



Rebel

By

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Chapter One

Adair Cantlen sat on the floor of the dim cell, the torch light coming through the barred door the only thing keeping complete darkness away. Not that she particularly cared. She sat with her back against the stone wall, her tights-covered legs bent at the knee, her wrists resting on those knees. It had been at least an hour since she'd been thrown into the cell, but Adair didn't care about that either. One place in that house was as good or as bad as another, and as long as she had to be here it didn't much matter where she was kept.

As had become usual over the years, she was being ignored. Young girls were supposed to be demure and ladylike at all times, she'd been told, not ridicule their lessons in proper behavior. When making fun of the nonsense did no good, she'd tried to complain to her father, the duke. Duke Elden had smiled and patted her on the head, hearing not a single word she said, so she'd also stopped trying to complain.

Instead she'd made trouble every chance she had, but even that didn't get anyone's attention. Most of the time her efforts were ignored, and when she'd done something that couldn't be ignored her father took a whole minute or so to inform her that decent young ladies didn't act in that particular way.

She'd finally gotten sick and tired of being the family ghost - and intended pawn - and had walked out with the intention of never coming back, but even that wasn't acceptable. It took less than three days for her father's guardsmen to track her down, and now she was right back where she'd started. Alone and ignored ...

The entire area of cells had been very quiet since the guards had closed the barred door and left, but suddenly the sound of footsteps came to destroy the silence. More than one set of footsteps, so either they were going to try to feed her, or ...

"Are you ready to be reasonable yet, or do you have to be left in here a bit longer?" her father's voice came after his arrival at the door cut down on the amount of light coming through the bars. "I'm really angry with you, Adair, and I have no patience left for any more of your nonsense."

"It wasn't my choice to come back here, Father," Adair pointed out without turning her head to look at him. "If you hadn't sent your men after me you'd never have had to put up with my ... nonsense again."

Duke Elden Cantlen made a sound of annoyance.

"If I hadn't sent my men after you, you'd probably be dead or worse by now," he stated, then turned to whoever had come to the cell with him. "Get her out of there and bring her to my study. I'm going to settle this problem once and for all."

"Yes, Your Grace," came before the shadow of Adair's father moved away. "Right away, Your Grace."

From the hoarse scratchiness of the voice, Adair knew that it was Zinder who'd spoken. Zinder was more of a general bodyguard than a guardsman, someone who wasn't under anyone's orders but the duke's. The man was no youngster, but there were very few younger men who would even consider going up against him. Lean and tough and deadly, Zinder was more a member of the family than Adair.

"Better get to your feet, girl," Zinder's voice came again after the sound of the door being unlocked. "You know I'll drag you if you force me to it."

"Of course you will," Adair answered, making sure not to look at him as she stood up. "You dragged me back to this place, didn't you?"

"Another girl in your boots would consider it being saved," Zinder said, taking her arm as soon as Adair got within reach. "On the other hand, another girl in your boots would never have left to begin with. Do you have to grab every chance coming past to show how different you think you are?"

Adair knew that the question was meant to put her on the defensive, so she simply ignored it along with the man who'd asked it. Zinder waited no more than seconds before he made the same sound of annoyance Adair's father had, and his hand tightened on her arm.

"I'm glad to say the duke wasn't joking about being out of patience with you," Zinder informed her, the hand on her arm already hurrying her along. "If you were mine it would have happened a lot sooner, but the duke makes a more gentle parent than I would. Used to make. You finally put him in a position where he can't afford to be gentle anymore, and that will turn out for the best. For both of you."

The satisfaction in Zinder's voice was too obvious to be missed, but Adair still didn't say anything. Arguing with the man would have been a waste of time, especially with her father waiting. Adair's discussion with him would certainly contain all the arguing anyone could possibly want.

It was the small study Zinder dragged her to, a cozy little room where her father worked when he didn't want to be bothered by the presence of others. The walls were all covered with bookshelves, the desk was on the small side, and there was only a single chair in front of that desk. Adair's father now sat behind the desk with a cup of tea in front of him, and when Zinder pushed her into the room and closed the door behind her, her father looked at her the way he sometimes looked at those who worked for him.

"I want to know right now what idiotic thoughts were in that black-haired head of yours when you ran away," he said, his light gaze locked to her face. "Did you think I was joking when I said a royal command was involved? When the king issues commands, a duke obeys just like everyone else."

"Since I'm not a duke, it wasn't something I had to worry about," Adair pointed out, making no effort to sit in the chair in front of his desk. "And I didn't run away, I simply left the way I'd been planning to do for quite some time. You had no right to drag me back here, and I demand to be released to go my own way again."

"Go your own way," he echoed, shaking his head as he leaned back. "You have no more than a limited amount of gold and silver, took two changes of clothes, and one horse. If you were running away with a man I could at least understand the effort, but you went alone. Where did you intend to go, and what did you expect to be able to do to support yourself when you got there? Do you have any idea?"

"Where I go and what I do is mine to decide," Adair stated, still refusing to be put on the defensive. "I certainly don't fit in here, something that was pointed out to me more than once during my life. If I want to go looking for a place where I do fit in you have no right to stop me."

“There is no such place,” her father countered, the words slow and deliberate to match his stare. “Women are required to be and do certain things in this life, and you’ve refused to be and do any of them. All you’ll find elsewhere is the same things you claim to dislike here, and when that happens, then what? Will you run away again, starve because you’ve run out of gold and silver and don’t know how to earn any more, or simply end up taken to please some lout of an outlaw? What will you do, Adair?”

Letting the demanding questions simply slide past wasn’t easy for Adair, but somehow she managed it. She’d already asked herself the same exact questions, but the answers she’d come up with weren’t something she cared to share with her father.

“I can’t ignore a royal command, Adair, and neither can you,” her father said after taking a deep breath. He’d used her silence to calm himself, just the way he usually did. “Every duke in this kingdom has been commanded to send a daughter of marriageable age to the palace, and you’re the only daughter I have. If I sent one of your brothers instead, I think the king and his sons would notice.”

“Since I don’t ever intend to marry, what would be the point in my going?” Adair put, tired of waiting for the threats to start. “Both you and the king can issue commands until you’re blue in the face, and that still won’t mean I have to agree. You can have me executed, but you can’t force me to agree.”

“Whether or not you mean to marry has nothing to do with the matter,” her father returned, still much too far from losing his temper. “There are six dukes in this realm, and not all of them are as content with their place in life as I am. Some of them want a more active say in the ruling of the kingdom, and the way they hope to get that say is by having one of their daughters married to one of the king’s three sons. Since we don’t yet know which of the three princes will be named heir, those discontented dukes are willing to gamble that the prince who marries their daughter will ultimately rule the kingdom.”

“But the king refused to simply order his sons to marry,” Adair added, letting her tone show how bored she was with hearing something she already knew. “He also refused to allow just the dukes who want more power to send daughters. He ordered all the dukes to send daughters, and now the princes get to choose who they’ll marry. It would have been more interesting, not to mention more fair, if the daughters got to choose.”

“But that’s not the way the world works,” her father pointed out - again. “In this world men get to choose their brides, but that’s not the grand freedom for all men that you seem to consider it. The princes will have only six women to choose among, and they will have to marry one of the six. The three women not chosen will simply be sent home again, to resume their lives where those lives were interrupted.”

“Which means it would be foolish for me to waste time going there,” Adair pointed out. “I haven’t seen the king’s sons much since we were all children, but they don’t like me any more than I like them. Since it’s already established that I won’t be chosen, why don’t I just - “

“Adair, close your mouth and listen to me,” her father interrupted. “I’ll admit I gave you your own way much too often while you were growing up, but this is one time you can’t have your own way. If I had another daughter I’d send her instead, but I don’t have another daughter so you’re the one who has to go. And if you’re so convinced you won’t be chosen, what have you got to lose?”

“Time and my sanity,” Adair stated. “I hate all the rigmarole involved with royalty and nobility, and I see no reason for subjecting myself to any more of it.”

“Just because you don’t see a reason doesn’t mean there isn’t one,” her father countered, a faint gleam now in his eyes. “If you stop this nonsense of trying to run away and start to behave yourself, I’m prepared to offer an ... incentive. Since you expect to go back to searching for what you think you’ll find, won’t the search go easier with lots of gold in your pouch? I’m even willing to include a couple of guardsmen in the deal, men who will take orders from no one but you. I will, however, first require the promise that if you don’t find what you think you will, you’ll turn around and come straight back home. So what do you say?”

Adair was too surprised to say anything for a moment. She hadn’t been able to put together all that much gold

and silver before leaving, but hadn't let herself wonder just how long the amount would last. She'd had no choice about leaving right away, so she'd decided that the amount would have to be enough. And traveling all alone was taking a risk...

"Until right this minute I never thought much of politics and what people are willing to do to play the game," Adair finally said with a shake of her own head. "I want the gold, but I'll have to think about whether or not to accept the guardsmen. Did you want me to leave for the palace right now?"

"No, you'll be leaving in the morning, properly dressed and riding in a coach," her father answered, a hint of satisfaction in his expression, then the expression changed. "But if you're accepting my bribe, there will be something else required of you. I'm tired of looking like a doormat where my daughter is concerned, so you'll also have to be punished for running away. And don't tell me again that you weren't running away. That's what your actions looked like to everyone, and in this instance it's appearance that counts."

"What if I decide not to let myself be punished?" Adair countered, disliking this little extra her father had thrown in. "I didn't do anything to deserve being punished for, so -"

"Didn't do anything?" her father echoed, and now a touch of outrage colored his words and hardened his stare. "You call disappearing without a word nothing? Do you have any idea how I worried until you were found and brought back safe and sound? No, of course you don't have any idea, not when you've never spent five minutes thinking about anyone but yourself."

He seemed to want to say more on that subject, but the duke was a man who prided himself on his self control. He swallowed his anger, then took a deep breath.

"Whether or not you accept my offer, you'll still be punished," he said then, not the least doubt to be seen in his eyes or expression. "For this you don't have the option of refusal, and I won't even listen to argument. Zinder will take you to the new apartment I've had prepared for you, and you'd better know there will be guards outside your door. I'll see you in the morning before you leave."

At one time Adair might have been tempted to say something else, but these days she really did hate to waste her breath. Zinder opened the door when his name was shouted, and then he had her arm again and was taking her someplace else.

The someplace else turned out to be one of the inner apartments of the house, large, beautifully furnished rooms that had not even a single window. Two guardsmen already stood outside the door, and Zinder opened that door and pushed her inside. When he closed the door again she was alone, in a more comfortable cell than the earlier one but still a cell. "The stone and bars were more honest," Adair stated, fairly certain that Zinder was listening at the door, then she went and sat down in a chair.

There was nothing else to do in that place, there was never anything else to do...

Which meant it was only a minute or two before Adair stopped being able to avoid thinking about what her father had said. It was his opinion that Adair thought about no one but herself, and to a certain extent that was true. With no one else thinking about her, what choice had she been left with? But the part about his being worried about her...

That part almost made Adair want to cry, but not for the obvious reason. She hadn't expected her father to worry because she hadn't expected him to notice she was gone, and that was the part which brought her close to tears. The only reason her father had noticed was because of the king's command, otherwise he probably would have simply enjoyed the peace and quiet her being gone would have produced.

So there was only one thing she could do now, and that was to make absolutely certain no one decided to choose her as one of the brides. She'd agreed to go through with the idiocy everyone was demanding, but the way she went through with it was still no one's choice but hers. When she got back she would take her father's gold but not his guardsmen, and then she would never have to see this prison of a house again...

* * *

Mayne Toram, prince of his father's house, sipped tea in the sitting room of the apartment Duke Elden had given him. When word had been sent to the king that there might be a delay in getting Duke Elden's daughter sent to the palace, Mayne's father had asked him to find out what the problem was. Since the duke's girl was meant to be one of the ones chosen by him and his brothers, Mayne had known the matter was serious.

And when he'd arrived, Mayne was very glad no details had been sent to his father about the problem. King Rodick wasn't a man who accepted opposition at all gracefully, most especially not from a slip of a girl with a mind of her own. If Mayne's father had found out that Adair had run away... To say the roaring would have deafened everyone in hearing would be an understatement.

Because Adair Cantlen was very much a part of the plan the king had come up with to teach his overstepping dukes a lesson. Only two of the dukes were trying to push themselves forward and grab for more power, which left four dukes unquestionably loyal to their king. One of those four had proven to be very much a nonentity when he wasn't leading fighters on a battlefield, but the remaining three were intelligent, capable supporters King Rodick knew he could count on.

So the king had commanded all his dukes to send their daughters, but privately had arranged that his sons would marry the three daughters of his other loyal supporters. The two errant dukes would find their daughters out in the cold, and themselves along with the girls. If the two then decided to try an uprising, they would find themselves opposed by four other duchies as well as the king's own troops.

And my father probably means to goad those two into trying to rebel, Mayne thought with amusement. After the dust settles down the rebels will be gone, and my father will have large estates to give the two of his sons who aren't chosen as his heir. A neat solution where one problem's answer also solves another problem.

But Duke Elden's girl had almost messed things up by running away. If it had become necessary Duke Rayl's daughter could have been substituted for Adair, but then there would have been no reinforcement of the bond between Duke Elden and his king. Part of that reinforcement was to be six months worth of freedom from having to pay taxes to the crown, something that would allow Elden and the other dukes the necessary gold to back their king with troops. As far as Duke Rayl went, the man enjoyed fighting so much he would be willing to do the paying himself in order to indulge his greatest passion.

Also, Mayne had to admit that he would have been disappointed if the substitution had had to be made. Adair Cantlen had grown up to be a beautiful woman with her black hair and bright black eyes, but there had always been something more to attract Mayne to her. They hadn't really gotten along as children, but the older Mayne got the more he began to value Adair's differences. All the other girls and women around him were exactly the same, only their faces making it possible to tell them apart.

But to go so far as to run away... Mayne felt the urge to shake his head at such foolishness, that and put the girl over his knee to teach her better.

Riding off all alone could have gotten her captured or killed, and just the fact that the gods kept a special eye on fools had most likely been the only thing that saved her...

A polite knock came at his sitting room door, and when Mayne called out permission to enter it was Duke Elden himself who walked in.

"How is she?" Mayne asked as the duke bowed to him. "Was she hurt in any way?" "Apparently the gods protected her," Duke Elden answered sourly as he walked to the sideboard to pour himself a cup of tea. "Other than the fact that she's in need of a bath, she's completely unchanged. Unfortunately. But she's agreed to go to the palace in the morning."

"How did you manage that?" Mayne asked, feeling how high his brows had risen. "If you're actually a mage, my father will be doubly delighted."

“Using magic is unnecessary when you know how to use words,” Duke Elden answered, his tone still sour as he turned with his cup of tea and carried it to a chair near Mayne’s. “She knows nothing of the additional arrangements His Majesty has made, so she believes she has no chance at all of being chosen as a bride. I used that belief to tell her that if she cooperated and went to the palace, when she was rejected and sent back to me I’d finance her ... trip away from home.”

“And you’re unhappy about having lied to her,” Mayne observed, having no trouble at all in seeing the truth. “But you’re acting for her own good, after all, and that has to count for something.”

“I have no idea if anything I do counts in any way at all,” Duke Elden said with a sigh after sipping at his tea.

“Maybe if her mother had lived things would have gone better with Adair. I’ve never had any idea what to

say to her or do with her, so most of the time I just pretended she was like every other girl child and ignored what didn’t fit into that matrix. I was a coward, I admit it, but that won’t be true this time.”

“You seem to have made some sort of decision,” Mayne commented, trying his best not to intrude too badly. “My first urge is to mind my own business, but since Adair will be the wife of either me or one of my brothers as soon as we sign the contracts I’m afraid that anything having to do with her is my business. Can you tell me what your decision involves while ignoring my nosiness?”

“As you pointed out, Your Highness, you’re not just being nosy,” Duke Elden replied with a very faint smile.

“And it might even be best if my daughter becomes your wife before she leaves here, since it makes no sense to hold off with signing the contracts. The marriage ceremony itself is a mere formality and a custom that doesn’t even have to be observed, so my daughter won’t ever be coming back to this house... Damn, I think I’ve made a liar of myself.”

The duke had put his cup aside to rub his eyes with both hands, a sign of distress Mayne had never seen the man display before. The display kept Mayne from commenting about the duke’s suggestion, something he’d been about to do.

“It’s just come to me that I never really knew my daughter and now I never will,” Duke Elden said, the words almost muffled as he continued to cover his eyes. “I know that what I’m doing is the best thing for her, but I also know that she won’t agree. I aged years until I got word that my men had found her unharmed and were bringing her back, and when I spoke to her a short while ago I told her she’d be punished for the worry she caused. But how can I even try to think of a fitting punishment when that’s the last I’ll ever have to do with her?”

“You aren’t sending her off to be killed, man, just married,” Mayne pointed out, trying to lighten the older man’s mood. “She may yell and scream and stamp her feet, but she will survive becoming a wife a lot more easily than running off on her own.”

