the information he has even if he's wounded, so we'll arrange temporary 'wounds' that will hamper the men involved. The men who win those races will likely be your best."

For the first time Lovar looked sincerely interested, and the commenting among everyone else said he wasn't alone. Then the signal was given for the first of the contests, and everyone fell silent in order to watch. The men may have been using wooden weapons, but that didn't mean there weren't casualties. The careless or untalented were quickly eliminated with broken arms or legs or ribs, but there were still some who would be able to go on to the next round.

They all watched the 'sword' work for a time, then the group was led to the other competitions. In every roped off area men contested with bare hands or wooden weapons, which was faintly annoying to Elissia. It was only men who contested, and that didn't seem fair. Surely there were women somewhere who would have enjoyed joining in, but women weren't usually given training with weapons. Maybe that rule could be changed like the one about gowns...

They were approaching the archery area when there was a small flurry of activity to one side. Elissia thought that no one but Derand noticed the flurry and he didn't comment, so she also kept silent. While everyone was engaged in watching the first of the archers contend, a fighter in black leather with a green scarf around his arm came up to Derand and spoke very softly. Derand nodded acknowledgment of what he'd been told without changing expression, but when the fighter was gone Derand came over to her.

"A man pretending to be one of the archers started to aim at us when we first left the palace," Derand murmured as he looked around. "My fighters arrested him and dragged him away, of course, but happily I'd told them about the false attack you pointed out on our way here. For that reason they were ready when two other archers suddenly turned in our direction when we were close enough to make much better targets. These last two didn't let themselves be taken alive, which is really annoying. They knew something that first man doesn't, but now we'll never know."

"Maybe we can find out," Elissia murmured back. "It's possible that first man was able to sneak in here, but what about the other two? If they were simply hired they would be as ignorant as the first, but if they came with the man behind the attacks..."

"Then that man might now be two fighters short," Derand finished for her with a nod. "Yes, I realized that myself, but checking on the matter won't be easy. The fighters who came here with their kings are scattered all over, so we won't be able to get an accurate count until they return to their assigned quarters tonight. My men have already been told to keep a tally on the visiting fighters to make sure some of them don't 'wander off,' but that leaves us nothing to do but wait."

"Wait," Elissia echoed, pronouncing the word like the curse that it was. "No wonder it's spelled with four letters..."

Derand made a sound of near amusement, but Elissia hadn't been joking. She hated to wait, especially since it wasn't even close to lunchtime yet...

Rildin felt absolutely marvelous as she and her husband Almis entered their apartment to rest and refresh themselves before lunch. She'd dressed in breeches in an effort to support her son's strangely unhappy wife, and Almis had only pretended to dislike the idea. It had come as a small shock that others of the women had done the same thing, but probably not for the same reason. But whatever the reason, the outcome had been just marvelous. Rildin had probably enjoyed herself more than any of the others...

"Woman, I want a word with you," Almis growled from behind her, surprising Rildin. "Your behavior this

morning was shameful, and if you don't have a damned good reason for doing as you did you're in a lot of trouble."

"What do you mean, for doing as I did?" Rildin asked as she turned to him, knowing better than to show guilt of any kind. "What is it that you think I did?"

"You know very well what you did," Almis growled, glaring at her with his fists on his hips. "You showed yourself off to every man you passed, swinging your bottom half around like a weapon - or like something for sale. In case you've forgotten, whatever goods you show belong to me."

"And don't you feel even a tiny bit happier owning those goods when other men show they'd like the goods for themselves?" Rildin asked with a small laugh as she patted his face. "Whatever was done was for your benefit, my love. My husband deserves to be envied."

"You're lying, my love, and thinking I don't know it is even more of an insult," Almis countered at once. "You flaunted yourself to prove that you're not too old to attract men even with younger women around, and if you'd told the truth I would have had to let you get away with acting like a naughty child. But you didn't tell the truth, so now you get what all naughty children deserve."

"What do you mean, now?" Rildin asked with sudden worry as he took her arm and began to pull her toward a chair. "Almis, it's in the middle of the day! We'll be expected to join everyone for lunch in a little while, and then we have to go back to the games!"

"And we'll certainly do both of those things, you and I together," he answered as he sat before pulling her across his knees. "You, however, won't enjoy the time quite as much as you did this morning, whereas I'll be enjoying it considerably more."

Feeling appalled, Rildin seriously fought to keep him from taking down her breeches and underdrawers but the effort was as useless as pretending to struggle would have been. With her clothing pushed down to her knees she was held in a place she usually didn't mind being, but she'd never been spanked in the middle of the day before. And she'd never had to leave her apartment and socialize after a spanking! The time would be horribly embarrassing, but maybe she could talk Almis into taking it easy

"Oh, no, please, not that!" Rildin found herself blurting as her nether cheeks were separated and that - that - thing was put in her bottom again. After that first time Almis hadn't used it again, but now -! She'd discovered that the feelings caused by the thing in her bottom didn't entirely disappear even after she'd been eased and the thing had been removed...

"For the first time in years you've really earned a good spanking, so I want it to be memorable," Almis said as he kept her from reaching the string that would have pulled the thing out of her. "You're lucky I don't have my wooden ruler with me, or you'd be feeling that right now. If I have cause to do this again, though, I'll find a wooden ruler."

Rildin had many things she wanted to say, but the first smack on her bottom changed all the words to a wail and gurgle. The second smack came much too fast after the first and much too hard as well, as did the third and fourth smacks and then more and more. Almis was really serious about punishing her rather than playing, and as the ache grew higher in her seat Rildin wailed even louder. She couldn't keep from squirming at the same time, just as though she were being spanked for the very first time.

The flames in Rildin's seat rose so high that she managed to force out words of begging. Tears were running down her cheeks as Almis's hand kept hitting her bottom harder than ever before, also causing that thing inside her to make her feel as though she were about to melt. She swore to be good from now on, swore to never do the same again, swore to turn inside out if that was what he wanted. Nothing came in response but the feel of his big

hand swatting her bottom, so the wailing came back and this time stayed.

The spanking didn't really go on all that long, but when Almis stood, put her over a padded foot stool, then entered her from behind, Rildin felt as though the spanking was continuing. His belly slapped her bottom as he stroked hard in and out of her, and the combination of sensations nearly drove her insane. But even as she lost herself to everything she was being made to feel, she wailed on the inside at the thought of having to sit down to lunch...

Chapter 20

Almost everyone ended up being late to lunch, something Derand found extremely amusing. His male guests seemed to have been aroused by the games they'd watched, and the women by the games they'd played. Little Tomia had drawn so many stares from the way she ... strolled along that under other circumstances Vandrin might have been crowded out of the way. Instead Vandrin had been right behind her, getting the full benefit of the show she put on. When someone suggested they go back to their apartments for a while before lunch, Vandrin had almost hurt himself with the speed of his agreement.

But someone else hadn't been at all pleased with a game that was played, and Derand had to deliberately keep himself from staring at his parents. The fact that his father was pleased rather than furious said that his mother would not enjoy sitting down to lunch, a fact underscored by the careful way she walked. Queen Rildin was trying to pretend that she hadn't been given a really hard spanking, but the situation was obvious if you knew what to look for...

"I've finally figured out where you learned your more unpleasant habits," Seea murmured from his left, where she stood sipping tea. "You take after your father quite a lot, don't you?"

"Not as much as I would like," Derand murmured back, refraining from pointing out that his father had certainly made love to his mother after he'd heated up her bottom. He himself had spent the time before lunch taking reports from his people rather than enjoying his wife, which reminded him... "I didn't get a chance to tell you earlier: My men arrested what was left of that outlaw band after the fight, and we also have the men who were sent into the city to keep tabs on what was being done. And I sent thanks to the men who reported the outlaws, telling them to keep up the good work."

"They'll probably throw their own celebration feast once they get over the shock of not having been ignored after all," Seea said, then she lowered her voice again. "If your father insists on acting in that awful way, the least he could have done was let your mother take lunch in their apartment. Making her come out here like that is inexcusable."

"Part of the lesson he wants to teach is which one of them is in charge," Derand responded, trying to be very careful of what words he chose. "My mother has a tendency to ... take over without realizing what she's doing, part of which is to go her own way without considering the consequences of her actions. Not having to go through this same thing again will be an excellent incentive for her to think before she speaks or acts, but the time won't be as embarrassing for her as you seem to believe. Not everyone is as observant as you obviously are, so there probably won't be anyone else who notices."

Seea made a sound that was neither agreement nor argument, which pretty much closed the subject under discussion. As far as Derand was concerned, the resulting silence was decidedly golden. He remembered that his trouble with Seea had started when he'd decided to "keep her safe" by making her obey him in all things, a line of thought that might have been reached if they'd continued to talk.

And Derand didn't want that line of thought reached, not when Seea would have been perfectly within her rights to ask him where all that danger he'd mentioned was. After evading the question as long as possible, he'd then

have to concede that he'd talked himself into believing there was danger to justify demanding her obedience. He enjoyed having the obedience of those around him, and as High King actually needed complete obedience to maintain his position. He'd somehow gotten the idea that having his wife be the sole exception to giving him that obedience would somehow ... undermine the respect he got...

Somehow, somehow, somehow... Derand closed his eyes for a moment, knowing there was no "somehow" about the matter. Seea had gotten him angry, and he hadn't wanted to look weak in front of her brother and his. Nothing but pride had pushed him into starting the chain of events that had ended with his giving Seea her freedom, but he would find a way to straighten out the mess. He would...!

"Hey, Derand, you certainly do know how to throw an interesting celebration," Gardal's voice came, and Derand looked up to see Seea's brother now standing to his right and grinning widely. "For a backward savage who lives in a hovel in the middle of constant fighting and killing, you don't do half bad."

"Gee, thanks," Derand answered dryly. "You have no idea how much your good opinion means to me. You know, I've been thinking that I might extend the borders of Arvin in a few years, and the day after your future coronation might be just the time."

"Okay, okay, I take it all back," Gardal said with a laugh as he held up his hands, palms out toward Derand. "You have the most advanced and civilized city on this whole continent, much better than what will one day be mine. Is that enough to keep your fighters on this side of the border?"

Derand snorted and started to expand the game he and Gardal used to play when they were younger, intent on making his friend come up with a real apology for the nonsense he used to spout all the time. At the same time he had the feeling that Seea had started to say something, but all that was suddenly pushed aside by abruptly raised voices.

"What's wrong with you?" Hileen was demanding, and the one she spoke to was Kaylea. "I was trying to start a conversation with you, but you made no effort to respond in any way at all. Elissia might not mind that sort of rudeness, but the rest of us do!"

Until the last of Hileen's words were spoken, Kaylea acted as if she hadn't heard a syllable. But suddenly, for no apparent reason, the blond woman's head snapped around and she glared at Hileen.

"Don't you dare talk about Elissia!" Kaylea snapped at Hileen, a wildness in the beautiful woman's eyes. "You and those others don't care about anything but yourselves, and I'm just like you! But Elissia is different, better than we are, truly fit to be High Queen. But I didn't know she would be like that, I didn't know! I swear I wouldn't have done it if I'd known, I swear!"

Kaylea seemed to be on the raw edge of hysteria, her hands to her hair as she continued to stare wildly at Hileen. The other woman stood silent with her mouth open, obviously trying to think of something to say, but Derand already had something to say. He strode over to Kaylea as Monil appeared at her side, trying without success to calm his wife.

"What is it you wouldn't have done, Kaylea?" Derand asked, fighting to sound gentle. "What did you do that involves Elissia?"

"Derand, please," Monil interrupted, his rasp of a voice sounding strained. "She's upset and doesn't know what she's saying. She - "

"Kaylea, answer me," Derand persisted, paying no attention to the man who loved this woman. "Tell me what you did that involves Elissia."

"I thought she would be like the rest of us, so I arranged to get her out of my way," Kaylea responded, her tone uneven and somehow distant. "I didn't know she would say things and do things for other people without expecting even a single word in response or thanks. I told them to kill her, and to not let anyone keep them from killing her. But I didn't know, I just didn't know, I didn't - "

Monil lifted Kaylea from the floor and held her tightly to him, but she didn't seem to notice. She just kept repeating that she didn't know, but Derand did know. She was the one behind the attacks, and she had information that he had to have.

"Monil, take her to your apartment and I'll be along right behind you with a doctor," Derand said, pretending he didn't see the flinching terror in Monil's eyes. "She's obviously ill, but we do need to know everything she arranged. The doctor will give her something to quiet her down, and then we'll be able to talk to her."

Monil nodded woodenly before heading out of the room with Kaylea, and Derand sent a servant for the doctor he wanted before he walked to the door and turned to face his other guests.

"I'm sorry this had to interrupt our day, but it can't be helped," he said, looking around at people who were at least disturbed if not shocked. "Please sit down to lunch or have food brought to you in your apartments, and I'll be back with you as quickly as possible."

Then he turned and headed for Monil's apartment, where he would meet the doctor. He would soon have all the answers he needed, and then...

Elissia watched Derand leave, more than a little upset by what had happened. By everything that had happened, and Kaylea's confession was only a part of the whole. There were things she wanted to be alone to think about, but only about half of their guests left to have lunch in their apartments. The rest stayed to eat at the table, so Elissia was forced to stay as well. It would have been insulting if she'd just walked out...

But at least those who stayed had gathered at the center of the long table, leaving Elissia alone in her end seat. Their muttering said they were talking about what had happened, and it would have been impolitic to discuss the subject in her hearing. Something about Kaylea's confession bothered Elissia, but she couldn't concentrate on what was causing the disturbance. Something else bothered her even more, and that something else was very personal.

Elissia chose her meal from the servants' trays almost at random, certainly paying

no real attention to what she asked for. Derand's brief conversation with Gardal before Kaylea's confession had come as a great shock to Elissia because it suddenly told her why she'd so disliked the idea of coming to Arvin. Gardal had been saying the same thing about Derand and Arvin for years, ever since Elissia was very young, and somehow she'd missed the fact that Gardal was joking. She'd come to believe that Arvin was a backward place of hovels and constant warfare, and because of that she'd wanted to avoid Arvin at all cost!

The food in front of Elissia was still hot and tasty, but it went down her throat in an almost automatic way. She'd tried so hard to keep from having to go to a place that sounded like one of the more horrible hells the gods had created, and even seeing the truth for herself hadn't changed her mind. She'd been surprised that people weren't being murdered in the streets in Derand's city, but hadn't been bright enough to question why she still expected the murders to start at any minute.