“Yes, I know, but I’d always expected to send her away already married,” Duke Elden returned with a sigh. “This way it feels as if she’s just running off again, and I hate the way that makes me feel. If you’re all that set against marrying Adair I can understand your hesitation, but if you’re not...”

“You know, you’re making a very good point,” Mayne said slowly, examining his own feelings as well as taking the duke’s into account. Upsetting one of his father’s loyal supporters for no real reason was not a good idea...

“I’m not at all disturbed at the idea of taking Adair for my wife, so if it makes you easier in your mind for us to sign the contracts now there’s no reason not to do it. And I also think she needs to be punished for what she did, so if you’d like me to I’ll take care of the matter. After all, the girl is my problem now.”

“Is that really the way you want to start your life with her?” Duke Elden asked, finally taking his hands away from his face. “Giving her a punishment she insists she doesn’t deserve?”

“If she were any other female I’d talk to her instead, letting her know that what she did was unacceptable,” Mayne responded without the sigh he felt on the inside. “From what I hear about Adair, though, almost everyone in this house has tried to talk to her at one time or another and she’s paid absolutely no attention to them. It’s going to take more than words to get her attention, and once I have it I’ll find a different way to keep it.”

"You're attracted to her," Duke Elden said as he stared at Mayne. "I had no idea this was anything but a political arrangement for you, but this actually makes matters worse rather than better. Adair told me she has no intention of ever marrying, and hearing that she wasn't even told about it much less given a choice..."

"She's probably just frightened, the way a lot of young girls are," Mayne soothed the duke when the man's words simply trailed off in distress. "She'll settle down once she finds out what marriage is all about, and then we'll be able to get on with our lives. And yes, I am glad I'm the one she'll be married to, and I hope you feel the same way."

"Truthfully, Your Highness, I don't know whether to be delighted or to pity you," Duke Elden admitted, his expression showing he wasn't joking. "I love my daughter dearly, but I have no illusions about what she's like. She said herself that she never fit in here, and I seriously doubt if her being at court will be any different. If I may ask, what do you intend to do to her as punishment?"

"For running off and risking her life, I'm going to put her over my knee and spank her bottom hard every night for a week," Mayne answered, making no effort whatsoever to hide his intentions. "That should take her through the week of 'getting to know one another' my father has decreed for the ladies and my brothers and myself, and by then she'll have learned to listen when I speak. When I tell her she's come to mean something special to me, in no way a lie, she ought to be ready to settle down."

Duke Elden parted his lips as if about to say something, then a headshake indicated that he'd changed his mind.

"Really, Duke Elden, everything will work out just fine," Mayne assured the older man with a smile. "Why don't we see about signing those contracts now, and later you can tell your people that there's nothing improper going on when I visit Adair. You said you were keeping her guarded, so there's no reason not to start her punishment tonight."

"You know, Your Highness, it's come to me that I might be a lot luckier than I realized," Duke Elden said with a sigh behind the words. "If the choice about any of this was mine to make, I'd probably either go crazy trying to decide which way to go or settle on the wrong option. But none of this is my choice, so I don't have to worry about cowardice when I rejoice. Let's go to my study and take care of the contracts there."

Mayne felt the urge to stare at the other man, but instead simply stood up and followed him out of the room. As soon as the marriage contracts were signed Adair would be his problem for certain, but that was nothing to worry about. After all, how much trouble could one small girl possibly be...?

Chapter Two

Adair didn't spend much time at all being bored. Five minutes after she was put into the new apartment she was at the door, demanding the books from her own apartment. Zinder was still out in the hall, and he didn't like the idea.

"A girl in your position has no right to demand anything," the man stated, giving her the narrow-eyed look that usually made the men around him nervous. "If you hadn't gone traipsing off you'd still be in your own apartment with everything you need and want, but instead you -"

"What I did or didn't do is none of your business, Zinder," Adair interrupted, having no trouble meeting the man's gaze. "What I will do is more to the point, and that will definitely be your business. If I don't have something to read to occupy my time, I'll have to find a different activity to entertain me until I leave. If I were you I'd want me to read, but don't let me influence your choice. You're the one in charge, after all..."

Zinder's jaw tightened and his head came up when Adair just let her words trail off, knowing a threat when he heard it. Or a promise, which was more to the point. Adair had never taken well to being pushed around, and right now there was no reason to put up with that kind of nonsense. A moment later Zinder nodded curtly, then stomped off to get the books Adair wanted.

It wasn't long before the books were brought, but not by Zinder. A couple of servants came in with what seemed

like half of Adair's library, and a third servant brought clothing and other assorted items from her bedchamber. The books were put on the shelves in the sitting room, and the rest was taken into her new bedchamber. The three servants hurried out of the apartment then, not one of them pausing to even glance at Adair. From

time to time every servant in the house had shown how much they disapproved of Adair's doings, which meant Adair had ignored them along with everyone else.

Just before the three servants left a fourth servant brought a tea service, so once she was alone again Adair chose a book, got a cup of tea, then sat down to read. She wasn't really in the mood to read, not after having been free for two days, but her capture would end in the morning when she left for the palace. After that she would have her plans to be rejected as a bride to occupy her, and once she was rejected...

Adair put her book down and leaned her head back, at the same time closing her eyes. She hadn't answered her father about where she meant to go when he'd asked, but not because she'd wanted to be difficult. She didn't know where she would go, at least not specifically. Her first objective was to leave the kingdom, the only place she knew anything about. After that... After that she would have to wait and see what other places were like, and if they were no different from what she'd left behind...

"If everywhere is the same as here, I won't care what happens to me then," she whispered, stating a conclusion she'd come to even before she left. She longed for a place where she fit in as easily as everyone else seemed to in this place, but if there was no place like that then what was the point of continuing to fight? Fighting to protect something you had or to gain something you wanted made sense, but just fighting for the sake of fighting? No, Adair had no interest in wasting her time like that, but first she'd have to see for herself that everywhere else was the same as here.

A number of hours passed in the land of fiction, and then a knock came at Adair's door. Zinder had interrupted her once to say that her father wanted her to bathe and dress before coming down to dinner, and she'd spent only a moment telling Zinder what they all could do with dinner. The way Zinder had slammed the door closed again made Adair believe that she'd be given the same thing for dinner that she'd had for lunch - absolutely nothing - but that idea turned out to be wrong.

Servants came in with dinner on a cart, and after a very brief hesitation Adair went to the table and ate. If she hadn't agreed to go to the palace she would have refused the food no matter how hungry she felt, but now refusal made no sense. So she ate the meal, let the old tea service be replaced with fresh, then waited for the servants to come for the empty dishes. Once the servants were gone again, Adair went to take a bath.

Soaking in the hot water felt really good, but having a bath on a regular basis was one of the things Adair knew she'd have to forget about for a while once she was on the road again. Or at least that had been a necessity when she'd had so little gold, but once she set out again she would be able to stop at inns at night. She still didn't like the idea of going to the palace, but the benefits in agreeing were too many to ignore.

A number of night shifts had been brought to her new bedchamber, so Adair chose one in blue to wear until she went to bed. She usually wore nothing when she slept, another thing her servants had hated, but she wasn't yet ready for bed. A little more reading and a little more tea would hopefully change that state of affairs, both working to quiet the clamor of her thoughts. If the effort didn't work, she'd be up tossing and turning all night...

Adair had only just settled down with her book again when another knock came at the door. She hesitated, trying to decide whether or not to let herself be bothered by whoever was out there, and the door was suddenly opened without her permission.

"Oh, you are in the sitting room," the man said as he just walked in then closed the door behind himself. "When I got no answer to my knock I thought you might have already gone to bed."

"So you just gave yourself permission to come right on in," Adair said, wondering only for a moment why the man looked so familiar before she was able to place him. Brown hair and light gray eyes, a good deal larger than the last time she'd seen him, handsome in a hard kind of way... "But of course you can give yourself that

permission because you're entitled to do anything you please. What an odd coincidence that you're here visiting just now, Prince Mayne."

"Then you remember me," he said with a pleased smile as he walked closer. "I remember you too, Adair, and of course it's no coincidence that I'm here. When he heard you might not be showing up with the other girls my father got worried, so he sent me here to find out what the problem was. Now that the problem is mostly taken care of, I'll be joining you on the trip to the palace in the morning."

"Mostly taken care of," Adair echoed, picking up on the odd phrasing at once. "Since I've agreed to go along with this time-wasting nonsense, what do you consider not having been taken care of? And what makes it any of your business to begin with?"

"What makes it my business is the fact that I'm one of the three men who will be choosing a bride," he answered, his smile having disappeared. "Since you're one of the prospective brides, I'm sure you can see the connection. And the part of the problem that hasn't been taken care of concerns your behavior and the fright you gave your father. If you don't know what can happen to a girl out all alone in the world, the rest of us do."

"If you're disturbed about how ... 'frightened' my father became, you can blame your own father for that rather than me," Adair said, already tired of the direction the conversation was taking. "If not for the king's command about daughters being sent to the palace, my father never would have noticed that I was gone. And now, if you don't mind, I'd -"

"Of course he would have noticed!" Mayne insisted at once, his expression almost scandalized. "You've obviously missed the fact that your father loves you very much, otherwise he never would have put up with your antics. Any other man in his place would have given you what you were asking for, but his love for you made him be patient instead. And rather than thank him and return his love, all you did was make him worry even more."

"If I'm such an ingrate and a total loss as a human being, then it's fairly obvious I'll never be chosen as the wife of a prince," Adair pointed out, not about to argue the great love her father had shown. "With that in mind, you're now in a position to go back to your father without me to tell him the conclusion you've come to. That should save a lot of trouble all the way around, and -"

"No, wait," Mayne interrupted, holding up one hand as he took a deep breath. "If what I said suggested I considered you a - total loss as a human being, you have my most sincere apologies. I don't see you that way at all, Adair, and I never have. You're just confused and unhappy, and in a very real way your father is responsible for that. He should have given you guidance with a firmer hand, but he was too kind-hearted to see to his duty properly. But the scare you gave him has changed all that. You'll be paying for his mistakes as well as your own, but this accounting has waited too long for you to have any grounds for complaint."

"What are you talking about?" Adair demanded, annoyed that Mayne refused to save her a useless trip to his father's palace. "What has accounting got to do with anything?"

"Adair, listen to me," Mayne said, moving even closer to bend and take one of her hands, his expression a mix of concern and ... something else Adair couldn't quite put a name to. But the look in his gray eyes was unwavering, and that look was neither soft nor regretful.

"You've spent years trying your best to shock people with wild behavior, probably because you considered doing that amusing," Mayne continued. "You made no effort to exercise restraint, and certainly never apologized for creating chaos wherever you went. You should have been punished for doing all that, right on the spot, and because you weren't you incurred a larger debt by doing something even worse. I've agreed to help you start repaying that debt, so let's get to it. We'll be leaving early in the morning."

And with that he pulled her to her feet by the hand he held, ignoring the way her book tumbled out of her lap to land on the floor. Once Adair was on her feet his other hand closed around her arm, and then he was pulling her with him toward her bedchamber.

"Let go of me, you fool," Adair growled, finding it impossible to break his hold or keep from being taken with

him. "You weren't even here, so how do you know what I did and for what reason? Let go of me and get out of here right this minute."

"Oh, I'll be leaving as soon as we're through," the fool said, making no effort to do as she'd asked. Instead he walked her into the bedchamber, then closed the door behind the two of them. "We'll want privacy for this, although it would be more fair if the people who were forced to witness your escapades were also allowed to see you being punished for those actions. But Duke Elden was hurt most by you, and he insists that your punishment be kept private. Kind of generous for a man who cares nothing about you..."

The single lamp burning in the room made the bedchamber look snug and dimly romantic, but Mayne proved that romance was the last thing on his mind. After dragging Adair to a chair he sat down, then pulled her face down across his lap.

"You had no right to run away like a spoiled little girl who hadn't been given her own way," the man said as Adair struggled uselessly to free herself from his grip. "Your father agonized over your safety until he got word that you were safe, and it's that agony you'll pay for tonight and every night for the next week. After that we'll see if you've gotten the message about changing your ways. If you haven't, we'll add another week of the same to get you completely caught up on every punishment you weren't given but should have."

And with that he pulled up the skirt of Adair's night shift, baring the lower part of her to his sight. Adair swallowed a snarl and fought even harder, but both of her wrists had been captured in one large hand. That same hand rested in the middle of her back, holding her in place in spite of the way she kicked and squirmed. Escape was absolutely impossible, and she didn't need the first smack on her bare behind to tell her what was about to happen.

And happen it did. The first hard smack had hurt, but the sting was nothing compared to what Adair felt from the following smacks. The miserable beast's hand felt like it was made of wood, and every time it struck her bottom it added to the growing ache. For some outrageous reason he seemed to think he had a right to spank her, but he didn't!

The spanking went on much longer than Adair had imagined it would. She jumped and twisted every time that hand came down on her aching behind, the added pain making her want to scream or howl or have hysterics. Everything inside her demanded that she acknowledge the punishment in some way, but one tiny part of her central being refused to let that happen.

The burning ache in her bottom grew higher and higher, every smack of that wooden hand adding to what it had already given her, and finally Adair lost a tiny part of the control that had kept her silent. A small sound escaped her throat, one that shamed her even more than what the beast was doing, and all she could do was pray that he hadn't heard the sound.

And it seemed like he hadn't heard when the spanking continued, and then, about a year or so later, the torture was finally ended. After what proved to be a last, really hard smack, her wrists were released and she was lifted off the beast's lap.

"That should do it for now," the beast said as he stood up, his voice quiet as he put one hand on Adair's shoulder. "You can go to bed now, but first there's something I want to say. Your father isn't the only one who cares about you, who cares whether you live or die. If you'd died I never would have gotten to see you again, to learn what a beautiful woman you've grown up to be. I'll - see you in the morning."

And then he was gone, striding to the bedchamber door and then out before closing the door behind himself. Adair could barely stand up and walking was even worse, but walking was the only way to get to the bed. When she finally reached the bed she collapsed onto it, and only then did she let the tears come. That beast had said he cared about her; of course he did, just the way everyone else in her life cared. Exactly the same way...

* * *

For some reason Mayne had trouble sleeping, so he took an early breakfast in his apartment, let the servants pack

his few belongings, and then he was ready to leave. He got down to the mansion's side entrance in time to see the coach pull up, and then he watched as three trunks worth of Adair's possessions were loaded. While that was being done, Mayne's escort, led by Danil Frayne, showed up, Mayne's own horse saddled and ready for him.

"Well, we're ready to go," Danil said in his deep voice, the red-haired man even bigger than Mayne. "How long do you think we'll have to wait until the lady shows up?"

"Not long, I hope," Mayne replied, a flash of guilt surprising him. He hadn't intended to spank Adair quite that hard last night, not when she would have to spend more than half the day today in a coach, but the spanking had - kind of - gotten away from him. The fact that she remained silent made him believe he wasn't getting through to her, and that in turn had made him try harder and harder and

"I was surprised to see you standing alone, my prince," Danil went on, happily noticing nothing of Mayne's inner turmoil. "I caught a glimpse of the duke when we were leaving the servants' quarters we were given. He was all dressed and striding along giving orders of some kind to two secretaries, so I expected to see him here with you. Did he show up and then have to leave again?"

"No, I haven't seen a sign of him," Mayne said, now feeling the frown he wore. "He must be involved in something important that's delayed him, but I'm sure he'll show up in a minute or two. After all, he'll want to say goodbye to his daughter."

Danil made a sound of agreement, and then they had nothing to do but stand and wait. It was still rather early, but just a few minutes later a servant came up with a carry-bag that he put inside the coach rather than

with the rest of the luggage. Mayne thought he knew what was in the bag, so he stopped the servant once the man had completed his chore.

"Does that bag hold Lady Adair's books?" Mayne asked, and when the servant nodded Mayne added his own nod. "That has to mean she's up and about, and hopefully almost ready to leave. She isn't lingering over her breakfast, I hope?"

"The lady ... refused breakfast," the servant admitted hesitantly, as if owning up to some sort of crime. "She wouldn't even take fresh tea, just drank a cup of the cold tea from yesterday. None of the others cared, but I - She's all dressed, Your Highness, and ought to be down in a minute or two."

And then the servant hurried back into the house, a disturbance of some kind still in his eyes. For the briefest moment Mayne thought the man might be in love with Adair, but then the truth pushed its way through. The man disliked the way the other servants thought of and treated Adair, and rather than love her he simply felt sorry for her.

"And here she comes now," Danil said softly, the words recapturing Mayne's wandering thoughts. "That is one beautiful woman, my prince, which makes you and your royal brothers very lucky men."

Danil had no idea that Adair was already Mayne's wife, of course, not when the unmentioned deals weren't supposed to be made public. And looking at Adair as she approached with an escort of house guards, Mayne was delighted all over again that this unmentioned deal had been made.

Adair wore a traveling outfit of red and white, a long red skirt, a very white blouse, and a red jacket to match the skirt. Her shoes were also red, and her beautiful black hair was caught up in the net attached to her small red and white hat. That there was no expression on her lovely face made her seem regal and distant, and suddenly Mayne couldn't wait for their actual wedding night when he'd be able to take her in his arms. He smiled as she approached, eager to tell her how incredible she looked - and she walked right past him as though he'd turned invisible.