"I'm an idiot, and I don't deserve to be here," Elissia found herself muttering as she stared down into her teacup. "Isn't it lucky that I maneuvered myself into a position where I don't have to stay? Kaylea said I'm better than her and the others, but I'm not. I'm actually worse, no matter what that poor woman thinks."

That poor woman... Elissia found it painful to remember how ... distraught Kaylea had sounded, and even more

painful to imagine how little of kindness the blond woman must have had in her life. Elissia had given Kaylea no more than a few words in support, and then had arranged things so that both Tomia and Kaylea would not feel left out. Two small, unimportant actions that seemed to have eaten away at Kaylea to the point where the blond woman had lost control of herself. She'd hired men to kill Elissia to clear the way for her to become Derand's High Queen; she obviously hadn't been lying, but something didn't quite fit...

Or maybe I don't want everything to fit, Elissia thought, the sudden realization coming to chill her blood. I promised myself that I'd get out of Derand's way once we knew who was behind the attacks, and now we know. Isn't it also time to admit that leaving would be a waste of time because I have nowhere to go? There's only one thing I can do, and I'd better get to it fast before I lose my nerve...

Elissia looked up to find that just about everyone had finished eating and had left the table. A few people still stood around in small groups talking, but the rest were now gone. That meant Elissia could also leave without insulting anyone, so she lost no time doing exactly that. Neither her parents nor Derand's had stayed to take lunch in the dining room, and there was a good chance they'd gone to hear what Kaylea had to say.

It didn't take long for Elissia to get back to her apartment, and a few minutes later she had one of the vials of "tea" in her hand. She carried the vial into the sitting room with her, wanting a glass for the liquid rather than simply swallowing it down, which was foolish but seemed necessary. And with the cork removed there was an odor to the liquid now that was very much like one of the strong alcoholic drinks the men liked so well. A short glass standing near the wine and whisky seemed perfect as well as fitting, so she emptied the contents of the vial into the glass, left the vial in the glass's place, then went to a chair and sat.

"Okay, now you have the stuff in a glass," she muttered when she found herself just sitting and holding the glass. "You know you have to do this, so why are you wasting time? Why don't you just drink it?"

The answer to that question was perfectly simple once Elissia stopped to consider it: killing yourself isn't as easy as some people think. A cold fear twists your insides and makes your hand shake, and even though you've seen to the last of your responsibilities you still find yourself wondering if there wasn't something you forgot to do. How that can be possible when you have all the answers you were looking for isn't quite clear, but

"But I don't have all the answers," Elissia suddenly realized aloud, feeling a frown crease her brow. That supposed servant she'd killed in Derand's father's palace, the one who had said she was in the way... He, obviously, had been sent by Kaylea, but the other attackers couldn't possibly have the same source. Kaylea might have told her hirelings not to let anyone stop them from killing Elissia, but that anyone couldn't have included Derand. After all, the blond woman had wanted Elissia out of the way so she could become High Queen. If Derand ended up dead, that plan would have been out the window.

"So there has to be someone else after Derand, someone we haven't found yet," Elissia murmured as she leaned forward to put the glass she held on a table not far from her chair. "But the whole thing still doesn't make any sense. Those men are so used to fighting wars that if one of them thought he could be High King in Derand's place he would probably lead his fighters in attack personally."

But they weren't attacking in an open way, one of them was coming from the shadows behind Derand's back. Even though they all had to understand that if they could have held the federation together as High King, they would have done so before Derand took over. It was as if someone was ignoring the facts because he didn't like them, expecting his wants and desires to change things simply because he wanted it that way. But that didn't sound like any of the men she'd met. It sounded more like

"The other enemy isn't a man, it's another woman," Elissia breathed, suddenly knowing exactly who that other woman had to be. "She's working through her husband, but she's in complete control of him. I noticed it yesterday when they got here and then again today, but didn't realize I'd noticed it. I'd better tell Derand right away."

Elissia got to her feet with the intention of going straight to where Derand was, but she wasn't able to take the first step before a knock on the hall door presaged the opening of that door. Two people came in, and the woman smiled at Elissia.

"We told the guardsmen that Derand asked us to meet him in his apartment," the woman said, letting her strong amusement show clearly. "Since we're honored guests and royalty ourselves, our word wasn't questioned. Aren't you going to welcome us and invite us to sit down, Elissia? I feel as if we're old friends."

Elissia stared at the woman, fighting to keep her emotions off her face. The woman had said what she'd told the guardsmen, not that what she'd said was true. Derand hadn't invited these people to the apartment, which meant they were here for reasons of their own. Those reasons weren't likely to be to the benefit of Derand or herself, not when these were the people behind the attacks aimed at killing Derand...

"Well, at least you now know who was after your blood," Derand's father said after letting out a deep breath. They and Gardal - along with Seea's parents - stood in the hall outside Monil and Kaylea's apartment, and none of them had enjoyed questioning a woman who was close to a complete breakdown.

"I don't think so," Derand answered, his mood close to black. "Kaylea was after Seea rather than me, and all the men she hired have been accounted for. That still leaves a good number of attackers who can't be accounted for, ones Kaylea claims she knows nothing about."

"Surely you're not going to accept the word of a woman who tried to have another woman killed," King Ostrin put in with his usual gentleness tinged by distress. "Trying to minimize her crime would be a natural reaction for someone like that."

"Kaylea is too busy feeling guilty to minimize what she did," Derand disagreed with a shake of his head. "I would guess that Seea is the first woman to ever do something for Kaylea without an obvious ulterior motive. Seea had every right to crow over the woman she'd bested, but instead she showed a concern that wasn't thrown out just to make herself look good. Monil said Kaylea started to brood yesterday, but he thought it was just because of the punishment. He had no idea she'd hired assassins; he thought she just meant to displace any other woman by using her beauty."

"Monil's situation leads me to think that arranged marriages might be the best thing after all," Gardal put in, looking glum. "He was the one who chose Kaylea as his wife because he fell in love with her, and look where he is."

"A man can fall in love with a woman without making a fool of himself," Derand's father said, gently clapping Gardal on the shoulder. "As long as you don't indulge the woman - or yourself - in everything, you won't have a problem. And as long as the love isn't a one way affair. That arrangement never leads to anything but tragedy."

"Right now I'm more concerned with hatred than with love," Derand said, still wrapped in the dark mood. "I even considered that Monil might have hired assassins himself in order to give Kaylea what she wanted, but that's nonsense. The way Monil was ready to challenge me yesterday proves that if he wanted me dead he'd make the effort himself, not hire others to do the thing for him. Now all I have to do is figure out which of the others doesn't see the situation the same."

Everyone including Seea's mother began to nominate their own candidates for major enemy, and the noise was threatening to give Derand a headache. What he needed was to find some place quiet to sit and think, but his other guests were waiting for him to continue the tour of the games. What he needed was a good rainstorm now, to give him an excuse to call off the games for the moment, but that wasn't likely to happen. It was a beautiful day out, and

"Excuse me, Your Majesty, but you're wanted back at your apartment," a voice said, and Derand looked up to see

a young girl bobbing in an awkward curtsy in front of him. "A king and queen said they had important information for you, information you needed to have as quickly as possible."

"Which king and queen, girl?" Derand's father asked just an instant before Derand asked the same thing. "Don't you know how many kings and queens there are in the palace right now?"

"No, sir, I'm very new, hired especially for the festivities," the girl said, her nervousness increasing. "I don't know anyone in the palace yet except for the king. My king."