She went straight to the coach, ignored the hand up she was given by one of the guards, and settled onto the coach seat without changing expression. Mayne felt as if he'd been kicked hard in the gut, and it took a moment before he noticed that one of the guards had stopped near him and was waiting to be noticed.

“What is it?” Mayne asked, seeing that this guard was dressed differently from the other two.

“The duke asked me to give you his apologies, Your Highness,” the man said, his tone completely uninflected to match the lack of expression on his face. “Something important has come up, so he won’t be here to see you off. He wishes you a pleasant trip, and asks that you give his best to your father the king.”

And not a word for the daughter he’d been so concerned about yesterday, Mayne thought. It’s possible Adair was given her own message earlier, but even if some horrible crisis has come up I can’t see that spending two minutes saying goodbye to someone you never expect to see again would make the crisis any worse.

But Duke Elden had decided against spending those two minutes with his daughter, which made Mayne feel even worse than he had earlier. He’d supposedly punished Adair primarily for causing her father such worry, a father who hadn’t even come to say goodbye to his only daughter. And now Adair must be furious with him, because he hadn’t told her the complete truth about why she was being punished.

Even though he had almost told her. When he’d heard that one sound from her last night, a sound she must have hated to have forced out of her, he’d finally woken up to the fact that the spanking had gone on much longer than it should have. He’d continued on for another half minute, pretending he hadn’t heard what he certainly had, and then he’d had to force himself not to take her in his arms to offer comfort. He’d told her he cared, for the gods’ sake, when what he really meant was -

“Thank you for passing on the duke’s message,” Mayne finally told the waiting guardsman, keeping his tone as uninflected as the man’s had been. “We’ll be leaving now.”

And with that he led Danil out of the house and to the horses, ignoring the flash of disturbance he’d seen in the odd guardsman’s eyes before turning away. Duke Elden would almost certainly be expecting a return message, but that was too bad about him. If he’d bothered to show up he would have been able to handle the matter himself.

Just a few minutes brought them to the road leading to the city and his father’s palace, and Mayne continued to ride just behind the coach. Half his escort had been sent to lead the way, but Danil himself stayed beside Mayne. The big redhead seemed to know that something was bothering Mayne, but since his prince didn’t mention what that something was, Danil refrained from asking questions. It was one of the things Mayne liked best about Danil...

No more than an hour could have gone by before Mayne discovered that he just had to talk to Adair. One of the things he wanted to know was whether or not Duke Elden had spoken to Adair in her apartment before she left, and if he hadn’t... Well, that would have to wait for another time.

Right now he wanted to make sure that Adair was all right, but once he’d urged his horse to a place where he could look into the coach, Mayne found that Adair had fallen asleep. She lay on her side on the coach seat, her eyes closed, one hand hanging above a book on the coach floor. She was obviously making up for however much sleep she’d missed last night waiting for the ache to ease up...

To say Mayne felt wretched was an understatement, and once he’d returned to his place behind the coach he descended into brooding. He’d always hated the idea of being used, but he couldn’t escape the idea that Duke Elden had used him in some way. Exactly what that way was Mayne couldn’t say, but the feeling refused to go away.

When noon arrived, Mayne roused himself enough to realize that they weren’t far from a really good inn. Since they still had a few hours before the trip would be over, stopping at the inn for lunch should give Adair a break from being cooped up in the coach. He told Danil to get the men headed for the inn, and Danil nodded before riding to the head of the column.

Little more than five minutes later the inn came into sight, and Danil led the small procession into the yard. The men of Mayne’s escort got out of the way to allow the coach to stop in front of the inn itself, and by that time a servant with a stepping stool was hurrying outside. After placing the stool the servant opened the coach door, and

a moment later Adair was being helped to the ground. Mayne had already dismounted and given the reins of his horse to a member of his escort, so he was able to follow the servant and Adair into the inn.

“Prince Mayne!” the innkeeper exclaimed with a bow when he hurried over to meet his newly arrived guests. “Your Highness, you honor my house with your presence. Allow me to show you and the lady to a private dining room.”

Mayne nodded and gestured for the innkeeper to lead the way, then followed a short distance behind the man and Adair. Even as he walked, the innkeeper lost no time in asking Adair if there was anything he could get for her. When Adair requested dark tea, Mayne smiled to himself. Not many people liked the strong, hearty flavor of dark tea, but Mayne happened to be one of them. So he and his new wife already had something in common...

The private dining room was large and lovely, with terrace doors leading to a walled-in garden. Adair walked to the doors to look out rather than going to one of the padded chairs at the table, and the innkeeper hovered until some of his people came hurrying in with the tea service. While the service was being set up and a cup of tea was poured for the lady, the innkeeper personally took Mayne’s lunch order. The men of his escort would be served their own meal in the common room after they’d seen to their horses, and the inn’s stable boys would take care of the coach horses.

Once the very important matters of tea and lunch were taken care of, Mayne was finally left alone with Adair. She still stood by the terrace doors, sipping tea while she looked out, so Mayne walked over to her.

“If you’ve never stopped at this inn before, you’ll find the food really good,” Mayne offered, the best opening gambit he could think of. “As you’ve already seen, they also provide a very good cup of dark tea.”

Mayne expected Adair to say something, either agreement or disagreement about the tea, doubt about or interest in the quality of the food, maybe even an order not to speak to her. Instead the girl just stood looking out the terrace doors, for all the world as if she were alone in the room.

“If you think you can ignore me from now on, it breaks my heart to tell you that that just won’t be possible,” Mayne found himself saying, annoyance producing the words. “The reason you’re going to my father’s palace in the first place is to get to know my brothers and me, and you can’t get to know someone if you pretend they aren’t anywhere near you.”

“The reason I’m going to your father’s palace is because I made a deal with my own father,” the girl said after a very short hesitation, still making no effort to look at him. “Nothing in that deal said I had to be friendly or even particularly pleasant, just that I had to go. If you want someone to get to know you, look elsewhere. I already know everything about you I care to.”

And with that she turned away from the terrace doors and walked to the tea service to refill her cup. Mayne followed her with his gaze, distantly wondering if any part of him could be suffering from frostbite. Talk about your cold shoulder...

“Listen to me, Adair,” Mayne finally said after a moment, firmly refusing to sigh. “I’ll admit we got off on the wrong foot, but that doesn’t mean we can’t still be friends. I don’t know nearly as much about you as I’d like to, and it’s come to me that I may know just as little about your relationship with your father. What did he say when he came to your apartment this morning to tell you goodbye?”

By that time Adair had refilled her teacup, so Mayne had no trouble seeing the small, bitter smile curving her lips before she drank. The smile suggested that her father hadn’t come to her apartment to say goodbye, something Mayne had already suspected.

But nothing in the way of words or even a glance in his direction followed the smile, showing that Mayne had been turned invisible again. When the food came Adair ignored it as well, and Mayne had no choice but to do some ignoring of his own. If he’d tried to insist that Adair eat something he would have just started another fight, and that was almost the last thing he wanted to do.

The very last thing he wanted was to continue being invisible, but at the moment Mayne had no idea how to change that state of affairs. He had the rest of the ride to his father's palace to think about the problem and come up with a plan of action, which he certainly would do. And he would, he promised himself as he stared at a very straight back in a red jacket, he would!

Chapter Three

Mayne waited only long enough to make sure that Adair was being taken care of by the palace servants, and then he went looking for his father. King Rodick was working in the large study with secretaries doing work at their own desks not far from the king's larger desk, but the king's work didn't continue past Mayne's appearance. The king glanced up, saw Mayne, then put down his writing instrument and rose to his feet. Five minutes later they were in a small and private meeting room, with the door firmly closed behind them.

"Is she here?" King Rodick asked as soon as they were alone. "What was the problem?"

"She's here, but I think the problem is more complicated than I believed in the beginning," Mayne said with a shake of his head. "I'll tell you what happened, Father, and then you can tell me what you think."

Mayne joined his father in sitting down, and then he began the story. He left out nothing, and by the time he'd finished, the king was shaking his head.

"Sometimes I hate having this throne," Mayne's father muttered with a sigh. "If I don't keep my eyes wide open all the time, I run the risk of suddenly finding a knife in my back. It does look like Duke Elden has his own agenda, but at the moment I have no idea what his plans might be. Do you?"

"All I can get out of what happened is that Duke Elden wanted to make sure I signed the marriage contract," Mayne said, pulling the contract out of his coat's inner pocket and handing it to his father. "I read the thing carefully before I signed it, of course, and it's nothing but your ordinary, standard marriage contract."

"Which the girl Adair knows nothing about," King Rodick said as he took the papers. "Is she really likely to make much of a fuss when she finds out that she won't be leaving the way she expects to?"

"Fuss' isn't quite the proper word, Father," Mayne answered with a wry smile. "Explosion, raging attack, screaming murder attempts... Any of that would be much more accurate, I'd think."

"You're worried about what a slip of a girl will say and do?" his father asked, faint amusement behind the curve of his lips. "A man who can't handle his own wife also can't aspire to running a kingdom."

"I'm sure you know I'm not worried about being able to handle my wife, Father," Mayne returned, sharing his father's amusement. "But being able to handle her isn't the same as getting along with her, not by a long shot. I have a feeling that Adair is the kind of woman who'll keep me on my toes no matter what I end up doing in this life, even if I end up in the street as a beggar."

"But right now she's not even admitting that you're alive," his father pointed out with even more amusement. "How do you intend to change that stance?"

"I've gotten an idea or two, and if those don't work I just may end up seducing her," Mayne answered with a small laugh. "Getting her into bed might not make her talk to me, but the silence will become a lot more ... pleasant."

"At least for the rest of this week," his father pointed out as he got to his feet. "I expect you to see that there isn't an ... explosion at the end of that time. The other young ladies have been arriving all day, which means they'll all be here by dinnertime. Don't give your Adair so much attention that you forget about the other girls. I want this nonsense about choosing to go on as long as possible."

"Of course, Father," Mayne agreed as he also stood up. "If you'll excuse me now, I'll go and freshen up from the trip."

"Keep in mind that your brothers don't yet know about this signed marriage contract," the king said, gesturing

with the papers he held. "The contracts weren't supposed to be signed until the end of the week, after all, but I can't help feeling that I would have done just as you did about signing early. I'll put this away in a safe place, and then we'll both forget about it."

Forget, yes, but only until the end of the week, Mayne thought as he simply agreed with his father's orders. After this week I won't be the only one who remembers...

* * *

Adair let the servants show her to her apartment, told them what kind of tea she wanted while a small army unpacked her things and put them away, and then, with all chores done, asked to be left alone. The apartment she finally stood in without others around was large and lovely, but having windows again didn't mean much. She would stay in the palace for the week she'd agreed to, but at the end of that time she would walk out the front door. Unless she was thrown out before the end of the week...

That idea made Adair smile as she took off her jacket, but the smile didn't last very long. She'd meant to review her plans during the trip here, but she'd gotten so little sleep last night that she'd fallen asleep almost as soon as the coach began to move. But falling asleep turned out to be a blessing instead of an irritation; the coach seat had been well-padded, but having to sit on it after what that beast had done to her last night hadn't been pleasant.

That beast. Adair knew that another smile now curved her lips, but not as nice a smile as the first. Mayne had been absolutely sure of himself last night when he beat her like that, and it was almost worth the pain she'd been given to see that assurance disappear today. She hadn't said anything when Mayne had asked about her father's "goodbye visit," but it had been perfectly clear that Mayne understood there hadn't been any such visit.

And that understanding had shaken the man, but only, Adair thought, to the extent that a nasty suspicion had been confirmed for him. He'd decided that he wanted to "start over" and "be friends" with her because he suspected he'd been fed a bunch of lies, as if what they thought of each other mattered in the least. Prince Mayne Toram's grand gesture had fallen flat and dead, and now she should only have his brothers to deal with. And the king...

Adair took off her hat and freed her hair, then toured the apartment a bit. The trunks that had held her clothes and other possessions had been put in the very large bedchamber along with her case of books, three trunks worth of clothes and underwear and such. The total came close to everything she owned in the way of clothing, which really wasn't all that much. She liked gowns and skirts well enough, but every time someone had had a fit over her wearing tights and a tunic she'd worn fewer gowns and skirts and more tights and tunics.

But the matter of clothing was really no more to Adair than another weapon to use against her hosts. Unlike just about everyone she'd ever known, Adair didn't judge people by what they wore. How they acted was, in her opinion, much more important than how much gold they spent fancying up their bodies. It was another point that showed her differences, and now it was one she'd use to get herself free.

Going back into the sitting room with the book she hadn't read from much during the trip, Adair passed by the tea service. Along with the tea a plate of small cakes had been brought and left for her, but sight of them did no more to stir her appetite than breakfast or lunch had done. It had always been true that the more trapped she felt the less of an appetite she had, but she'd really have to see about eating something at dinner. Assuming, of course, she wasn't thrown out before dinner was served...

It wasn't long before the time came to dress for dinner, and after refusing the help of the maids sent to assist her Adair saw to her own dressing. The maids would certainly have tried to talk her out of doing as she meant to, and Adair didn't need any more argument. She was certain to get all the arguing anyone might want once she showed up in the dining room.

A male servant waited outside her door to guide her to the dining room being used tonight, and the man almost stuttered and tripped over his own feet when Adair appeared. He seemed taken with the emerald green gown she wore, a gown with a low-cut bodice that showed off her breasts, tightened below those breasts, then fell softly -

and clingingly - to her shoes. Adair's only jewelry was a thin silver necklace and matching earrings, a simplicity that went better with her black hair hanging loose and unstyled.

"Please follow me, my lady," the servant finally managed to get out once he'd stopped gawking at her. "His Majesty's other guests are probably already there."

Meaning that Adair was on the verge of being late, something she already knew. As she followed the hurrying servant at her own pace, she reflected that her plans were starting right, at least. Her appearance was bound to cause trouble, but the later she arrived, the less time there would be for trouble before the king put in an appearance. Then, of course, a different kind of trouble would start...

The dining room the servant led her to was more than large enough to hold the hundred or so people who stood around talking. Servants with trays of drinks circulated through the beautifully-dressed and carefully coifed throng, but Adair refused all offers until a man with fruit juice in his glasses came up to her. Drinking anything alcoholic on an empty stomach would have been stupid, but even so, Adair had time for only a single swallow of juice before the trouble she'd been expecting abruptly arrived.

"See, Aleena, I told you it was her," a triumphant female voice exclaimed from behind Adair. "Keeping up with proper fashion always has been beyond her."

"Yes, Dinra, you certainly were right," another, very amused female voice agreed. "Imagine, wearing a gown that went out of style more than a year ago. Only she would be this ... out of touch."

Adair turned to see the two girls who'd spoken, girls she'd known since they'd all been very small. Their fathers were dukes just as Adair's was, but the two had never had any trouble fitting in perfectly. Dinra, leader of the small set, had blond hair and blue eyes, Aleena's very light brown hair almost putting her in the same category. Both girls had their hair up in intricately curled hairdos and both wore examples of the latest style in gowns, Dinra's in pink, Aleena's in yellow. Three other girls hovered behind the two, listening to the goings-on but making no effort to join in. With Adair, their number had been brought up to six...

"If being 'in touch' means not even having taste in one's mouth, I accept the compliment, Aleena," Adair said with a mocking smile. "Don't you ... ladies have any idea how ridiculous you look?" The two girls lost their sneering smiles immediately, most likely due to the fact that, deep down, they knew Adair was right. The newest style in gowns had high round necks and short, cap sleeves, but that wasn't the worst of it. The gown skirts formed narrow bells before widening at the ankles, making the wearers look like immature barrels.

"No one ever looks ridiculous in the latest style," Dinra stated with heavy ice coating the words, her stare matching perfectly. "Being in style shows a woman's status, Adair, and ignoring that style shows her as backward. If you think you can hide your backwardness with inane comments, you're just as wrong as you've always been."

"But weren't you saying almost the same thing only a few minutes ago, Dinra?" another female voice asked, and then Lisni stepped forward. "You said the new style was too bloated for your taste, and -"

"I said no such thing," Dinra stated in a growl, glaring now at a new target. "You're almost as bad as Adair is, Lisni, so just keep your comments to yourself."

And then, with a toss of their heads, Dinra and Aleena turned and sauntered away.

"Those two have always been absolute pains," Lisni said to Adair in a soft voice as they watched the "very important" girls walk away. "If they end up being chosen to marry two of the princes, there won't be any living with them from then on."

"Like it's possible to live with them now?" Adair countered just as softly with a chuckle. Lisni had dark brown hair and nicer blue eyes than Dinra did, and Adair had always felt that Lisni might have become a good friend if their fathers hadn't spent so little time together. Duke Rayl, Lisni's father, was too "warlike" to suit Adair's father, so the girls had only met on rare occasions.

"It's never been possible to live with those two," Lisni agreed with a wry smile of her own. "They've always been convinced that no one could ever match them, but somehow their matchless qualities have escaped me."