Derand thanked the girl and sent her on her way, not at all eager to hear someone else's list of who had to be guilty. What he really needed was that quiet place to sit down and think, and when he saw that his companions were busily engaged in talking to one another he just faded back and left them to their discussion. He'd apologize later for having walked away without a word, but right now...

"We've sent for your husband, Elissia, so we'll all just sit down and wait for him to get here," she said, smiling at the silly woman as she and her husband moved closer to where Elissia stood. "We won't need anything in the way of refreshment so don't bother to send for a servant."

She'd added that last about a servant because Elissia had glanced at a bell pull. Things would really go much better if there were no witnesses around until the time came for many witnesses to be around. They would have to speak to Derand first, of course, but then... Then she would finally have the position in life she deserved.

When she reached a chair across from the one Elissia stood in front of, she sat down and made herself comfortable. Her husband took a chair to her left, and she smiled at how gingerly he lowered himself to sitting. There was no doubt he still ached from his latest punishment as well as the one before that, but it was nothing he didn't deserve. He was supposed to have made her High Queen, and now that she had to do the thing herself, his failure had to be paid for.

And he'd been paying in many enjoyable ways, enjoyable to her, that was. She smiled at the memory of the time they'd spent before lunch, an amount of time long enough for giving him that additional dose of punishment. When they reached their apartment's bedchamber he'd gone to his knees as he was supposed to, but something about his posture had bothered her.

"Your head isn't down low enough, and I think I know why," she'd said as she studied him. "Watching all those silly contests has made you imagine that you're something you're not, hasn't it?"

"No, mistress, please, it hasn't," he'd answered, his head immediately lowering to the proper position. "I'm nothing, and of no consequence at all."

"If you really believed that I wouldn't have had to scold you," she'd pointed out, still studying him. "What you need is another lesson in humility, I think, but which one should it be?"

He'd known she wasn't actually asking him for a suggestion, so he'd stayed properly silent. But his body had tensed up in anticipation of what she would choose, which was really very wise of him. There was one lesson he'd disliked intensely the time or two she'd used it, and it was possible to make that lesson even more ... educational for him.

"Take your breeches and short clothes down, and then rest your forearms and forehead on the floor," she'd ordered before heading for the bathing room. She'd had the foresight to bring along everything she might need for his disciplining, and some of the paraphernalia was in a bag in the bathing room. He, of course, had immediately started to obey her, so when she finished her preparations and came back to the bedchamber he was all ready and waiting for her.

His broad, bare bottom was thrust up into the air the way it was supposed to be, and she'd smiled at the redness that hadn't yet faded from this morning's session of discipline. Men needed a constant reminder of who their master was, otherwise they tended to think they were free to get out of hand. Her husband had been learning better, but he still required a special touch every now and then.

"Hold still," she ordered when his bottom twitched at the feel of the polished bone wand-end entering between his cheeks. The wand was hollow and was mostly made of rubber, except for the equally hollow tapering end of bone. The other end of the wand was attached to a small bag also of rubber, which already contained the warm water it was supposed to hold.

"This will do you a world of good," she'd said as she squeezed the rubber bag, causing him to moan out his distress. The warm water was being forced into his bottom, and the tiny movements of his body which were beyond his controlling showed how unpleasant he found the sensation. She squeezed every drop of water out of the bag before removing the wand end from his bottom, and then she inserted the cork.

"There," she'd said as she put aside the apparatus. "Now you're all prepared for the lesson. Do you think you'll learn it any better this time?"

"Yes, mistress, I swear I will," he'd choked out, obviously already feeling the water beginning to work on him. He knew better than to say anything else, of course, no matter how desperate his situation became.

"Pull your clothing up and then come and sit with me," she'd said after returning the apparatus to the bathing room and its place in the carrying bag. "We can share a cup of tea."

His face showed that his desperation had grown, but he still obeyed her and pulled up his clothing before walking slowly to the chair she'd indicated. When his seat came in contact with the chair his eyes widened and he gasped, but no words were spoken. He simply reached for the cup of tea she'd poured and placed near him, and then picked it up in trembling hands. She sipped at her own tea with her gaze directly on him, so he had no choice but to sip as well.

It was amazing how quickly his small movements of discomfort turned into actual squirming. She waited until a soft whimper came from his throat, and then she smiled.

"There are a number of things that have to be done before that cork can come out of you," she said, drawing his immediate attention. "The first of those things is, of course, the additional session of discipline your behavior has earned you. Go and get the light switch and bring it back to me."

He put the teacup back on the table and then got himself out of the chair, small mewling noises coming from his throat. He couldn't seem to move as fast as he obviously wanted to, so it was a long minute before he got the short, slender switch and brought it back to her. He offered the switch to her with both hands, and when she took it he then began to lower his breeches and small clothes again.

When his bottom was bare, he had some trouble arranging himself across her knees in a way that didn't burden her with his full weight. He knew well enough how to do that arranging, but the cause of his desperation was obviously making him somewhat clumsy. Still, that didn't excuse the clumsiness, so she gave him ten strokes with the light, springy switch instead of the five he usually got for discipline. Each stroke caused him to twitch and swallow a moan, and he seemed ready to stand again when he got the sixth stroke. If he'd actually started to stand up after the fifth stroke he would have gotten twenty instead of five, but the obedience he'd learned saved him that.

She gave him the last four strokes slowly, letting the burning build up well in his seat before delivering the next whack. He actually seemed close to tears when she finally told him he could stand up again and fix his clothing, but he restrained himself and then took the switch to return it to its proper place.

After his little chore was done, she walked to the bed and lowered her own breeches, then lay down. He came to her as fast as he could make himself move, knowing what was expected of him now. He had to use his lips and tongue to give her pleasure, and his desperation seemed to lend him more skill than usual. It wasn't long before her body spasmed with delicious release, and once her breathing eased a bit she looked at him.

"All right, now you can go and use the facilities," she said, feeling good enough to be generous.

"Thank you, mistress," he said with a bow of his head, not forgetting to then touch his forehead to the bed. He'd shown her the proper respect, and only then had he turned and made his squirming, hopping way to the bathing room. She felt the urge to call him back just as he was about to enter the room, but that sort of effort really wasn't necessary. If she'd called him back he would have come, but he'd probably also have cried. They would be among other people again in a little while, and tears sometimes left a track that couldn't be washed away with water. No, this time she didn't want him to cry...

"What was it that you wanted to speak to Derand about?" Elissia said suddenly from the chair she'd reclaimed, drawing her back from pleasant memories. "Do you have a question that I might be able to answer?"

She smiled rather than respond in words, not about to mention the reason she and her husband were here. Derand obviously adored this new wife of his, so when he showed up he would be told that Elissia would be killed unless he immediately gave up his place as High King to her husband. As soon as he spoke the words of abdication in front of the other kings, he would return to the apartment. He would expect to get his little wife back unhurt, and he would find her unhurt.

As unhurt as she would stay until he was dead, and then she would follow him down to death. Then she would be High Queen, and the delightful fun would really begin...

Chapter 21

"What was it that you wanted to speak to Derand about?" Elissia said, having sat down again. "Do you have a question that I might be able to answer?"

The woman simply smiled at her, and that after having been lost in her thoughts for a time. She seemed a different woman now, and she wasn't pretending that her husband was in charge any longer. Elissia knew that that wasn't good, not in any way at all. The only bright spot was that she didn't seem to realize that Elissia knew her for the enemy she was.

She, rather than her husband. Elissia only glanced at the man where he sat in obvious discomfort, his manner making it clear that his wife was in charge of everything including him. That was the memory Elissia hadn't been able to reach at first, the memory of noticing yesterday that this man moved and sat as though he'd been spanked by someone. The realization hadn't come through until Elissia saw -and thought about - the way Derand's mother moved after having been punished, and then all the missing pieces had fallen into place.

This man had moved both yesterday and this morning as if his bottom ached, and he was one of only two of the men who hadn't protested seeing his wife in breeches. His wife had claimed he'd grumbled, but unlike Sholon, who didn't seem to be aware of anything not pertaining to warfare, he was fully aware of what his wife wore. Aware but showing neither approval nor disapproval, as if he felt he hadn't the right to an opinion.

All of which has to mean that she's in complete charge of him, Elissia thought. Not simply the possessor of a stronger personality that he's learned to listen to, but almost like the owner of a slave. She does as she likes to him, and he accepts it all without protest. She obviously wants him to be High King, which will put all the power into her hands instead. How can he stand to live like that...?

"I can understand, in a distant way, why some women let themselves be treated like

a slave," Elissia found herself saying, the confusion inside her forcing the words out. "If a woman has no resources of her own, if she's too weak to defend herself, if she's terrified of facing the world alone and helpless, then she accepts what's done to her in order to survive. But why a man would do the same is completely beyond me, especially a man strong enough to defend a throne. What can he possibly be afraid of?"

"It isn't always fear that's behind such actions," the woman answered, still clearly amused. "Sometimes it's the need to be dominated, the need to be relieved of any and all responsibility. When you put yourself completely into the hands of someone else, you no longer have to worry about making mistakes, or choosing among difficult options, or about anything at all. As long as you behave exactly as you're ordered to, you can revel in the knowledge that all your needs are being seen to properly. If you do happen to make a mistake you're punished swiftly and soundly, and the punishment can be avoided by not doing the same again. You know exactly where you stand in life, with each and every burden removed from your shoulders."

"Making mistakes is part of being human, and often the mistake itself is enough to teach you not to do the same again," Elissia countered, sickened by the slick response she'd gotten. "If you find someone who's afraid to make decisions, you teach them how to choose between or among their options. Taking over their lives instead is wrong no matter how gracious you make the action sound. It's like finding someone who's fallen, and instead of helping them back to their feet you keep kicking them to keep them down. You're not helping them, you're just letting yourself have the kind of fun only the sick consider attractive."

"The strong are always in charge of the weak," the woman came back, no longer amused. "And aren't you the wrong one to be voicing such noble sentiments? The word going around this palace is that you forced Derand to back down from the way he tried to treat you, and now you're the one in charge. You made him crawl, and he liked it so well that he begged for more. When you tell him what he has to do to keep you safe, he won't hesitate for an instant."

"I think you're forgetting that you're supposed to be here just to chat with Derand, Sissile," Elissia pointed out, both relieved and disturbed that the woman had dropped her innocent act. "And you're dreaming if you really think that Derand will abdicate in favor of your husband Lovar and then you'll have it all. Lovar will never be High King because the other kings won't follow him the way they follow Derand. Lovar doesn't have the ability to defeat the others, so they'll immediately challenge him if he tries to take the High throne. Everything you've done has been a waste of time."

"How much of a waste of time will it be when the rest of our fighters get here and kill the paltry fifty fighters the others have brought with them?" Sissile countered as she leaned forward in her chair, her light eyes blazing. "If the other kings want to keep from being killed in the same way, they'll have to pledge their loyalty to Lovar."

"You know, I used to think it was only men who lived in a dream world," Elissia said, too annoyed to worry about what she was saying. "Are you under the impression that Derand sent his fighters on vacation because he knew, deep in his heart, that none of his kings would be so dishonorable as to try to sneak in extra fighters? And even if by some unknown fluke your fighters do manage to follow their orders and you're able to ask the other kings for their sworn words, how long do you think those words will be kept? As long as five minutes after they get back to their kingdoms and the rest of their own fighters?"

"They're men, and men keep their words even if they don't want to," Sissile ground out, clearly refusing to hear anything but her own ideas. "As soon as Derand does what I want him to, I'm going to enjoy watching you die, bitch. And if you open your mouth again I'll see to it that you beg for that death. Where the hell is that fool you're married to?"

Elissia watched the small woman get to her feet and start to pace back and forth, the anger in Sissile growing

higher with every passing minute. Sissile was completely irrational, and being balked in any way increased her irrationality to the point of insanity. So far Lovar hadn't said or done a thing, but Elissia wasn't fooled. A single word from Sissile would have the husky man doing anything she told him to, up to and including killing their "hostess." It was like being in the same room with a dangerous dog on a leash. As long as the leash was tightly held the people around the dog were fine, but if the leash were released...

"He'll pay for making me wait so long, that miserable fool will definitely pay," Sissile muttered as she moved back toward Elissia. "Who does he think he is, taking his time when I send for him? A taste of the whip before he goes to do as he's ordered will do him no end of good, and he'll learn to like it with me in charge even more than he likes having his sweet wife in that place. And if he's obedient enough, I may even keep him alive for a short while..."

The madwoman's muttering had also made Elissia wonder where Derand could be, but there were too many possibilities to know for certain. Derand might not even have gotten the word Sissile had sent, or he could be occupied with some other

"No!" Elissia gasped, grabbing for the glass Sissile had picked up from the table near Elissia's chair. The pixie-like woman quickly pulled the glass out of Elissia's reach, and then she laughed harshly.

"Your life is almost over, bitch, so stop trying to hold onto things that now belong to me," Sissile said with a toss of her black-haired head. "This isn't wine, so it has to be exactly what I want right now."

And with those words the small woman swallowed in one gulp the contents of the glass that she obviously thought held some kind of whisky. Elissia had started to get out of her chair to stop the madwoman from drinking the poisoned tea, but Lovar stood up quickly with silent menace as his right hand closed into a fist. Even without words, the man's meaning was perfectly clear: If Elissia tried to interfere with anything Sissile did, Lovar would use that fist to stop her.

So Elissia straightened and then just stood there and watched Sissile swallow down what she'd meant to use herself. In an oddly detached, unreal way, it was like watching herself do what she'd earlier hesitated over, and a reaction came in no more than a few heartbeats. Sissile made a face over the taste of what she'd swallowed as she looked into the emptied glass, and then she choked as her eyes widened. She dropped the glass as she choked a second time, her hands going to her throat and middle, and then she tried to scream. It was perfectly clear how badly she wanted to scream, but the sound was never voiced. Instead she collapsed to the floor, her body jerking as her legs kicked a few times, and then all motion abruptly ended.

Just like a hunting cat killed with an arrow, Elissia thought distantly, an odd ... bubble-like thickness between her and the world. Something inside kept her staring at Sissile's body - until a sudden movement to the right caused the bubble to burst.

"Sissile?" Lovar said, frowning at the dead woman as though he'd only just noticed what she was doing. "Is something wrong? May I ask why you're just lying there?"

May I ask, Elissia thought with heavy illness as she saw Lovar begin to move toward Sissile's body. As soon as the man's full attention was on his wife, Elissia forced herself to edge slowly toward the right and away from the two. She had no idea what would happen when Lovar finally knew the truth, but there was no one left to hold the leash of that very dangerous dog...