"You and me both," Adair agreed, seeing that the last two girls were looking back and forth between them and the two girls who had left, obviously wondering which group to join. Elmini and Nossa were both on the mousy side, and standing aloof would have been impossible for either of them.

"Look, Lisni, I appreciate the way you came into the argument on my side so you're entitled to a warning," Adair said just as softly as they'd been speaking. "My objective in being here is to get thrown out as quickly as possible, so you aren't doing yourself any favors by standing here talking to me. Once things start to happen, you really want to be well out of it."

"I can see you aren't any happier about this nonsense than I am," Lisni said, now studying Adair rather than their former opponents. "My father apologized for sending me here, and thanked me in advance for not making a fuss. The king has decided to make a point before giving in to political pressure, so we all have to be part of the show."

"Not all of us," Adair countered, swallowing the flash of jealousy she felt. Lisni's father obviously talked to her like a real human being, unlike Adair's father... "All I agreed to was the part about coming here, without the word 'fuss' being mentioned even once. As I said - "

Adair was about to repeat her suggestion about Lisni walking away, but that was the moment the king chose to show up. Some fool with a staff banged loudly on the floor to get everyone's attention, and then King Rodick and his sons the princes were being announced. Adair had just enough time to take three quick steps away from Lisni, and then everyone in the room was either bowing or curtsying to the king and his sons.

Everyone, that is, but Adair. She stood negligently holding her cup of juice, completely upright, and it took only seconds for someone to notice.

"Are you deaf, girl?" the man with the staff demanded after straightening from his own bow, his frown downright menacing. "You curtsey to your king right this minute!"

"But he isn't my king," Adair answered the man easily, seeing from the corner of her eye that Rodick and his sons had stopped walking toward the tables. "He's made sure that only the men in this realm have any rights, so he's their king, not mine. He didn't even bother to send his commands directly to me, only to my father, so if he wants to be bowed to he can look to my father again. Looking in my direction will be a waste of time."

A shocked silence seemed to hold everyone in the room, the men still bent over bowing and the women in deep curtsies. But rather than looking down, all those people were staring at Adair, and the weird sight was enough to make Adair have to fight to keep from laughing.

"If you live in this kingdom, and you do, then I'm your king whether or not you admit it," King Rodick said in a surprisingly mild voice after gesturing the man with the staff to silence. "With that in mind, Lady Adair, I'm due a sign of respect from you even if you don't like the idea."

"Left to my own devices I would have been out of this kingdom by now," Adair pointed out, countering Rodick's contention with very little effort. "That means I don't live here, but even if I did I still would give the same nothing I get from the man in charge. Giving respect when you don't get any in return is stupid, and there's enough stupidity going around that I don't have to add to it."

Now there was flinching to be seen along with the shock, a respectable amount of it coming from the three princes. Everyone seemed to be waiting for the king to explode, just as Adair had expected the same before now. The king's volatile temper was known to everyone in his realm, but for some reason there was no sign of it tonight.

"You raise an interesting question, Lady Adair," King Rodick said after a very long moment, the stare resting on her more contemplative than angry. "You and I will have to discuss the matter at greater length later, but right now there's a meal to be eaten. Come and join us at table, my friends."

Those words let everyone straighten up, a couple of the women needing help to keep from falling. There was shock again in the sudden whispering to be heard all over the room, and then Lisni was beside Adair again.

"I think he may have decided to have your food poisoned," Lisni murmured, her amusement perfectly clear even so. "No wonder you warned me away..."

"Adair, are you crazy?" Nossa demanded in a hiss as she joined them. "How could you say that to the king?"

"I wanted to see if he was allergic to the truth," Adair returned, surprised to realize that Nossa also fought with amusement. "Any minute now he ought to break out in a rash."

"And then you'll be needing to break out of a dungeon cell," Nossa stated, shaking her head. "I can't say I disagree with what you told him, but I'd never have had the nerve to speak the words myself. Will you leave me that gown in your will before the execution?"

Lisni joined Adair in staring at Nossa, clearly just as surprised as Adair was. Nossa had always been more than quiet and definitely mousy in spite of her auburn hair, green eyes, and good figure, but suddenly she seemed to have changed completely.

"Who are you, and what have you done with Nossa?" Lisni demanded, just about taking the words out of Adair's mouth. "The Nossa I know would be over with Aleena and Dinra, nodding her agreement with them because she wouldn't have had the nerve to speak even when she didn't disagree."

"I finally got tired of doing things the way everyone told me to do them," Nossa said with a dismissive shrug and a wry smile. "I was assured over and over that if I had patience I'd find everything working out perfectly, but no one ever mentioned that the perfection would be everyone else's, not mine. Being sent here to lure one of the princes into marrying me ... broke the spell, I guess you could say, but I can see I have a really long way to go before I'm in Adair's league."

"To be frank, I don't think we can be in Adair's league," Lisni said with a grin. "We both seem to be more interested in living than in dying, a fate that Adair obviously isn't bothered by. So you think the king will have her executed publicly rather than having her quietly poisoned?"

Nossa grinned in answer and began to respond, both girls ignoring Adair's annoyance, but an interruption came before Nossa could speak.

"Ladies, the king and the princes await you at the main table," a servant said to them with a bow. "Follow me, please."

Adair exchanged a glance with her two companions, then they all followed the servant. Having supporters wasn't any part of Adair's plans and she'd have to avoid the two girls for their own good, but right now she felt less alone than she ever had before in her life...

* * *

Mayne stood with his mouth open only for a moment, and then anger took complete charge of him. No one would ever have the right to speak to his father the way Adair had, and as soon as he got that girl alone he would show her just how big a mistake she'd made.

In his mind's eye Mayne could see himself following Adair back to her apartment and walking in without knocking. She would turn to him in annoyance, of course, but he would speak first.

"How dare you say such things to your liege lord?" he would demand, letting her see just how angry he was. "If nothing else, you now enjoy his hospitality."

"If you think there's anything enjoyable about my being here, you'd better take another look," the little mule would answer, raising her chin in defiance. "If your father doesn't like what I say, he can always send me home again."

"If that's the plan behind your rudeness you can forget about it," Mayne would tell her very flatly. "You aren't

going anywhere, and what's more you also aren't going to get away with what you said."

And then Mayne would take her arm and pull her into the bedchamber. She would try to resist, of course, but that would do her as little good as it had done in her father's house. Once they were in the bedchamber with the door closed, he would sit down and take her over his knee again.

"Just as I thought," he would say once he'd raised her lovely green gown skirt to find nothing in the way of underwear beneath it. "It was perfectly clear that you were anything but modestly clad under this gown, and you're never to do the same again. Showing every man in the palace glimpses of this body is not acceptable, and if you should be foolish enough to do it again you'll know what to expect."

And with that he would start to spank the round and saucy bottom now exposed to his view. One smack after the other while she shouted at him to stop, but the end of the spanking would not come anything like that soon. He would smack that bottom over and over, watching it go from white to pink to red, watching her squirm harder and harder with every stroke of his hand.

Or maybe he would use a hairbrush instead, applying the brush to her backside in a way that would reach her as his bare hand hadn't. The hairbrush would make it impossible for her to stay silent, and before very long she would be apologizing for everything she'd said. When she began to beg him to stop spanking her he would ignore her pleas to begin with, making sure she got every bit of the punishment she'd earned. Then and only then he would put the brush aside and take her in his arms and

"Stop looking so grim, brother, or you'll chase the ladies off," Mayne's brother Lethan murmured to him with a buffet to his shoulder, pulling Mayne out of his thoughts. "Not one of those girls is hard on the eyes, so we need to thank the gods for allowing us this week to get to know them.

Have you decided yet which one interests you the most? Personally, I'm leaning toward the shy flower in that incredible green gown that doesn't look anything like a barrel."

"The girl is just as incredible as that gown," Mayne's brother Nallis said from his other side, grinning as widely as Lethan. "Since Father hasn't had her arrested on the spot for treason, she may even survive long enough to marry one of us."

"How can you two joke about that girl?" Mayne demanded in as low a voice as he could manage while the three of them walked toward the main table. "She insulted our father without the least hesitation, and that isn't anything to laugh at."

"Actually, Mayne, what she said was the complete truth," Lethan corrected, his grin having disappeared. "Women don't have any rights in our kingdom, but until now none of them have made a fuss about it. I could see that Father was about to be abrupt with the girl - until he noticed, as I did, that most of the ladies in the room seemed to agree with her."

"And that means we may have a potential insurrection on our hands," Nallis put in, his own amusement lessened but still visible. "Father's nobles may be able to put fighters into the field, but if the ladies get it into their heads to be difficult they could easily make life unbearable for nobles and fighters alike. I know that women usually throw themselves at you, Mayne, but even you should be able to see the problem."

Mayne wanted to tell his brothers that they were imagining problems that weren't there, but even he'd noticed the expressions on the faces of the other women in the room. The other women clearly wouldn't have said the same thing themselves, but once Adair had said it...

It looked like problems were beginning to pile up, more problems than the ambition of a couple of dukes...

Chapter Four

As Adair walked toward the main table with Lisni and Nossa, she casually studied the two princes she hadn't yet come in contact with. Lethan was second oldest after Mayne, with the same dark brown hair all three of the

brothers had but with blue eyes rather than gray. Nallis had green eyes, but other than that the three men were almost the same in appearance. They were even just about the same height and build...

"At least they haven't gotten fat and bald yet," Nossa murmured as they walked, obviously talking about the princes. "My cousin was married to a fat, bald man, and I was told she was very happy with the man who'd been chosen for her. Five months later she killed herself, but no one said she must have been a lot less happy than they'd thought."

"The fat, bald man must have made a deal with your cousin's father," Lisni responded with a grimace. "Men always love to make deals, and for some idiotic reason they believe that the deal won't fall apart if a marriage is involved. If you can't trust someone's word about upholding their end of a bargain, why in the world would you believe that a marriage would make that someone more trustworthy?"

"It's probably more a matter of buying support in some venture," Adair put in when Nossa shook her head. "Instead of using gold to do the buying, though, they use women's bodies. And too many women haven't the courage to refuse to go along with the nonsense."

"What good would refusing do?" Nossa asked with a sound of ridicule. "When you have no say at all in what happens to you, refusing to do as you're told is nothing but a waste of time."

"If nothing else, refusing can make life less pleasant for the men," Lisni said with a small but evil smile. "If, instead of doing as you're told, you put them to the trouble of forcing you and then spend all your time complaining... The sweetness of life tends to fade for the men rather quickly."

Nossa stared at Lisni in delighted surprise while Adair chuckled, and then there was no more time for the women to talk. They'd reached the head table, and everyone was being seated according to some preset arrangement. King Rodick and his sons already stood by their chairs, the king on the extreme left and everyone else to his right.

The first of the princes was Mayne, with Lisni to his left and next to the king, and Dinra on Mayne's right. Then came Elmini, Lethan, and Nossa, with Aleena, Nallis and Adair finishing the arrangement. Adair showed only a very small smile as a servant seated her, distantly wondering if her seat was the one that had originally been intended for her. If she'd been put any farther away from the king, she would have been sitting on the floor...

"Oh, Prince Nallis, this is such an honor for me!" Aleena bubbled as soon as Nallis was in his chair, her face wearing a simper that Adair thought was probably supposed to look sexy. "We were no more than children the last time we talked, but you're certainly not a child any longer! I've been waiting and waiting to tell you -"

"Excuse me, Lady Aleena," Nallis broke into the flowing stream of words, freezing the simper on Aleena's face. "I'll be more than happy to speak to you in a few minutes, but there's something I need to do first. Adair, how could you speak to my father like that? If you were a man you'd probably be in chains by now."

Adair looked to her left to find two faces staring at her, Nallis's green eyes showing just a hint of amusement, Aleena's dull eyes showing strong resentment.

"She spoke to the king like that because she's an idiot," Aleena stated.

"An idiot who doesn't even know enough to dress in the latest style."

"If I were a man, Nallis, I wouldn't have had to speak to your father like that," Adair pointed out, completely ignoring Aleena. "Besides, if someone tells you the truth and you don't like what you hear, you're supposed to make a change for the better. Or does that go only for decent human beings rather than kings and princes?"

"Just because you're unhappy doesn't mean that everyone else is the same," Nallis countered, joining Adair in ignoring Aleena's gasp of outrage. "If the arrangement we have now was so bad it would have been changed a long time ago, but it wasn't changed. That has to mean things aren't nearly as bad as you're trying to paint them."

"Or it can mean, as it does, that men are too happy having women as their possessions to want to change things," Adair countered easily. "Since women are raised not to speak their minds no matter what's done to them, you men

can pretend that everything is just lovely. Well, guess what, Nallis? With me around, pretense time is over.”

“You’ll change your mind once you’re married,” Nallis said with utter conviction, his gaze warming as it moved over her. “You’re a beautiful woman, Adair, and if I end up being the lucky man to marry you I’ll devote my life to making you happy. You’ll enjoy that, believe me, you will.”

“If you were the poor unfortunate who had to marry me, you’d find that the only thing able to make me happy would be making you miserable,” Adair told him with a wide smile. “Aren’t you glad now that I won’t be getting married?”

“Of course you won’t be getting married,” Aleena put in at once with a smirk while Nallis lost his amusement and simply blinked at Adair. “No man would be dense enough to want you. I, on the other hand, am a very desirable woman, so I’d love to hear what you would do to make me happy, Prince Nallis.”

Aleena’s hand turned Nallis’s face back in her direction, and her smirk widened when Nallis made no effort to turn to Adair again. By then the food was being served, so that was just as well. Adair’s appetite had definitely improved, which let her give all her attention to eating.

The meal was a long, drawn-out affair, almost a banquet, and there was even soft music to help the diners’ digestion. When the king finally rose to signal an end to the meal and everyone else also stood up, Adair took her time getting to her feet. Then she turned and headed for her apartment, filled with good food and the satisfaction of a job well begun...

* * *

Mayne had indigestion even before the food was brought out. His first reaction to the seating arrangement was regret that he couldn’t give Adair a piece of his mind, but then he realized that making a scene - another scene - would probably have caused his father to explode. As soon as the meal was over, though, Lady Adair Cantlen would certainly hear from him.

And then the ladies who would sit to either side of him were brought over, and matters immediately went from bad to worse. Lisni, daughter of Duke Rayl, was seated to his left, between Mayne and his father, and on his right was the blond Dinra, daughter of Duke Lemish. Neither of those ladies were meant to be chosen for marriage, which was probably why they’d been seated near him. Mayne was already married to Adair, so it was his brothers who had to be exposed to the eligible girls.

But Dinra didn’t know that, so as soon as Mayne was seated the blonde immediately began to work on him. The girl seemed to think that seducing him was the way to get what she wanted, and Mayne’s ignoring her efforts only made her try harder. At one point Mayne turned toward Lisni, hoping to use the girl to give him a rest from Dinra, but oddly enough Lisni was engaged in a low-voiced conversation with Mayne’s father.

So that endless meal went on and on, Dinra’s efforts breaking off only when a new dish was served. The blonde did no more than bat her eyelashes at him while she stuffed her face, but once her plate was emptied... Mayne felt the strong urge to take refuge in the wine that flowed so freely, but he really didn’t dare. If he got drunk he would certainly tell Dinra what he thought of her, and although the effort would be satisfying his father would definitely have his head off even before he sobered up.

It finally came through to Mayne that the meal was dragging on so long because his father was very obviously enjoying his conversation with Lisni. King Rodick was doing a lot of chuckling, and at one point he even laughed out loud. Mayne didn’t really begrudge his father the enjoyment, but he still couldn’t keep from wishing that Dinra had been seated next to his father rather than Lisni. If that had been the arrangement, the meal would probably have ended with the second or third course.

Everyone got to their feet when the king finally stood up, but before Mayne could excuse himself Dinra grabbed his arm and refused to relinquish possession of the limb. Every time Mayne thought he was free he found that the girl had only shifted her hold to a more secure position, but then a stroke of genius came. Pleading a call of nature finally got rid of the eight or nine-handed girl, and Mayne took immediate advantage of his freedom by leaving

the room.

His original intention had been to walk over to Adair, but that miserable female had been just about the first to leave. Well, catching up to her in her apartment would be much better than confronting her in public, Mayne knew, his smile grim as he strode along. He would give her the chance to apologize to his father in the same public way she'd insulted the man, but if she refused she would find herself obeying with an aching bottom.

One way or another she is going to apologize, Mayne promised himself silently as he approached the door to her apartment. If she does well enough with the apology the spanking she gets afterward won't be too bad, but if she continues to act the way she's been

Mayne's thoughts broke off when the doorknob under his hand refused to turn. There should have been nothing to keep him from entering Adair's sitting room, not when sitting room doors were rarely locked. Possibly the knob was just stuck in some way...

But the knob wasn't stuck. Peering closer showed Mayne that the door lock was firmly in place, and knocking on the door brought absolutely nothing in the way of a response. The miserable female could well have gone to bed, closing a second door between herself and her husband. A husband she didn't yet know she had, and one she was hardly likely to greet with open arms when she did find out about him...

That thought stopped Mayne cold just as he was wondering what it would take to break down the more-than-sturdy hall door. All that anger he'd been feeling, the sense of insult on his father's behalf... Being angry was a lot easier than feeling guilty, a lot easier to accept and a lot easier to admit to. This morning, everything he'd done in secret with Duke Elden had felt perfectly normal, but now...

"Now I feel like a sneak and a liar, not to mention a slave owner," Mayne muttered as he stared at that locked door. "Slavery is absolutely forbidden in this kingdom, but somehow the restriction doesn't do a thing for women like Adair. And apparently there are more like her than we knew."

Enough like her that even his father had chosen to tread lightly, Mayne admitted to himself with a sigh. This little game that they had decided to play with the two dukes who wanted more power was threatening to get out of hand, and all because of one black-haired, black-eyed female.

Mayne stared at the unmoving door for one more minute, then turned and strode off in the direction of his own apartment. Silently he thanked the gods for keeping Adair from answering his knock, at the same time keeping him from making even more of a mess in his relationship with her. He'd already punished her once for, in effect, daring to tell the truth, and now he'd come close to doing it a second time. When what he really wanted to do was take her in his arms...

But that would be impossible until the end of the week, which was probably a very good thing. It gave him time to think of ways to get closer to Adair, so that when she found out they were married she would be more likely to accept the situation than fight it.

Mayne was still determined to find a way to make that happen, so he was deep in thought by the time he walked into his sitting room. He closed the door behind himself, more involved with plotting than paying attention to what was around him, so the complete lack of servants in the room made no impression. The fact that there usually were servants went right past him until his distracted stroll toward his bedchamber was stopped by the two slender arms circling his waist from behind.

For the briefest instant Mayne thought it was Adair who was behind him, but then the truth shredded that delightful fantasy.

"Surprise, Prince Mayne," he heard Dinra purr in tones that were probably supposed to be extremely provocative. "It was so clever of you to find a reason to leave the king's presence like that, an excuse I also used as soon as you were gone. Now no one will have to know about our little ... arrangement until the end of the week when you announce our betrothal."

“We don’t have an arrangement, Dinra,” Mayne said with vast annoyance as he pulled the girl’s arms away from their hold and then stepped forward to turn to look at her. “And if there are any announcements concerning you made at the end of the week, they won’t be coming from me. You’re obviously not very good at taking hints, so let me say this straight out: I’m not in the least attracted to you, so you might as well leave my apartment right now.”

“Of course you’re not attracted to me,” Dinra said with a smile and in a tone that told him she didn’t believe a word he’d said. “That’s why I was seated right next to you with no one but that nothing Lisni on your other side. I know you want me, Prince Mayne, and now that I’ve sent away your servants you can have me without anyone finding out and making a fuss.”

And with that she moved close again and this time wrapped her arms around his neck. With her body pressed up against his like that, Mayne was very much tempted to tell her the real reason she and Lisni were seated near him. But telling Dinra the truth would ruin Mayne’s father’s plans, which meant that he had to keep silent - on that point, at least.

“Dinra, stop it!” Mayne said sharply, finding it almost impossible to push the girl away again without hurting her. “I’m not the one who decided who sat where, a fact that ruins your ridiculous little theory, so let go of me and go back to your own apartment. I won’t say it a third time.”

“Now, now, Prince Mayne, you don’t have to be afraid of me,” Dinra purred as she tried to push herself even closer. “All I want to do is show you how pleasant life will be when I’m your wife. Once we’re married, you won’t even have to send the servants away if you don’t want to. Don’t you like the sound of that?”

“Not particularly, but there’s a sound I will like,” Mayne said, completely out of patience with the fool of a girl. “When you won’t take no for an answer, you can’t complain about what happens to you afterward.”

And with that he pulled Dinra’s arms from around his neck, then took her by one wrist and pulled her after him to the nearest suitable chair. Dinra, the little fool, made a pleased sound in the belief that she was about to get what she’d been demanding, just the way she’d most likely been given whatever she demanded all her life. Instead Mayne was going to give her what she should have been given, and then maybe she would have grown up to be someone worth knowing.

Sitting down and pulling Dinra across his knees took only a moment, but then Mayne had a small problem. The barrel-like skirt of her gown looked like it would be hard to raise, and the thing did resist some as Dinra squawked and tried to get back to her feet. But then the heavily pleated skirt flipped up and over Dinra’s head and shoulders, taking itself out of Mayne’s way and staying like that without needing to be held.

There was no slip under the skirt, not when the skirt itself was lined, and the fact that Dinra hadn’t acted on the spur of the moment became perfectly clear when Mayne saw she also wore nothing in the way of drawers. A bare, too-plump bottom squirmed around clear in his sight, and there was no reason for Mayne to refuse the very tempting offer.

“No, ow!” Dinra howled from the very first smack of Mayne’s hand. “This isn’t the - ow! - way to start a - oh! - relationship, so stop it! Prince Mayne, let me go! Ouch!”

“You’re only getting what you asked for, Dinra,” Mayne said as he kept on smacking that very deserving bottom. “If you’d taken no for an answer you would have avoided the lesson, but you knew better. Do you still think it was a good idea to keep pressing me?”

Instead of answering in words, Dinra started a howling to go along with her squirming and kicking. At first there was only a faint pinkness tingeing her bottom, but the more Mayne’s hand slapped that roundness the more the pink turned to red. Adding strength to Mayne’s hand was the knowledge that Dinra kept calling him “Prince Mayne” for a reason other than protocol. The stupid female was relishing his title, glorying in the idea that it was a prince she meant to wrap around her finger. It would be interesting to see what she called him once he was done spanking her.

By the time Mayne was finished with the spanking, Dinra wasn't calling him anything. She was crying hysterically, though, and when Mayne pulled her skirt back down and set her on her feet she just stood in place and cried and bounced. Mayne thought she might be waiting for him to take her in his arms and comfort her, but that wasn't about to happen. Instead of touching the girl, he stood up and went directly for the room's bell pull. It took only a moment for one of his servants to appear, and the man's face wore nothing of an expression.

"Lond, the lady Dinra needs to be escorted back to her apartment," Mayne said without inflection. "And please tell the others that if she ever comes back here, she isn't to be allowed entrance. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Prince Mayne, perfectly clear," Lond answered, the twinkle in his eyes saying how happy the man was that there was no chance of this female ever being in a position to give him and the other servants orders. Mayne got the impression that Dinra had treated his people as if they were unimportant pieces of furniture, which showed even more clearly how much of a fool the girl was. Good servants were priceless treasures, something anyone with a mind would know.

It took a few minutes for Lond to get Dinra out of Mayne's apartment. The girl cried even harder when she was made to walk, but finally Mayne was able to close the door on the intrusion and head for his bedchamber. He wanted a bath, and while he bathed he'd go back to making plans that he hoped would not be a waste of time and effort...

* * *

Adair woke refreshed from her good night's sleep, glad she'd locked out the horde of servants who'd tried to take over her life the night before. They'd ignored her when she told them she didn't like to be fussed over, so she'd ordered them all out of the apartment and then had locked the door. The key to the hall door was right where it was supposed to be, in the low cabinet to the right of the door, the same place the outer door keys were kept in her father's house.

After a quick wash Adair dressed in a tunic, tights, and a pair of low boots, an outfit the next part of her plan called for. When she unlocked the hall door and then rang for a servant, she got twice the amusement out of the effort than she'd expected to. Not only did her outfit almost make the servant drop his teeth, the man was also shocked that Adair intended to have breakfast in her apartment rather than join the other ladies in the small dining room.

"The princes should be there as well, my lady," the servant told her, obviously thinking she'd missed the point. "Since you've been invited here for a specific purpose - "

"I wasn't invited, I was ordered to come," Adair corrected the man immediately. But she kept her tone bland, which seemed to upset him even more. "Now that I'm here, for whatever reason, I'll do as I think best. If bringing me breakfast is beyond you, I'll just have to do without it."

"Oh, no, my lady," the servant protested as quickly as Adair had interrupted a moment ago. "Making a guest in this palace go hungry... No, no, your meal will be here in just a few moments."

He then bowed his way out as fast as he could move, and Adair found that he hadn't been exaggerating. In only a few minutes there was a knock on her door, and then two servants were bringing in a cart loaded with food. She let the two men serve her at the cozy table at the side of the room, but brought her book along to give the two no chance for more intrusive conversation.

When her meal was finished and the servants had taken the cart and gone, Adair decided to go for a walk. There was one part of the palace she remembered fondly, and it would be the perfect place to spend some of her time. Once out in the hall she found a set of stairs going down, and being on the ground floor let her orient herself. The area she wanted would be that way, she thought, off to the right and a few corridors over.

The last turn brought Adair exactly where she'd wanted to go, a small area that was still indoors but also

outdoors. A wide square in the center of the area had grass and a couple of trees, the square completely open to the sky. Arranged around the outside of the area under the overhang of the surrounding building were chairs and small tables, a lovely place to sit and enjoy the pretty day. Or, as it happened right now, to sit and enjoy the rain coming down.

Adair loved rainy days, so she took a chair and made herself comfortable.

The small table next to her chair had a large bowl filled with fruit, apples, pears, oranges, and something else she didn't recognize. Having just finished breakfast Adair wasn't in the least hungry, but she kept the bowl of fruit in mind in case she decided against joining the others for lunch as well.

The rain was coming down fairly hard, but Adair got to watch it in peace only for a little while. No more than twenty minutes went by, and then footsteps told her she had company.

"Lady Adair, how nice to see you," a voice said, and when she turned her head Adair saw that the newcomer was Prince Lethan, the middle brother. "I usually come to this spot when I want to be alone, but I don't mind in the least sharing the place with you."

"I notice you didn't ask whether I mind sharing, but that's hardly a surprise," Adair said in the most insulting drawl she could manage. "You and your brothers do take after your father..."

"Yes, we do try to do as our father does, but that's not something we consider a sin," Lethan returned, the teasing quality gone from his voice as he stopped between Adair and her view of the rain. "My brothers and I happen to admire our father, and you really had no right to speak to him as you did last night. He's a king, your king, and no one has a right to -"

"A right to tell him he's doing wrong?" Adair interrupted without hesitation, ignoring the man's annoyance.

"Don't you think it's about time someone tried to set him straight? I wonder how much you would admire your father if you were female instead of male. How would you like having other people decide what you'll do with your life, giving you no chance to make your own decisions or even listen if you tried to speak on your own behalf? Just because I'm female doesn't mean I can't -"

"You can't really believe that my brothers and I are free to do as we please," Lethan interrupted in turn with a sound of scorn. "Mayne, Nallis and I may be princes, but that just means we have more obligations than ordinary men. When our father speaks we're required to listen to him and do as he says, because he's not only our father he's also our king. Just as he's your king."

"As I said, once this week is over I'll be leaving the kingdom, so your father isn't my king," Adair pointed out, pleased with the way things were going. "And even if it somehow turned out that I had to stay here, I'd still refuse to give him the kind of respect that everyone refuses to give me. As for me obeying your father or mine, don't make me laugh."

Lethan's expression of frustration was a lovely sight, but prudence told Adair to look away from him. The last thing she wanted was for the man to realize that she was baiting him on purpose, deliberately taking herself out of the possible-bride category. Getting men angry was really so easy, but the trick would be to keep them angry just long enough to

"Lethan!" Adair gasped as she rose to her feet, the sight of the masked man holding a dagger coming toward them chasing away all thoughts of game-playing. The apparent assassin was still at least twenty feet away and obviously trying to sneak up on them, and when Lethan whirled around the man gave up trying to be stealthy.

"Adair, run!" Lethan snapped, taking one step forward. "I'll try to hold him as long as possible... Guards! Attack! Guards!"

Time seemed to stretch out and slow down for Adair for a moment. Lethan had told her to run while he tried to hold off the assassin, but Lethan wasn't wearing a sword or any other weapon. There were guards in the hall close enough to hear the shout for help, but certainly not close enough to get here in time to save Lethan's life. Adair

also wore nothing in the way of weapons, mostly because she couldn't handle weapons.

But there was something she could do, possibly the only thing. Her initial shock was gone when time began to move normally again, so she turned quickly to the bowl of fruit only a short distance from her hand. Two large, hard apples to start with...

Throwing those apples one at a time at the assassin wasn't the act of desperation it might have been. Adair had no skill with weapons, but she'd been throwing things for sport and exercise ever since she was a child. By now her arm and eye were nicely trained, so nicely trained that for Adair to miss her target rarely ever happened.

And she certainly didn't miss her target now. The first apple made the assassin break stride, and the second caused him to stop running altogether. By then Adair had even more ammunition, two pears with one of those odd pieces of fruit ready to be grabbed up and thrown next. The pears pelted in after the apples, but the odd piece of fruit wasn't needed. The second pear knocked the assassin over, Lethan jumped on the man to keep him from getting up again, and then guardsmen from the hall were there to help Lethan with his prisoner.

And all Adair had to do was sit down again - before she fell down...

Chapter Five

When Mayne heard that his brother had been attacked by an assassin, he ran faster than he ever had in his life. He knew the part of the palace where the attack had taken place, of course, and he got there almost completely out of breath. Since he already knew that his brother was unharmed he would normally have taken his time, but the servant who told him about the attack had mentioned that the lady Adair had also been there.

And Adair was there, sitting in a chair with Lethan next to her and holding her hand. She didn't seem to be hurt either, but she did look really pale.

"Lethan, what happened?" Mayne asked as he moved closer to bend next to Adair and take her other hand. "Were either of you harmed in any way?"

"Happily, only the assassin was harmed," Lethan answered with a grin, but Mayne could see the strain under his brother's show of amusement. "I give thanks to the gods that Lady Adair was here, otherwise I'd probably be dead right now. She pelted the assassin so hard with pieces of fruit that he actually fell under the onslaught. At that point I was able to jump on the man, and then the guards were here to put him under arrest."

"I also give thanks to the gods, but not just for your well-being, brother," Mayne murmured, stroking Adair's hand once with the fingers of his free hand before turning her loose entirely. Her hand had stiffened in his grip, so he'd had no choice but to release her. "Do you recognize the man who tried to attack you?"

"Never saw him before, far as I know," Lethan answered after glancing over to the unmasked assassin where he stood chained with the guards all around him. The man's face looked badly bruised, and the vagueness in his gaze said he was still dazed. "But not knowing him is hardly a surprise. I don't number many assassins among my circle of friends."

"Well, we'll be finding out if you number people who hire assassins among your friends," Mayne said, completely aware of how hard his voice had turned. "You haven't by any chance insulted someone lately, someone touchy as well as wealthy? I can't quite picture you doing that, brother, but it's a question that needs to be asked."

"And it would be a very good question, except for the fact that I haven't even exchanged harsh words with anyone for months," Lethan said, shaking his head a bit. "There shouldn't be anyone who hates me enough to send an assassin after me, so I really don't understand why this happened."

"Maybe it wasn't Lethan the assassin was really after," Mayne heard, and he looked down to see Adair looking up at both him and his brother. Her color had already come back, and she seemed steadier than Lethan did.

"Don't forget that you three brothers look quite a lot alike. Maybe the assassin was after one of you other two and simply mistook his target."

"I don't like the sound of that, but unfortunately it's perfectly possible," Mayne agreed, cutting off Lethan's trying to laugh off the suggestion. "People who don't know us personally do get confused about which of us they're talking to, Lethan, so we'd better look into the possibility. I can't think of anyone I offended either, so we'd better check with Nallis."

"If it turns out that I went through this because of something Nallis did, I may end up killing the fool myself," Lethan grumbled. "But in all honesty, I don't expect us to get anywhere with that line of inquiry. Our brother is usually as careful as we are about not offending people, Mayne, so where will we look if Nallis isn't to blame?"

"Let's not worry about dead ends until we run into them," Mayne answered, very aware of the way Lethan had turned away to hide his disturbance. He discovered that Adair was looking at Lethan with sympathy, apparently fully aware of how bothered Mayne's brother was, and that gave Mayne an idea. He touched Adair's shoulder to get her attention, nodded his head in Lethan's direction, then moved his hand in the air in a circle, hoping that Adair got his message before he spoke to Lethan again.

"Right now, brother, we need to consider Lady Adair," Mayne said briskly.

"She's just been through a terrible time, and really needs to be accompanied to a place where there are friendly people rather than assassins. While you do the accompanying, I'll help out with questioning the assassin to see if there's anything he knows."

"Yes, of course, I'd almost forgotten about Adair," Lethan said with what seemed like badly hidden relief as he turned back to them. "I'll see her to a place of safety while you take care of the assassin. If you learn anything, Mayne, please let me know as soon as possible."

Mayne nodded to show that he'd do just that, and then he got something of a surprise.

"Thank you for your consideration, Lethan," Adair said as she let him help her to her feet, a weary smile on her face that hadn't been there a moment ago. "As much as I like this spot, being somewhere else right now sounds like a much better idea."

Lethan immediately became very involved with helping her along, but not before she glanced at Mayne sideways in a very direct way. That glance said Adair was playing fragile in order to help distract Lethan, the very thing Mayne had asked her to do. Lethan was still shaken by what had almost happened, but Adair seemed completely recovered - not to mention ready to play the damsel in distress.