"No!" Lovar suddenly howled when Elissia was only a few steps on her way. "No! You've killed her somehow! For that I'll kill you!"

A glance showed Elissia that Lovar was straightening from his wife's body and beginning to draw his sword, so she started to run. Her heart was pounding madly, but the pounding grew instantly worse when Lovar suddenly

appeared between her and the door to the hall. She'd never seen a man move that fast, and the look in his eyes was horrible.

"I loved her," Lovar said with tears running down his cheeks - and the sword held tightly and steadily in his fist. "She was everything I needed and wanted in this world, and things were fine between us until Derand made himself High King. Then she blamed me for not having what Derand had, so I had to get what Derand had. But the people I sent after that bastard kept failing, and I paid for their failure. That was Derand's fault, but you just did something a million times worse. I don't know how you did it but you took my life away, and now I'm going to take yours."

There was a large chair between Elissia and the man who had just sworn to kill her, and that was the only thing that kept his sword from her heart. When he lunged at her she jumped back, and the chair kept him from completing the lunge. He moved to his right and tried again, and Elissia was able to do the same thing a second time. But time was clearly running out on her, and very soon Lovar would be able to

"Lovar!" a furious voice shouted, and Elissia joined the madman in looking toward the door to the hall. Derand stood in the doorway with his own sword in his fist, the most beautiful sight Elissia had ever seen.

"You can't stop me from killing her," Lovar stated to Derand as he turned to face the other man. "First I'll put you out of the way, and then I'll kill her. Nothing can stop me."

Derand didn't respond in words, only in the way he came forward to meet Lovar, and for a horrible moment Elissia was afraid that Lovar had spoken the truth. The madman attacked Derand with such ferocity and strength that Elissia wouldn't have been surprised to see Derand go down under the terrible assault. But Derand didn't go down and even managed to force Lovar back a step, the steel of their swords ringing and clashing.

Guardsmen came running with their own weapons drawn, but instead of intervening they simply stood and watched the fight. Elissia wanted to scream at them to help Derand, but even with terror choking her she knew the guardsmen would not obey. Helping Derand best a single opponent would weaken Derand's position as High King, especially when the single opponent was another king. Only through his own actions could Derand win the fight, and that's just what he did.

Lovar fought with nothing but attack in mind, and that was the mistake Derand took advantage of. Derand parried an attack and then replied with one of his own, the second movement so fast that it was a miracle Elissia was able to follow it. Reflex might have made Lovar start to defend himself, but the movement was never completed. Derand's sword thrust right through Lovar's chest, an inch or two of steel actually coming into sight from Lovar's back. The madman gasped once as he froze in mid-movement, and when Derand withdrew his blade Lovar's already dead body fell to the floor.

Elissia felt like falling down herself, only the chair back she leaned on keeping it from happening. So much had happened in so short a time that she felt dizzy, and only the thought that the insanity was over now was able to bring her back to herself.

"Seea, are you all right?" Derand demanded from where he stood above Lovar's body. "Did he hurt you in any way?"

"No, I'm fine," Elissia answered with a small shake of her head. "Sissile decided she wanted Lovar to be High King and she was crazy enough to think that her half-baked plans would work. Which reminds me: she said that they'd arranged for the rest of their fighters to attack and kill the men brought by the other kings. They could be in the midst of attacking right now."

"They're in the midst of being surrounded by a large segment of my army," Derand responded, having turned to wipe his sword on the tunic Lovar would never need again. "The word about that was brought to me just before I

got here, letting me know that the trap I set had worked. I had a feeling that my enemy would try to use his army to back up whatever plans he had for himself here in the palace, plans I'd almost missed seeing the start of."

Derand straightened up after he finished cleaning his sword, then turned to look at Elissia after resheathing the weapon.

"I was actually on my way to a place no one would have been able to find me so I could spend some time thinking in peace," Derand continued with a mirthless smile. "It was pure luck that I suddenly realized someone had had the nerve to invite themselves to my apartment and then send for me. My only excuse is that Kaylea's breakdown must have affected me more strongly than I thought."

"Right now I'm extremely grateful to Kaylea," Elissia muttered, partially turning away from Derand. "If not for Kaylea's plans, Sissile would still be around to make things worse with her madness. I'm going to send for a pot of tea and then sit down with it in my bedchamber. I have some thinking to do."

"Thinking about what?" Derand asked as she turned away toward the bedchamber. "Seea, what are you going to be thinking about?"

Instead of answering, Elissia walked into the bedchamber and closed the door behind her before ringing for a servant. Everything really was settled and over now, but that made things worse for her rather than better.

Elissia brooded until a servant knocked and then entered with a tea service. Derand silently followed the servant into the room, then dismissed the man once the service was on a table. Elissia watched Derand pour two cups of tea, then he brought them to where she sat and handed her one of the cups.

"I decided I could use a cup of tea myself," Derand said as he took a chair near the one she sat in. "I had a look at Sissile's body, and there wasn't a mark on it. The only thing that told me what happened to the woman was the greenish foam covering her lips. She was poisoned, but I don't understand how it was done."

"She died because of really bad timing," Elissia said with a sound of amusement that wasn't amusement at all. "I'd saved the poison Kaylea's assassin had tried to make me drink in your father's palace, and was trying to get up the nerve to drink the stuff now when she and Lovar walked in. She ranted and raved for a little while because she didn't like the way I picked her plan to pieces, then she must have decided she needed a gesture to show how much in control she was. The filled glass standing on the table near me was obviously mine, so she made it hers instead and drained it before I could stop her."

Elissia noticed the way Derand actually turned pale, and the words she expected from him weren't long in coming once she'd finished her explanation.

"You were going to kill yourself?" he demanded in a choked voice that seemed to get louder and wilder with every word spoken. "Are you completely out of your mind? How could you even consider doing something that insane? How - ! Oh, I'm going to beat you like you've never been beaten before! I'm going to - "

"Stop that!" Elissia snapped as he started to get out of his chair. "You gave your word not to get angry or to touch me again, remember? Besides, what I do is no longer a concern of yours. You seem to forget that you put our marriage aside."

"Do you think I have to be married to you to find the idea of your death completely unacceptable?" he demanded again, his hands curled around the chair arms in a grip so hard the wood should have splintered. "If you'd died then I would have done the same, and you have no right to take my life! Besides, we are still married. That statement of ... freedom I gave you is useless unless and until I publish the same statement all over the kingdom. Do you think I'm fool enough to do that?"

"So you're worse than a fool, you're a liar," Elissia growled, hating the trapped feeling that rushed up to surround her again. "I should have known better than to believe anything you had to say. You asked for one last chance and I gave it to you, and now that time is over. I want a horse and an open road, and I want them now."

"I have a better idea," Derand said, this time straightening all the way to his feet before he strode to the door and yanked it open. "Guards!" When two men in black leather ran up, Derand turned and pointed toward Elissia. "That woman is under arrest. Take her to a cell in the dungeons and toss her in."

Elissia couldn't believe the fool was serious, but the guardsmen had no doubts. They came and pulled Elissia out of her chair, dragged her to the dungeons, and threw her in a cell.

A cell in a dungeon is supposed to be dank and chill, but Elissia's cell was actually stuffy. The straw on the floor looked clean and fresh in the light supplied by the open cell door, so once the door closed and there was nothing but darkness Elissia groped her way over to the straw and sat down on it. The straw was the only furnishing the cell contained, but Elissia was too angry to care. She leaned her back against the stone of the wall and just let the anger smolder.

Hours went by before the sound of a key in the cell door came. Elissia made no effort to look toward the door when it opened, but it was no surprise when she heard Derand's voice.

"Get up and come with me," he said, sounding more than a little annoyed. "You and I are going to have a talk."

"You have nothing to say that I care to hear," Elissia stated, still without looking at him. "If I can't have a horse then I'd rather stay here."

"I don't care what you'd rather," he said as he came forward and wrapped a big hand around her arm. "This is my palace and you're my wife, so we'll do what I want. And right now."

With that he pulled her to her feet and dragged her out of the cell behind him. After just a few steps it became clear that he was heading for a heavy wooden door opposite the row of cells. Only torchlight lit the area, but that was enough to show

not a single guardsman anywhere around. He opened the door and pulled Elissia into a room that had a single lantern as its source of light. The room contained a wooden table with straps and chains all over it, with buckets of water standing against the wall to the left. He closed the door firmly behind them, then finally released her arm.

"I spent the last few hours thinking, and I hope you did the same," he said from behind her. Elissia now stood with her back to him, but he didn't seem to care. "Why do you keep insisting that you have to leave me?"

"If you're going to send for your torturers, do it now," Elissia said, ignoring his question as she stared at the ugly wooden table. She'd known the purpose of this room as soon as she'd walked in, but for some reason she wasn't afraid. Even the worst torture had to end some time, unlike many of the tortures of life...

"If I want you tortured I'll do it myself," he answered, sounding surprisingly calm. "Tell me why you think you have to leave me."

"My reasons are none of your business," she countered, finding it impossible not to wrap her arms around herself. "If I want to be free of you the desire alone should be enough. If it isn't, then all the reasons in the world won't make any difference."

"Oh, but your reasons do make a difference," he said, and his voice showed that he'd moved closer to her. "I think you want to leave me because lately we haven't had any trouble getting along."

"If that's your idea of a reason for leaving you then you need some serious help," Elissia said, fighting not to let

the bleakness she felt enter her tone. "Are you going to let me go or not?"

"Not," he answered at once, and then he swung her around by one arm to face him. "You enjoyed being with me these last couple of days, enjoyed it almost as much as I did, and that's why you're so desperate to leave. You enjoyed being with me more than once before and each time I did something stupid to ruin things, so you decided not to wait for me to ruin things this time. Every time you trusted me I betrayed that trust, so there's no reason for you to think I won't do it again."

Elissia stared at his chest, aware of the tears running down her cheeks but helpless to stop them. She hadn't actually thought the matter through as clearly as he'd just stated it, but he was absolutely right. That was why she hadn't been able to make up her mind where he was concerned. She loved this man desperately, but couldn't trust him not to make her life a waking nightmare.

"After I stopped being angry, it finally came to me how desperate you had to be to consider killing yourself," he said, his voice now an uneven whisper. "If you didn't love me you would have simply walked out and gone back to your father or anywhere else you decided on, but you've reached the same point I have: you can't bear the thought of living without me. But you also can't live with me, so you decided there was only one option left open to you."

Elissia wanted to close her eyes, but the gesture would have been pointless. Everything he'd said was true, and you can't escape the truth.

"Seea, listen to me," he said when she began to turn away again, his hand gentle on her arm. "The worst trouble we've had was when I tried to make you do things my way instead of your own. I did that because I got angry, but these last couple of days have shown me the right way to handle the anger. Walking away and letting myself cool off lets me look at a situation more rationally, and then I can cope with that situation intelligently instead of emotionally. I am learning, and you're the one who's taught me that very important lesson."

His arms went around her then, holding her as though she were something very precious. Elissia didn't want to lean against him, but the trickle of tears had turned into sobs. He held her until the crying stopped, used a soft cloth to wipe away the last of her tears, then urged her out of the room with him. By the time they got back to their apartment, Elissia was feeling almost human again. He waited until they were in their bedchamber before he spoke again.

"I said a little while ago that I wasn't going to let you go and I meant that," he said after sitting her in a chair. "I kept my part of our latest bargain, so now I'm going to insist that you keep yours. You said you'd stay with me until I broke my word, and that time hasn't come yet."

"The hell it hasn't," Elissia disagreed, still vastly unhappy. "You weren't exactly cool and composed when you had me thrown into that cell."

"Having you taken to that cell was just a different version of walking away until I cooled down," he countered, folding his arms as he looked down at her. "I would have done the walking in the usual way if I hadn't been afraid of what you would do while I had my back turned. Are you going to claim that I didn't have reason to worry?"

"You didn't, because I've discovered that I don't have the nerve to kill myself," Elissia muttered, looking away from him. "That means I have to stick with my original plan and just leave. In case you've forgotten, our bargain was only for the time until we found out who your enemy was. Now that we know, we don't have a bargain to argue about."

"You know, that hadn't occurred to me," he said, and the delight in his voice made Elissia look at him narrowly. "If our bargain is concluded, then my word doesn't hold me any longer."

He looked much too happy about that state of affairs, which wasn't at all surprising. He must have been really

chafing under the terms of their agreement, and now that he was free...

"So now I get to state the terms of the next bargain we're going to agree to," he went on as he crouched in front of Elissia's chair, the delight suddenly gone from his expression. "I love you more than life itself, Seea, so I freely and happily give my sworn word never to lose my temper with you again. If something you do happens to get me angry, I'll just stomp away and not come back until the anger is all gone."

"And if you happen to break your word, will you then give me another worthless piece of paper?" Elissia countered. "Obviously I was supposed to have forgotten about that, but you're out of luck. I didn't forget and I'm not interested in any new bargains."

"You'd rather be chained up like a slave?" the monster asked with raised brows, his arms resting on his thighs. "I wasn't joking about loving you more than life itself, a terrible truth you're going to have to learn how to live with. If you didn't return my love it would be another story, but since you do... If we can't agree to one last bargain to see if we can make our marriage work, I will chain you to a wall. That way I won't have to worry that you'll disappear as soon as I turn my back."

"I don't love you, I hate you," Elissia growled, telling about half the truth. "You're trying to force me to make the choice you want made, and that's lousy."

"No, that's desperation," he corrected, his dark gaze as calm and unwavering as his tone. "The only way I can make you know you can trust me is by showing that I'm telling the truth. If you aren't here, how can I show you anything at all?"

Elissia tried to think of a reasonable answer to that question, but ideas refused to come. She hated the idea of being forced to do things against her will, but then she remembered what she'd thought when he'd first made those promises. He'd never be able to keep his word, not for more than a few days, and then she'd be within her rights to turn around and walk away.

"All right," she finally grudging, meeting that calm stare. "I'll take your word again on the same matters I did the last time, but this will be the last time. If you lose control of yourself even once you will have to use chains to keep me here, and even that might not work."

"Your warning is duly noted and acknowledged," he said with a quick single incline of his head. "The only point you missed is that I'm not offering the same things I did last time. But before we go into that, let me ask you a question. The times I completely ignored your opinions and desires and just stuck to mine... How did that make you feel?"

"Why, I felt ... hurt, and dismissed, and as if I didn't matter to you," Elissia answered in a groping way, having no idea why he was asking such a thing. "I also felt helpless and both furious and miserable... Did you ask just to satisfy your curiosity?"