Mayne turned to watch the two leave the area, wishing that could be him Adair clung to rather than Lethan. But it was Lethan who needed someone clinging to him right now, so Mayne couldn't very well complain. But later he'd want to thank Adair for helping out, which ought to give him a chance to be alone with her. Yes, this could work out really well...

The guardsmen were now forcing the assassin out of the area and toward the hallway, so Mayne followed right after the group. But he had to work really hard not to whistle a happy tune while he walked...

* * *

When Adair let Lethan lead her into a well-filled visiting room, it took an instant before she understood that they weren't under attack again. The large number of people rushing at them were courtiers, all of them intent on finding out the details of the actual attack from the man who'd been the object of that attack.

"Yes, yes, of course I can tell you all what happened," Lethan answered the babble of questions, moving a few steps away after seating Adair in a

comfortable chair. Adair waited only until the crowd had followed Lethan away before leaving the chair again, certain that no one would see her do it. There were servants ranged around the room ready to dispense

refreshments, and what she wanted right now was a good strong cup of tea.

It didn't take long before Adair had her tea, but the way the servant had looked at her was more than just bothersome. The man had acted as if pouring tea for her was the greatest honor he'd ever had, his gaze above an adoring smile downright shining. Apparently everyone had heard things about the attack, and her certainty that everyone would believe Lethan had stopped the assassin didn't seem to be working out that way...

"Adair, are you all right?" Lisni demanded as she and Nossra practically ran Adair down hurrying to her side. "We heard that Lethan was attacked by an assassin, but you threw things at the assassin and knocked him out. Is that really what happened?"

"Okay, I see it now," Adair said with an inner groan. "Lethan should have taken all the credit instead of telling the truth to everyone who came in, but he didn't. This is all his fault."

"You sound as if you're blaming Lethan for speaking the truth," Nossra observed as she studied Adair with her head to one side. "I don't understand why you would do that when the truth gives you credit for saving the life of a prince."

"Oh, I see," Lisni said with satisfaction before Adair could think of a way to avoid going into long explanations. "Adair has been mounting a campaign against being chosen as one of the brides, and that's why she said what she did to the king last night. The fact that King Rodick flatly refused to talk about her during the meal means her plans were going well, but now..."

"But now she's a hero," Nossra said with a nod, showing that she, too, understood before turning her attention back to Adair. "Didn't you realize how foolish you were being when you saved Lethan's life, Adair? If you'd helped the assassin instead of stopping him..."

"It's not funny," Adair stated, hating the way the two girls were grinning at her. "Everything was going well, but now I'll probably have to attack someone myself before I'm crossed off the bride list. And to make matters even worse, not a single soul has come over to say how outraged they are about what I'm wearing."

"Give it a few minutes, and Dinra ought to oblige you," another voice said, causing all of them to turn. It was Elmini who had spoken, and the very faint smile on her surprisingly pretty face said she was actually joking. Elmini had dark blond hair that wasn't styled at all, a situation that distracted the viewer from noticing her big blue-green eyes.

"If this situation wasn't so interesting, I'd be tempted to say it was getting repetitive," Lisni commented as she studied Elmini along with Adair and Nossra. "First Nossra stops being a mouse in the background, and now you're taking your own turn, Elmini. Nossra got tired of waiting for things to become as perfect as she'd been promised they would be, so I can't help wondering if you're another victim of impatience."

"No, I didn't get tired of waiting for something I never expected to happen," Elmini answered, her smile widening just a little. "I kept away from you three just the way I kept away from Dinra and Aleena, thinking you were just as bad as those two. Then last night and today I learned differently, so I thought I'd come over to offer Adair my condolences. Bad move, Adair, but maybe you'll do better next time."

"Are you saying you're someone else who doesn't fit in, Elmini?" Adair asked, staring at the other girl with surprise. "Why didn't anyone know about it before now?"

"Mainly because I don't enjoy being hurt," Elmini answered, the smile disappearing as the look in her light eyes grew hard. "My loving father never touched me himself, but his people made it very clear that if I stepped even an inch out of line in public I'd live to regret the mistake. If they'd threatened to kill me instead I wouldn't have minded, but they were always very careful not to kill me. I was all ready to leave my father's house after paying a few ... debts, but suddenly I was packed off here instead."

Adair put her hand to the other girl's arm, offering compassion without messing up the gesture by trying to use words. Life hadn't been pleasant for Adair in her father's house, but at least she hadn't been physically hurt.

“Well, isn’t this a cozy grouping,” another voice came, and this time it was Dinra speaking with Aleena right behind her. “All the lower life forms congregating together for mutual support, correctly counting the chance of a lifetime lost. But you silly little fools are overlooking an important point. Aleena and I can only marry one of the princes each. The third prince will have to choose one of you as his bride, the poor man. That makes things much more interesting, doesn’t it?”

“Sorry, Dinra, but your ‘great revelation’ isn’t going to make any of us decide to join your group,” Lisni drawled, her very obvious amusement wiping the smirk from Dinra’s face. “Most of us don’t want to be chosen as a bride, but even if we did we’d rather pass on the chance than have to endure your company even for the rest of the week. The prize just isn’t worth that high a cost.”

“You’ll be sorry you said that, Lisni,” Dinra growled while Adair joined Nossa and Elmini’s soft laughter. “My father promised that I’d have one of the princes for my husband, and when I do I intend to spend my time making you and your mongrel friends’ lives even more miserable than they are right now. You wait and see if I don’t!”

And with that Dinra flounced away, an outraged Aleena right behind her again. Adair studied the two as they walked away, a disquieting thought having just come to her.

“You know, it’s only just now come to me that something isn’t right here,” Adair said, drawing the attention of the other girls. “Two dukes of this kingdom are demanding that their daughters be married to two of the king’s sons, and all the king does to show how independent he is is insist that the daughters of the rest of his dukes also show up? Am I the only one who thinks that that makes no sense?”

“Actually, now that you mention it, no,” Lisni said while the other two girls frowned. “If we had a weak king I could see him making a silly little gesture before agreeing to what was demanded, but Rodick isn’t weak. He’s strong enough to command our fathers to send their daughters and know he won’t be refused, so what are we really doing here?”

“I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m the daughter of one of those two dukes,” Nossa said, disturbance now showing in her light eyes. “My father told me that all I had to do was be my own sweet self with the princes, and I’d end up happily married. I considered that wishful thinking on my father’s part until I heard about his and Duke Lemish’s demand, but now I don’t know what to think. Is King Rodick really going to stand still for two of his vassals telling him what to do?”

“And if he isn’t going to stand still for the demand, what is he going to do instead?” Elmini added, showing they all felt the same. “Possibly make a big show of his sons getting to know all of us before telling Dinra and Nossa that they’re out of luck? I really do want to be out of my father’s house, but moving in with a husband wasn’t the way I intended to leave.”

“Do any of you think your father may have made a deal with King Rodick?” Lisni asked, looking around at all of them. “I’m sure my father didn’t, otherwise he would have told me. He and I have always gotten along really well, and he’s never lied to me even to protect my feelings. On top of that, everyone knows that my father is completely loyal to the king. So if there have been deals made, that would mean -“

“That would mean my name, Elmini’s, and Aleena’s are the only ones on the list of brides!” Adair finished before Lisni could, rage rising up inside her. “No wonder my father was so generous when he bribed me to come to this lousy place! He knew damned well I’d never be back to collect on his promise! Well, too bad for him and his friend the king. I now know exactly what I’m going to do.”

“Adair, I don’t like that look in your eyes,” Lisni said, worry clear in her voice and expression. “If the king is in the middle of trying to make an important point, he’s not going to enjoy having you ruining things.”

“Well, either he’ll get over it or he’ll have me executed,” Adair said, distantly surprised she wasn’t screaming out loud and destroying things. “At this point I don’t much care which he chooses, because when he announces the choices his sons have made I intend to refuse the ‘honor’ if my name is mentioned. But that doesn’t mean you have to do the same, Elmini. We all know Aleena won’t refuse, so - “

“So I can keep my head on my shoulders by keeping quiet?” Elmini said with that faint smile back again. “It’s fairly obvious I’ve been a coward most of my life, but that’s all over with now. My father can’t claim that he doesn’t know I don’t want to be married, not when I’ve said it so often. If my name is announced along with yours, Adair, they’ll have two of us refusing.”

“And then we can walk out of here together,” Adair said, finding it impossible not to show her own smile before turning to Nossa and Lisni. “But you two had better remember we’re just speculating. If you really have your heart set on being married to one of the princes, forget about what we just said and go for it. Even if your efforts don’t work, at least you ought to have fun trying.”

“No, I don’t think I’ll be joining in an effort like that,” Lisni said with a smile while Nossa grew happily thoughtful. “I suppose I like the princes well enough, but somehow they strike me as being ... too young, I guess you could say. We’re all pretty much the same age, but I tend to find greater attraction in more mature men.”

“Then maybe I ought to mention that my grandfather is now available,” Nossa said, still wearing the smile of enjoyment she’d developed a minute earlier. “My grandmother died ten years ago, and last week my grandfather announced he was thinking about looking around for a replacement for her.”

Lisni laughed while Elmini said something about how interesting a match that would be, but Adair was still too out of sorts to join the banter. Knowing her father had betrayed her again didn’t come as much of a shock, but the added bitterness was something else. If he liked betrayal so much, they’d see how well he liked her version...

* * *

Mayne followed behind the group of guardsmen dragging the assassin along with them, but once they all reached the punishment area of the palace there was a delay in continuing on to their destination. There seemed to be conflicting orders about where the assassin was supposed to be taken, some of the orders originating with Mayne’s father. So while a messenger was sent to the king with a request for clarification, they all stood in the punishment area and waited.

Sounds of crying were coming from a room to Mayne’s left, a room that had a wide archway rather than a door, so Mayne walked over to see what was happening. The first thing he saw to the right was a kitchen girl bent over, her skirts and apron held up high, her drawers down around her knees. One of the men responsible for discipline in the kitchens was using a light switch on the girl’s bottom, causing the girl to jump and yelp every time the switch reached her seat.

Mayne knew that the light switch was used for first-time offenses and moderate punishment, and the girl under the switch never got more than ten strokes. Even as he watched, two more measured strokes of the switch ended what the girl was obviously supposed to be given. The girl’s seat was red, of course, but not as red as it could have been. Still, when the girl was told to replace her clothing she began to cry harder even as she obeyed. Once her drawers were pulled up and her skirt and apron were back down, she’d feel the punishment even more sharply than she did right now.

But it wasn’t her crying that had originally taken Mayne’s attention. A second girl was being punished to the left, but this girl wasn’t standing up. The man administering the punishment sat in a chair with the girl draped over his lap, her skirt raised and her drawers down around her knees. This time, though, it wasn’t a light switch being used on the girl. The man held a flexible wooden rule, and it was the wide rule that struck the girl’s bottom over and over again.

The girl howled even when the rule wasn’t striking her clearly aching seat, the tears running down her face showing that the punishment had been going on for a while. This second girl must have done something more serious than what the first girl had done, but not something serious enough for her to be put in the small stocks and have a strap used on her. A girl in the stocks was strapped by everyone and anyone coming by, the punishment lasting for as long as she was kept in the stocks. Since people made it their business to come by if there was a girl in the stocks, only on very rare occasions did any girl ever end up there.

The man using the wooden rule wasn't holding back much if at all, and it looked like he meant to keep up the spanking for quite some time yet. Mayne saw the way the girl being spanked kicked and struggled and howled and cried, and the sight brought to mind the way Adair had taken her spanking. A spanking she really shouldn't have been given, a mistake he hadn't yet apologized for.

But how was he supposed to apologize for doing something because of the way he'd been lied to? Having to admit that he was a fool would have been hard enough, but having to confirm to Adair that her father really cared nothing about her would just be adding more pain. It was true that Adair needed a firm hand to keep her from doing wild, outrageous, and dangerous things, but that firm hand ought to be given with love and concern. She –

"Mayne, are you coming?" he heard, pulling him out of the turmoil of his thoughts. When he turned he saw his father, and the king looked more concerned than impatient.

"Yes, Father, of course I'm coming," Mayne answered at once, now seeing that the assassin's destination had been decided on at last. "I was ... just distracted a little."

"Probably thinking about the lady Adair," Mayne's father murmured once Mayne stood beside him, an odd expression in the king's eyes. "Is it really true that she saved Lethan's life?"

"That's what he's been telling everyone willing to listen, and I believe it," Mayne confirmed. "She looked a bit shaken when I got there, but she got over the shakiness before Lethan did."

"I'm not surprised," King Rodick said, drawing Mayne along when he began to follow after the group with the assassin. "A girl who showed no hesitation at all in confronting a king isn't likely to whimper and faint in the presence of an assassin. Did you ask Lethan about who might want him dead?"

"I did, and I believed him when he said he had no idea who he might have insulted," Mayne answered. "But Adair made a suggestion that I found disturbing. She pointed out how much alike my brothers and I look, so it's possible that the assassin was after Nallis or me and just made a mistake going after Lethan."

"Well, that we ought to be able to find out about," King Rodick said, his expression grim as he led the way into the room on the right that the assassin had been taken to. "It's possible the man can't tell us who paid him if the one who hired him took precautions, but he'll certainly be able to tell us who he was hired to kill."

Mayne had no trouble agreeing with that conclusion, so he simply stopped beside his father to watch the preparations being made. The assassin had been chained down to a wooden table, and the desperation in the man's eyes said he was very afraid.

"Someone gave orders that this filth was to be put in a cell in the dungeons rather than be taken directly to the questioners," Mayne's father remarked in a murmur. "If I hadn't issued my own orders immediately, I wonder just how long the filth would have been available to question."

"You think he would have been set free?" Mayne asked, feeling the frown he'd developed. "But that doesn't make any sense. Anyone wanting to set him free would have to go through the guards who would be standing in front of the cell. Just because the dungeon cells aren't guarded when no one is in them doesn't mean there aren't guards when someone is put in one."

"That was what I thought until I considered the matter for a minute or two," Mayne's father responded, still speaking softly. "It isn't possible to free an assassin who has been caught, but it is possible to help him escape having to face being questioned. I sent some men down to the dungeons to search the cells, but I'm already certain I know what they'll find."

"Some kind of poison, or maybe a dagger," Mayne said, the conclusion now obvious. "Is there any way to find out who gave the orders for the man to be taken to a cell instead of to the questioners?"

"That's something else I have people looking into, and I will get the answer if I have to put everyone in this palace to the question." King Rodick's statement came as no surprise to Mayne, who happened to agree with his father completely. If the assassin had succeeded, Mayne's brother would now be dead, and probably Adair as

well. Mayne felt nothing in the way of hesitation over hurting whoever was involved in this murderous plot, and when they finally found out who was behind it all...

"Good, they're getting started," Mayne's father said, drawing Mayne's attention to the man on the table - and the men who stood over him. "It shouldn't be long before we have an answer or two."

"No, you can't do this to me!" the assassin suddenly shouted, also struggling as the questioners began to cut away his clothes. "I don't know anything, so there's nothing I can tell you! Please, I don't know anything, and this isn't supposed to happen!"

"You expect the king to be merciful to a man who tried to kill one of his sons?" a questioner asked with a terrible smile as he watched the other questioners making the assassin ready. "If you really don't know anything you have my pity, but pity won't save you from what's about to be done. You were a fool to believe whoever told you that you'd escape being questioned, and now you get to pay for that foolishness - as well as for your stupidity in accepting gold as an assassin in the first place."

"But everyone accepts gold, and Prince Lethan isn't all that important anyway!" the man on the table protested, his voice beginning to go shrill. "I was promised that no one would ever know it was me who did the deed, and if the gods turned against me and I was caught anyway I would never have to worry about being questioned! He gave me his word about that, he swore by everything he held holy!"

"And it never occurred to you that some men hold nothing holy," the same questioner said with that same chill smile. "Would you like to tell me the name of the man whose actions turned the gods against him as well, or would you rather wait a short while before confessing?"

"No, please, I'll tell you his name right now," the would-be assassin whimpered, terror having taken him at sight of the instruments held by the other questioners. "I won't refuse to tell you, so those things won't have to be used on me. The man's name is Wedim Pann, and I've been working for him here in the palace as a servant for the last two months."

"It was good of you to give us a name so quickly," the questioner said, his expression unchanging. "Unfortunately for you, though, you gave us that name too quickly. Now we'll have to see what name you come up with after a short time of being ... convinced. If at any time the pain gets to be too much, just tell me the truth and we'll see about ending your torment."

"No!" the poor fool on the table screamed as the first knife was brought to his chest to open the skin and let his blood flow free. "I was supposed to give a different name if anyone ever asked, but I told the truth instead! Please, no!"

The man's words turned to pure screaming then, and Mayne exchanged a glance with his father. The king had sent one of the guardsmen to find Wedim Pann and keep an eye on the man, but to do nothing else unless Pann tried to leave the palace. It would be a while before they were certain the assassin had given them the right name, rather than pretending to be too stupid to hold anything back. Extreme pain tended to make men forget the role they happened to be playing, and that was the time Mayne and his father would wait for.

But Mayne knew the wait would not be easy, and that no matter how much the man on the table deserved what was being done to him...

Chapter Six

When Adair saw the tables being set up around the visiting room, she realized that someone had decided to serve a buffet lunch right there. It wasn't all that bad an idea, she decided, not when even more people -including Nallis - had come to hear Lethan's story.

Right now Adair stood a couple of steps away from the girls who had unexpectedly become her friends, aware of the fact that Lisni and the others hadn't disturbed her brooding on purpose. They seemed to know that her father had used her weakness against her, the weakness of wanting a father who could be believed. She needed some

time to get past the realization that she never would have a father like the one she used to dream about, and only then would she be able to associate with people normally again.

Once the food warmers with their underneath candles had been set up along the table against the back wall, another small table had been put to the right to hold stacks of plates for people to use. A couple of people had already gone over and taken plates, and now they headed for the warmers to see what they would choose for lunch. Oddly enough Adair felt the next thing to hollow, so she also made her way to the plate table ahead of a small group of people that included Nallis.

And then Adair glanced back to see the oddest thing. There was a servant standing to the left of the table, out of the way of those who wanted plates. The man just watched as various people, including Adair, chose their plates, but when Adair glanced back she saw that when it became Nallis's turn the servant handed him a plate, one from somewhere other than the handiest stack. Granted, Nallis was a prince in his father's palace, but Nallis had been reaching for a different plate before the servant handed him one. If being given special treatment was something to be expected, Nallis would not have been about to take his own plate.

But Nallis was too involved with laughing and joking with the people around him to notice the oddity, and no one else seem to notice either. If not for the attack on Lethan earlier Adair probably would have dismissed the oddity, but Lethan had been attacked by an assassin. That meant Adair hesitated not at all before she turned and pushed through the advancing crowd of people to stop in front of the prince.

"Nallis, wait a minute," she said, seeing the look of surprise on the prince's face. "Before you use that plate you were just given, you might want to take a really close look at it. It didn't come from —"

A scream of frustration suddenly sounded from the servant who stood by the table about ten feet away, and the next instant the man had a long dagger in his hand and was in the midst of running directly toward Nallis.

Everyone stood frozen in shock, everyone, that is, but Adair.

Feeling as if she'd already gone through the same scene once before, she moved her hand holding the plate in toward her body, then snapped it out in the direction of the charging servant. The round plate sped hard and true, hitting the servant in the middle of his face. The man went down as if he'd been pole-axed, and then the babble of hysteria broke out amidst the shouts of guardsmen who would have been much too late to save their prince.

"Is this some kind of game I'm missing the point of?" Adair asked Nallis above the hubbub. "You know, people try to kill you and your brothers, and the bunch of you get to see how long it takes for bystanders to intervene assuming they do? If this is a game, isn't there any other way to relieve your boredom?"

"You really are an incredible woman," Nallis returned as he stared at her, and then a grin broke through to his face. "I guess you could say this attack is my fault, because I've been feeling just a little jealous that Lethan got to be saved by you. Now you've done the same for me, so I have nothing left to be jealous about."

Adair suddenly felt like an absolute idiot, and silently cursing at herself did no good at all. Speaking to Nallis and then flinging that plate had been automatic actions, but even if she'd stopped to think about the matter she really couldn't have done any differently. She'd been caught in the middle again, and now things were even worse than they'd been.

"Adair, that was unbelievable," Nossia said with a laugh as she and Lisni and Elmini abruptly appeared. All three of them were laughing, even though they seemed to be trying not to. "But come to think of it, I suppose you did have to do it. I mean, one medal looks unbalanced, but now you'll have two."

"Reflexes are awful things, aren't they?" Elmini commented, amusement dancing in her light eyes. "But even so, I guess you had no choice in the matter. The gods obviously want the princes' lives saved, and you're the one they chose to do the job."

"I would have been better off if I'd just stepped in front of Nallis," Adair grumbled, not yet up to seeing the absurdly funny side of the happenings. "The assassin would have had to kill me first, and that would have given the guards enough time to keep him off Nallis. Why couldn't the gods have decided to do things that way?"

“Possibly because you should now have a way out of this marriage mess,” Lisni offered, her own amusement somehow on a different level. “After you saved the lives of two of his sons, the king shouldn’t find it possible to refuse your request to have your name taken off the bride list.”

“Lisni, you’re a genius!” Nossa exclaimed while Adair simply stared in shock, silently demanding why she hadn’t thought of that. “Now all we have to do is hope there are more assassins, and then figure out a way for Elmini to do the same as Adair.”

“If the assassins stick to daggers I shouldn’t have much of a problem,” Elmini said with what was becoming her usual smile, surprising all of them. “I happen to like knives of all sorts, so I’m not afraid of them the way most people are. And I used to watch my father’s guardsmen being trained in how to use their daggers, then I would go back to my apartment and practice with the dagger I’d stolen. I’m not bad with the weapon, even if I do say so myself.”

“If we do manage to get out of here, are you willing to give me some lessons?” Adair asked, distantly realizing how odd it seemed to hear a woman in an ordinary day gown talk about using weapons.

“If you’ll teach me how to throw things the way you do, you have a deal,” Elmini answered, her smile widening. “The more you know about how to defend yourself, the better off you are - but only if you’re willing to use what you know. I spent too long a time backing away from using what I know, but those days are over.”

“Nallis is overseeing the guardsmen taking away that assassin, so why don’t we all get something to eat?” Lisni suggested as she turned back from watching what she’d just described. “Most of these poor people are too upset over what they just saw to want a meal, probably because they’re picturing themselves being attacked. Since I don’t really care whether or not I’m attacked, my sensibilities aren’t quite as delicate as theirs. Shall we?”

“Good idea,” Nossa answered while Adair and Elmini just nodded their agreement. “I don’t really want to die, but it’s come to me that if I do get killed I won’t have to keep worrying about what’s likely to ruin my life next. The idea of being completely out from under is oddly comforting.”

Adair had no trouble seeing the truth of that point of view, and it was clear that Elmini and Lisni also agreed. To find herself less alone should have made Adair feel better, but it suddenly came to her that she actually felt worse.

“Do you girls realize we’ve just agreed that dying would be easier on us than continuing to live?” Adair demanded, stopping them all on their way to get plates. “We’re not quite up to the point of committing suicide like your cousin, Nossa, but if things just keep getting worse we may eventually reach that point. Why does the king refuse to see that?”

“Maybe it’s because no one has ever bothered to tell him just how bad things are,” Lisni suggested after a long moment, her expression now as disturbed as those shown by the other girls. “He may not care even once he’s told and has been convinced it’s the truth, but he really ought to be given a chance to change things.”

“Since he’s not a woman, I doubt if he will change things,” Adair said, remembering the way she’d been simply brushed aside before dinner the previous night. “What he and the other men need is a taste of what we’ve had to live with for so long, but at the moment I can’t think of a way to accomplish that. Putting a knife to the king’s throat probably won’t do the job.”

“And even if the king agreed, the other men in the kingdom would certainly refuse,” Elmini pointed out with a shake of her head. “I know for a fact that my father would refuse, even if his title and all the gold and property ended up in my mother’s possession. I love my mother dearly, but she’s such a frightened, delicate little thing that I decided when I was very young not to ever become the same.”

“My mother is just the way they all wanted me to be,” Nossa said, her expression now sad. “She’s sweet and very reasonable and never raises her voice, and if she was ever put in charge she’d have no idea what to do.”

“But my mother would know exactly what to do,” Lisni put in, her own expression showing more amusement.

“No one is allowed to tell her what to do, not even my father, and Father seems to enjoy that state of affairs even

more than she does. They were both delighted when I turned out to be so much like her.”

They’d all started to move toward the plates again, so Adair followed along behind them without joining the discussion. She could barely remember her own mother, but the general impression she had was of a very unhappy woman. Which, considering the fact that the woman was married to Adair’s father, wasn’t terribly surprising.

Adair went with the other women to get some food, but she couldn’t help wondering what her own life would have been like if her mother had been able to marry a man she loved and liked rather than one who had been forced on her...

* * *

Mayne joined his father in leaving the questioning room, knowing as well as the king did that they had all the answers they were going to get. The assassin’s screams hadn’t been pleasant to listen to, but the man’s extreme pain and fear had shown that he hadn’t been lying about who had paid him to attack Lethan. And it was definitely Lethan the man had been after...

“What’s this?” Mayne heard his father say, the words making him leave his thoughts for the world around him. The first thing he saw was a group of guardsmen carrying someone who was unconscious and bleeding from the mouth, and then Nallis and Lethan were striding forward from behind the procession.

“Father, Mayne, you won’t believe it,” Lethan called out as soon as he and Nallis were close enough. “This time it was Nallis who was attacked, and in a worse way than I was. First they tried to poison him, and when that didn’t work they fell back on trying to use a dagger. We wanted to tell you sooner, but no one seemed to know where you were.”

“We were here, listening to the first assassin being questioned,” King Rodick responded, now frowning at the unconscious servant who was just beginning to stir. “How many of the guard did it take to stop this one?”

“The guardsmen came into it only after the man was stopped,” Nallis answered, and for some reason he and Lethan were both wearing wide grins. “Adair did it again, first by noticing the poisoned plate I’d been given, and then by sending flying the plate she was holding. The plate she threw hit this one right in the mouth and hard enough to knock him out, not to mention taking out some of his teeth.”

“Nallis and I have been trying to figure out a way to decide which one of us gets her as a wife,” Lethan put in as soon as Nallis finished his tale. “Adair may argue a lot, but when it comes to doing the right thing she doesn’t hesitate at all. She went pale after the attempt on me, but this time she didn’t seem bothered at all.”

“I don’t like the sound of this at all,” King Rodick said while Mayne clamped his jaw shut on the words he wanted to say to his brothers. Adair was his wife, and it looked like Lethan and Nallis would have to be told about that sooner than he and his father had expected.

“What is it you don’t like, Father?” Lethan asked as their father stared at the assassin who was now coming back to himself even more. “If you’re talking about the assassination attempts, I have to say that I’m not terribly happy about them myself.” “The attempts are bad enough, but what I really don’t like is the thought I just had,” King Rodick answered, finally turning to look at his two sons. “Is there any chance at all that Lady Adair was able to stop these two attempts because she’s involved with them in some way? Just think about it: two murderous attempts, and it’s a woman who stops them both? Doesn’t that strike you as highly unlikely?”

All amusement was suddenly gone from Lethan and Nallis, and Mayne had no trouble understanding why. What their father had suggested was so disturbing that for a moment Mayne stood silent in shock, but then the shock was gone and Mayne shook his head.

“No, Father, it isn’t possible that Adair could be involved with whoever is behind the attacks,” Mayne stated, never more sure of anything in his life. “I think you’re forgetting that given her own choice in the matter, Adair would be just about anywhere else than here. Not only did she have to be bribed to come, she’s spent most of her

time alone since she got here. And she also doesn't know anyone in the palace. How would she know who to offer gold to, assuming she actually had enough gold to offer, which I seriously doubt she does."

"Mayne's right, Father," Lethan said while their father continued to look concerned. "It was perfectly clear that Adair had gotten to the atrium a number of minutes before I did, and just as clear that she wasn't expecting anyone else to show up. She couldn't have gone there knowing I would show up, not when I haven't spent time near the atrium in months. The assassin must have followed me there."

"The assassin admitted following Lethan there, Father," Mayne added, remembering the screamed out words that his father might have somehow missed. "He said it while he was desperately trying to think of things that would stop the questioning, so it's hardly likely that he lied."

"And there really wasn't time for Adair to arrange the second attempt," Lethan pursued. "I escorted her to the visiting room myself, and the only ones she spoke to there were three of the other ducal daughters."

"Not to mention the fact that one of the guardsmen found a second plate near where this servant was standing at the plates table," Nallis put in. "If no one had interfered, Lethan would certainly have been given that second plate. The arrangement says someone is seriously after our lives, but that someone can't possibly be Adair."

"All right, you've convinced me," King Rodick grudging, clearly not as happy about the conclusion as Mayne wanted him to be. "I doubt if we'll find out anything new from this second assassin, but that's not to say we won't try. Let's get him to a questioning room and we'll see what the questioners can pull out of him."

"Father, wait a minute," Mayne said after examining the assassin with his gaze. The former servant had been put on his feet once he was completely conscious, and had been struggling against the guardsmen's holds for a couple of minutes. The servant had a ring beard and mustache, but the blood from his mouth had seeped down into the beard and a corner of that beard looked odd. Mayne reached out to that corner and pulled, and both beard and mustache immediately pulled free of the face they'd been on. "It's not a man, it's a woman!" Nallis blurted, the shock he showed just as clear in everyone else as well. "I don't believe this!"

"Of course you don't, because you're a fool," the woman snarled, lisping through her broken teeth. "You're all fools and you deserve to be dead. Go ahead and let your torturers question me, but don't expect to get any answers. I'll die before I'll speak."

Looking at the tall, thin woman while his brothers both spoke at the same time, Mayne had no trouble believing her. It was perfectly obvious that this woman was tougher than the man captured first, and a glance at his father showed Mayne the additional problem they now faced.

Adair might complain that women had no rights in this kingdom, but one thing women did have was an edge when it came to the matter of being questioned. King Rodick had always refused to allow women to be put to the question, and the expression Mayne's father now showed in his eyes said he would find it impossible to change his mind about that stance. Mayne happened to agree, but maybe there was another way...

"Dying isn't very hard for someone with courage," Mayne said, breaking a silence that had put smug satisfaction on the woman's damaged face. "You expect at least a small delay before we work ourselves up to putting a woman to the question, and during that time you think you'll be kept in a cell in the dungeons. That part doesn't bother you at all, because you've been told that your escape into death can be found in whatever cell you're put in."

"But that's not true any longer," King Rodick said with his own satisfaction as the woman scowled at Mayne. "We found the vials of poison put into every cell, and now those vials are elsewhere. You won't escape the consequences of your actions by dying when you want to. Your death will come only at my pleasure, and that pleasure will be a long time in coming if you refuse to tell me what I want to know."

"Then why don't you have your questioners get started?" the woman challenged, an oddly steady look in her dark eyes. "I said I'm not afraid to die and I mean it."

“As I’ve already pointed out, dying is easy,” Mayne said when his father just ground his teeth in frustration. “There’s a way to question you that won’t cause your death, but will be more humiliating and painful than anything you’ve probably ever had to face. How willing are you to face life rather than death?”

“You’re babbling and bluffing,” the woman stated, but the ghost of doubt slid through her eyes for a moment. “There isn’t anything you can do to me that I can’t take, so let’s just go straight to the execution. All this talk is nothing more than wasting time.”

“I have nothing more pressing right now, so wasting a little time is fine,” Mayne said, having glanced at his father to get a small nod. The king had given his permission for Mayne to try his idea, even though the king seemed as puzzled as Lethan and Nallis. “Guardsmen, bring her this way.”

Mayne led the way back toward the punishment area for female kitchen workers, a place he was sure the woman had never been taken to even if she happened to be a real servant in the palace. The woman was too self-assured to have ever been given a girl’s punishment, and that could be the key to breaking her silence. “Put her in the stocks,” Mayne directed once they all entered the punishment area. “From this side, of course, facing her toward the wall.”

The guardsmen had hesitated, having no experience with putting girls in position for punishment, but once Mayne had given them the necessary directions they didn’t hesitate. The woman they held struggled even harder to escape, but that didn’t stop her from being bent over the padded bar before her head and hands were closed into the frame of the stocks.

One of the men in charge of giving kitchen girls the proper punishment came over to help, so there was a lot less trouble getting the female assassin placed properly. When the man began to take down the woman’s trousers, she tried to struggle even harder.

“You bastards!” she screamed as her trousers and drawers were lowered to her ankles and her shirt lifted up. “If you don’t do this to men, you can’t do it to me!”

“I’d be willing to wager gold that your predecessor in assassination would have chosen this method of questioning in an instant over what was actually done to him,” Mayne commented. “That’s the real reason why he was put to the question in his way, and you’re being questioned like this. Our doing something you’ll have no trouble resisting doesn’t make much sense. If you change your mind about talking, we’ll be right here watching.”

The woman screamed again in rage, but escape just wasn’t possible. She was bent over the padded bar with her head and hands trapped by the stocks, her surprisingly well-rounded backside perfectly positioned for the man who had fetched a strap. The leather strap was only a little more than an inch wide, but there was no doubt that it would do the job that needed to be done. When the king nodded his permission to the man holding the strap, the odd questioning was immediately started.

But at first there was no real response. When the first stroke reached the female assassin’s backside she jumped, but after that she seemed to be gritting her teeth. The strap struck her bottom again and again, each time leaving a reddened track of its presence, but it wasn’t ordinary questioning she was resisting.

It was a girl’s punishment the assassin was being given, nothing that came even close to being fatal, and that was the point Mayne was counting on to reach her. If she’d been given true hurt she would have been able to hold out using the terrible pain as a barrier to hide behind, but the pain being given her by the strapping wasn’t the same thing at all.