"No," he replied, an odd look in those dark eyes. "I wanted to know how close your feelings came to mine, and now I do know. You felt back then just the way I did when I found out you'd planned to kill yourself. You didn't consider me, or your parents and brother, or anyone but yourself. You made no effort to sit down and work something out with me; you just went ahead and thought about no one but yourself."

"There wasn't anything to work out," Elissia protested, that odd stare making her feel uncomfortable. "I knew you'd refuse to listen to anything I had to say, so why would I have bothered?"

"You knew I'd refuse to listen just the way I knew you had to apologize to your parents?" he responded. "I made a unilateral decision that you were intimately involved with, and you made one that intimately involved me. If what I did was wrong, what about what you did?"

"I took the only option left open to me," Elissia muttered, now even more uncomfortable. "You had a choice about what you did, but I didn't."

"Of course you had a choice," he disagreed at once. "You had the choice of talking to me, but you decided not to bother because in your opinion it would never have done any good. When I made my last mistake, you made sure I would be punished for it and I was. In order to save my neck I had to accept the humiliation of letting people think you'd humbled me. You do remember telling me that it would happen?"

Yes, and you were absolutely right."

Elissia discovered a sudden interest in the hands that twisted in her lap, not about to contribute what Sissile had said. The man had probably been humiliated even more than he knew, but...

"All of which brings us back to the subject of what you missed in my offered bargain," he said, his voice still completely calm and controlled. "At the same time I realized I had to make sure I never dealt with you in anger again, I also realized that I couldn't punish you with the intention of making you do or not do something. A reasonable punishment is one that's given for something wrong that was done, and once it's given that should be the end of the matter. You have my word that I'll never give you the wrong kind of punishment again, but if you do something that calls for punishment you have to know better than to expect it won't be given. Stand up now."

Elissia suddenly realized that he'd straightened back to his full height and his hand now reached for her arm. She babbled as she tried to keep him from pulling her out of the chair, hating the idea of what he was going to do, but rational words of protest refused to come to her. Maybe she had dismissed him and his feelings just the way he'd done with her, and maybe she had punished him with humiliation that most men found more painful than a physical wound, but

Much too quickly Elissia found herself over the monster's knees after he'd taken his place on a chair. It wasn't possible to keep her breeches and underdrawers from being taken down, and once her right hand was held firmly out of the way it began. The first smack wasn't all that bad, and the second was the same, but an unwelcome revelation came with the third and fourth whacks. For some reason it felt as though that bead had been put in her bottom again, and as her seat began to ache her body also began to flare with need.

Elissia squawked and began to think seriously about escaping, but that proved to be just as impossible as ever. The monster's hand kept smacking her bottom as if he meant to keep on with the spanking forever, and that's the way the episode ended up feeling: as if he would continue on forever. Crying and howling did nothing to stop her bottom from being turned into one large aching, throbbing, stinging mass, and still he kept at it. His hand was being driven by hurt rather than by anger, and by the time it was over Elissia knew she would definitely have preferred the anger.

By the time Elissia realized that she wasn't being spanked any longer, her boots, breeches, and underdrawers had already been pulled off. She was put back on her feet before her tunic was taken, and then she was led by one hand to the bed. She couldn't keep from hopping and squirming even as she gingerly rubbed at her blazing bottom, and then she was in the bed with the monster crouched between her hastily raised knees. He entered her as if it had been months since they'd last been together, making her yelp with the enthusiasm of his motion, but then another thought drove away even the sharp awareness of an aching bottom.

She no longer had to hide the fact that she loved this man with every fiber of her being! For the first time she was free to show exactly how she felt, and that was a freedom beyond compare. If somehow he did manage to keep his promise... If somehow he did...

Derand walked into the dining room the next morning with a smile on his face for the whole world. The night before he'd excused Seea's absence at dinner by saying she'd been badly shaken up by coming so close to being

killed, and everyone had understood and accepted the excuse. Not that they'd been in any condition to question what was said to them. They'd been in shock over the revelation about Lovar and Sissile, how the man had been a virtual slave to a woman who'd wanted control of the entire Federation. Derand was now considered a savior of their necks as well as his own, and when word came that Lovar's army had been stopped dead when Lovar's head was thrown to the ground in front of them, everyone breathed a little more easily.

"Derand, where's Elissia?" Gardal asked as he came up, his expression concerned. "She's not still upset, is she?"

"No, she'll be along in a few minutes," Derand answered, giving his friend a clap on the shoulder. "She decided to soak in her bath for a bit, and there was no reason not to let her indulge herself. We'll be going back to the games today, and we'll have to keep moving to see everything we want to. Tomorrow the meadow will be crowded and choked with everyone in the city."

"What about your primary plan?" Gardal asked after a bit of a pause. "Are you and my sister getting along any better now? You seem a lot happier than you were, so I was wondering if we'll have a ceremony to attend after all."

"Yes, we're getting along better, but no, there won't be a ceremony," Derand answered, losing some of his happiness. "Seea refuses to marry me voluntarily until she sees if I can keep the promises I made her. I'd love to think she was being unreasonable, but I can't really blame her. She admitted how afraid she was that something would go wrong again, so I'm forced to respect her honesty. If I want to keep her I have to earn her trust - and this time I will."

"If there's anything I can do to help, just let me know," Gardal said as he returned the shoulder clap he'd been given. "Meanwhile, let's get some tea while we wait for the late sleepers to join us."

Derand considered that a very good idea, so he and Gardal went over and let the servants pour them cups of tea. His remaining guests arrived while he was taking the first sip, and that included Monil and Kaylea. The blond woman seemed to feel better after admitting what she'd done, and in an odd way seemed satisfied that she would not be getting away with it. Monil had given Derand his word that Kaylea would be punished for at least a week once they got home, and Derand had agreed not to pursue the matter himself. When he'd told Seea about the promise Seea had also agreed, and just as he thought about her, Seea appeared. But she wore a really strange expression, and Derand was instantly concerned.

"Is everything all right?" he asked as soon as she came up to him. "You look ... odd."

"I feel odd," she answered, putting a hand on her brother's arm in greeting. "I was asked a question by one of my girls this morning, the subject being something I hadn't thought about in quite some time. When I was able to answer the question that had been put, the world had become ... different."

"I don't understand anything you're saying," Derand protested, sudden fear twisting his insides. "This difference doesn't have anything to do with you and me, does it?"

"I'm afraid it does," she answered, her expression now rueful. "But since it's all your fault you can't very well complain."

"Complain about what?" Derand demanded, now even more upset. "What's supposed to be my fault? Seea, tell me -!"

"Let me tell you instead what question I was asked and how I answered," she responded, for some reason moving closer to him. "I was asked when my monthly courses were due, and the answer turned out to be about two weeks ago. Do you understand now why I said it was all your fault?"

Derand stood there staring down at his love, his mouth open and his brain frozen in shock even as she smiled up at him. What she'd just said... It meant... It had to mean...

"I'm going to be a father," he breathed, and then wild elation turned his voice into a shout. "I'm going to be a father! Do you all hear that? I'm going to be a father!"

And then he tossed away the teacup he'd been holding and lifted his woman into his arms so that he could dance around with her while everyone exclaimed in surprise or called out words of congratulation. After breakfast he'd meant to announce that there wouldn't be a celebration after all, but this marvelous news changed everything. There would be a celebration, but not as big a one as he would hold nine months from now...

THE END