Better than a dozen strokes of the strap fell one by one on that round seat, turning the woman’s nether cheeks more and more red, but not a sound came out of her. Mayne was certain that the male assassin would probably be begging to talk by now, but the woman was stronger than that. She’d obviously decided to hold out against what was being done to her, so Mayne made a decision of his own to help matters along.

“I think we need to bring a few more people in here,” he commented to his father in a loud enough voice that the woman would have no trouble hearing him even over the smack of the strap being applied to her bottom. “Once

the man in charge of discipline finishes giving her the fifty or sixty strokes he usually gives, we'll want enough people on hand to continue with the ... questioning."

"And I know just who those others should be," the king agreed at once, obviously understanding Mayne's objective and helping out with it. "The members of my court who were present when this female tried to murder my son... They'll enjoy seeing an assassin being treated like this, and they'll also be delighted to help out."

"No, you can't!" the woman screamed, and it was possible to hear the pain she felt in the tone of her voice. "Those parasites will laugh their useless heads off, laugh at me when they see what's being done! You can't bring them in here!"

"I can and I will," the king disagreed calmly, ignoring the hiss of pain forced out of the woman by the continuing punishment. Having the strap continue to land on her bottom was getting harder for the woman to bear, now that her concentration had been broken. "Yes, my people probably will laugh at you, and most will likely keep laughing even while they take their turn at using the strap on you. But what's done won't kill you, and not even the most protective of the men toward women will say a word about any of it. As my son said, you will live through this."

"All right, damn you, you've made your point," the woman gasped out after a long moment, her voice a good deal more uneven now. "Make him stop hitting me, and I'll tell you anything you want."

"No, that's not the way questioning is handled," Mayne said, putting a hand to his father's arm before the king was able to order the strapping stopped. "First you tell us what we want to hear, and only then do we consider ending the painful part. Who paid you to kill my brothers?"

"It - was someone named - Radeem Forril," the woman got out after another hesitation, all but speaking through gritted teeth. "Why are you - asking me that when - you should already - have the name?"

"That's not the name we have," Mayne answered, ignoring the small noises now coming out of the woman's throat every time the strap reached her backside. "We've never heard of anyone by that name, so it seems you're not as ready to talk to us as we all thought. Maybe we ought to send a guardsmen for your courtiers, Father, and then they'll be right here to -"

"No, I'm not lying!" the woman screamed, and now she danced in place to the urging of the strap. "The one who paid me tried to pretend it was Wedim Pann who sent him, but I followed the man after he left me and saw him talking to Forril! He was reporting to Forril, damn you, and that means he was sent by Forril!"

"How did you know that two plates had to be poisoned?" the king put in after exchanging a disturbed glance with Mayne. "Was the second plate for my eldest son rather than for the next eldest?"

"The second plate - was for - the one who escaped his just due!" the woman panted out with small screams between the words. "Everyone heard about that escape - and I was - supposed to take over - if that happened! Make him stop now! You have to make him stop!"

"You admit you were ready to kill two of my sons and now expect leniency from me?" the king asked, his voice and expression having turned very hard. "I think we'll let this punishment continue to its end, and then you'll be allowed to live with the results for a while before you're executed. By the time we're done, you really will be eager for death."

The woman screamed again, this time wordlessly and with desperation clear in the sound. When she began to beg for the strapping to stop, the king turned and led the way out of the room. Mayne followed after him, having seen more than enough of the blazing red of the woman's bottom, and his brothers seemed to feel the same. They left as quickly as Mayne did, amusement conspicuous by its absence among all of them.

Chapter Seven

"I could use a drink, but I'm going to settle for tea," the king announced once Mayne and his brothers had

followed their father into a small meeting room. “There are a number of things we have to talk about, so I would suggest that the rest of you get drinks of some kind as well.”

The king had rung for a servant as soon as he walked into the room, so it wasn’t long before the servant appeared. Mayne ordered dark tea like his father and his brothers also settled on tea, but the servant wasn’t sent back to the kitchens alone. Two guardsmen went along to make sure nothing was added to the tea, a precaution Mayne hated but was still glad for.

“Do you really know nothing about Radeem Forril?” the king asked Mayne once they’d all taken seats. “What about you, Lethan? And you, Nallis?”

“I wasn’t lying, Father,” Mayne said while his brothers shook their heads. “I’ve never heard of the man, but I’m guessing that you have.”

“I’ve had a report on the man, just as I get reports on everyone in the palace I’m not completely sure of,” the king said with a sigh. “Forril spends most of his time among the servants, talking them up while being open and friendly and even helpful. He’s made loans a few times, and doesn’t get nasty even if a loan repayment is a bit late in reaching him. That could be because he never makes loans to people who can’t be counted on to pay him back.”

“So he spends time here in the palace but doesn’t work for anyone but himself,” Mayne summed up. “And he has silver at least, probably gold as well, even though he doesn’t work for any of it. Or at least he doesn’t work for anyone openly. How long has he been hanging around, Father?”

“Less than two months, and he never does anything to bring himself to the notice of guardsmen,” the king answered. “If I didn’t have people who are paid to keep their eyes open for everything and anything, no one but the servants would know he was there.”

“But the servants are the major weak point in a palace like ours, so it only makes sense to keep an eye out for anyone wanting to take advantage of them and us,” Lethan put in, looking as disturbed as the rest of them. “We’re so used to seeing the servants around we usually don’t notice them any longer, which means they’re virtually invisible most of the time. Paying even a few of them to do something other than serve could end up being enough to reach every one of us.”

“Which is why from now on I want all of you to be armed at all times,” the king said, looking at each of his sons in turn. “I’ve also arranged to have guardsmen on and in your apartments, but those arrangements won’t do a thing to end whatever is going on. What we need to do is find out who’s behind all this.”

“I’d suggest questioning this Forril the way you questioned that first assassin, but that might not do any good,” Nallis fretted, definitely sharing the disturbance Mayne felt himself. “If I were behind these attacks I’d make sure there were lots of layers between me and the ones doing the actual dirty work, so what we really need to know is who Forril reports to. Without that someone knowing we’re on to Forril, so he’ll go to whoever he reports to, and so on up the ladder.”

“I doubt if we’ll have enough time to handle things in just that way,” Mayne disagreed, having been thinking about the problem. “If someone near the top of that ladder you mentioned has orders not to approach the real power behind the attempts until the plan has been successful, we could watch the underlings until we die of old age and still not find out anything useful. What we really need to do is watch Forril to see which of the servants he approaches, and then put a watch on those servants. At least that way we ought to avoid any more attacks of the same kind that have already been made before we figure out who’s after our blood.”

“Watching to see who Forril contacts is already being taken care of,” the king said, satisfaction showing briefly in his eyes. “I’ve also arranged for a couple of very obvious men to watch Wedim Pann, pretending I believe the accusation against him. When Forril sees Pann being watched he’ll hopefully consider himself completely in the clear.”

“Which ought to go some toward saving our necks,” Nallis said, then a smile creased his face. “And speaking

about saving our necks, what are we going to do to reward the woman who saved two necks? Aside from having me marry her, of course.”

“Marrying you would be more penalty than reward,” Lethan said at once with a grin. “We really do have to give the poor girl more than that - like marrying me, for instance.”

Mayne’s gaze went to his father, only to find that his father was already looking at him. There was serious consideration in the king’s eyes, but before anything could be said there was a knock at the door. Calling out permission to enter brought two servants with the tea into the room, and the next couple of minutes were taken up with getting them all served.

The continuing presence of the same guards said Mayne and his family didn’t have to worry about drinking what they’d been given, which they did while the servants left again. Mayne expected part of the previous topic of conversation to be dropped after that very timely interruption, and when his father began to speak he became sure of it.

“I’m going to need some time to think of the best way to reward Adair for saving two of my sons,” the king said with a small shake of his head. “If she were a man there would be no problem, especially if she also happened to be from the lower classes. But she isn’t a man and she isn’t from the lower classes, so finding a fitting reward is going to take some doing. In the meantime I’ll speak to her privately before dinner and at least give her my thanks.”

“I would suggest that Nallis and I be allowed to join you in that, Father,” Lethan said. “Neither he nor I actually went so far as to thank Adair, and we really need to do that.”

“That’s a good idea, but there’s something you need to know first,” the king said, interrupting whatever Nallis had been about to add to what Lethan had said. “You two can thank Adair all you like, but offering her marriage can’t be part of what you say. Mayne and I had intended to keep this quiet until the end of the week, but circumstances caused him to sign a marriage contract with Duke Elden before Mayne left the duke’s house to come here with Adair. The girl doesn’t know it and isn’t to find out until the end of the week, but she’s already married.”

“It could be that Duke Elden was afraid Adair would be too ... vocal for any of us to want her for a wife,” Mayne put in while his brothers exclaimed in surprise. “He’s in line to get a lot of benefit out of having his daughter married to one of us, and losing out on that benefit would hardly sit well with him. If that’s the reason he maneuvered me into signing the contract early, he can’t really be blamed for doing something to eliminate all his worries.”

“It’s not possible to argue that Adair isn’t happy about being here,” Nallis put in after exchanging a glance with Lethan. “I’ve been joking about marrying her, Mayne, but I really do like her too much to want to be in the place you are right now. When you finally have to tell her you’re her husband... If hearing that doesn’t shatter her, she’ll probably strike out in all directions.”

“And I’d hate to have her striking out at me,” Lethan agreed just as soberly. “The way she threw that fruit at the assassin... It was perfectly clear she was frightened, but instead of screaming and fainting she attacked in return. I like her too, and she’s a really beautiful woman, but being married to her won’t be easy.”

“It won’t be easy at first,” Mayne corrected, refusing to share his brothers’ misgivings. “She’s a very unhappy girl, but I mean to show her that she doesn’t have to run away to change that state of affairs. When you speak to her later, Father, I’d like to be here also.”

“Of course, Mayne,” the king agreed. “But after I tell her that she’ll be rewarded, I think Lethan and Nallis ought to escort her in to dinner. I’ll have the seating rearranged just for tonight, and when I announce her heroism she can enjoy the applause she’ll get. Now I’d like to hear if any of you suspect who might be behind these attacks. If you do, we can see if the man has a really good reason for going ahead with even more attacks. If you need a minute or two to think, take the time.”

Mayne had to pull his thoughts away from Adair before he could think about the subject his father wanted him to consider, and that wasn't easy. The girl had barely glanced at him since they got to the palace, and she certainly hadn't spoken to him. That was the first thing he had to find a way to change, but short of being attacked while Adair was nearby, how was he supposed to do that...?

* * *

Adair walked into the gathering room near the dining room to find that Lisni, Nossa, and Elmini had already gotten there ahead of her. The three girls wore older gowns like the one Adair had worn the night before - and now wore again - and they all smiled when Adair joined them.

"So tonight you're wearing red while the rest of us are wearing various shades of blue," Lisni observed with amusement. "Does that mean you intend to do something else to make you stand out from the crowd, or is that very bright color enough?"

"I still won't be curtsying to the king if that's what you mean," Adair answered with her own amusement as she glanced around. "And tonight I'm wearing red so no one can miss the fact that I haven't changed my mind."

"I've been thinking about joining you in that, but we haven't quite reached the proper time yet," Elmini said with her own amusement. "I don't want to distract anyone from noticing how many of the women here have changed from the newest style of gown and gone back to the style you prefer."

"That comes to more than three quarters of the courtiers' wives," Nossa pointed out as Adair looked around in surprise. "That also includes those of us standing here, but not, of course, Dinra and Aleena. Those two fashion plates are still wearing barrels."

"But that's not to say they haven't noticed how small an amount of company they have," Lisni added. "Dinra is furious and Aleena is outraged, but then Aleena is always outraged. Dinra is the one you'll have to watch, especially if she comes over with a smile to offer you a knife to cut your food with. The knife will be for your back, not your food." "If our theories are right, I can't wait until Dinra finds out that Aleena will be one of the brides but she won't be," Nossa said with a very evil smile. "Aleena will instantly snub Dinra, and then the fur ought to really fly."

All four of them laughed at that, but before Adair could make a comment of her own, a servant approached their group and bowed.

"Your pardon, ladies, but His Majesty would like a few words with the Lady Adair before dinner," the servant said with his own smile. "If you'll follow me, my lady?"

The man's second bow was obviously only for Adair, so after a shrug and an exchanged glance with the others, Adair followed the servant. If the king meant to get the matter of her curtsying taken care of before it became a public argument again, there was a good chance she would end up missing dinner entirely. Or thrown out, which was what she'd been trying for all along...

The servant led Adair to a room just a short distance from the gathering room, opened the door, then bowed her through. Not only was the king there and already dressed for dinner, but he and his sons, who stood ranged behind him, all wore swords.

Normally Adair might have wondered at the men being armed, but after two deadly attacks it would have been strange if they hadn't been armed. Adair walked into the room far enough to let the servant close the door again behind her, and then she simply stood and waited for the king to get to the reason he'd sent for her.

"Lady Adair, how good of you to answer my summons," the king said after a brief moment, the dryness of his tone perfectly clear. "One of the reasons men are allowed certain liberties that women aren't is because men are wise enough to know when to stop pushing. Women who push seem never to have been told about a stopping point."

"But of course women know when to stop pushing," Adair answered with a faint smile. "Women stop pushing

when they get what they've been pushing for. Was this what you wanted to see me about?"

"Not at all," the king returned, and the man actually seemed to be swallowing amusement. "The reason I asked you in here was to thank you personally for saving the lives of two of my sons. They're here themselves for the same purpose, and when they escort you in to dinner they'll be right beside you when I make my thanks public. There will also be a reward for your actions, and as soon as I decide what reward would be most appropriate I'll make that announcement public as well."

"I accept your offer of a reward, and can even save you the trouble of deciding what the reward should be," Adair said at once, not about to let the opportunity slip past. "The only thing I want is your agreement to my leaving here right now, that and a horse and some gold, all of which will be a reward for you as well as me. After I'm gone you'll never have to worry about someone not bowing or curtsying to you again."

"Adair, that's not going to happen," King Rodick said gently after a long moment, all traces of amusement now gone. "You and the others will be my guests for the entire week, and only those who haven't been chosen by my sons as brides will be free to leave at that time. Are you saying you find life here so unpleasant that you insist on leaving before the week is up?"

"Yes," Adair answered, almost angry enough to tell the king what she and the others had figured out about what would happen at the end of the week. "And if what I asked for is too difficult for you to provide, don't try to give me anything else. If you do, I promise I'll tell you what to do with your reward even if everyone in the world is standing around listening."

Adair turned then and walked to the door, but the king's hand was on her arm before she could open it.

"Listen to me, girl, and listen well," the king said, something of a growl now in his voice. "There are things in this world more important than the good opinion of a slip of a girl, so I suggest you adjust yourself to that truth. I'm grateful for what you did for my sons, but not grateful enough to let you ruin plans you aren't even aware of. If you behave yourself and stop trying to show what a martyr you are, we'll all find life a good deal more pleasant."

"But I'm not a martyr," Adair corrected without turning her head to look at the king. "I'm not about to sacrifice myself for anyone or anything, and if you're foolish enough to think I will you'll be very disappointed. Right now I'd appreciate your letting go of my arm so I can go back to my apartment. Or to your dungeon, if you prefer. I couldn't care less which you choose."

"What you'll do is go into dinner and behave yourself, or you'll learn to care about the difference between your apartment and a dungeon cell," the king stated. "Lethan, Nallis... Come over here, please, and escort the Lady Adair to table."

There was a small hesitation before the two men came over to Adair, and when they did they discovered that Adair wasn't looking at them either. She simply stood staring at the door, making no effort to take the arms being offered to her. The two men ended up having to take her hands to place them on their arms, then they had to use their free hands to hold her hands in place. By the time they were ready to leave the room, the four men were almost as angry as Adair.

Their small procession didn't take long to get to the gathering room near the dining room, and after all the bowing and curtsying they led the way to where the tables waited. Adair was deliberately paying attention to nothing, but she couldn't help noticing that the slow pace their procession kept to had let the other girls be taken to their places at the head table first.

At another time the fact that Dinra had been given Adair's old place at the extreme right of the table would have been amusing - along with Dinra's furious anger. On Dinra's left was Aleena and her outrage, then Elmini, Nossa, and Lisni. The five unoccupied chairs had been left for the men with Adair and Adair herself, who was taken to the chair right in the middle. Lethan stood to her left beside the king and Nallis to her right beside Mayne, and the two men made sure Adair didn't sit down until the king had settled himself.

Once everyone else in the room was settled, the king made a speech about heroism and gratitude, and then

everyone rose to drink a toast to the woman who had saved the lives of two princes. Adair wondered if the king would be foolish enough to give her a chance to say something, but even a complete fool would have known better and the king wasn't a fool. Rodick sat down again after the toast, letting everyone else do the same, and then the food began to be served.

"There, now, doesn't that look good?" Lethan said to Adair when the plates of the first course were put in front of them, his tone coaxing. "After you get some food into you I know you'll feel better about things."

"And you have to remember that this isn't your father's house," Nallis added in the same tone from her right. "You have people around you now who really do care about you, and if you take the trouble to look around you'll find that that makes all the difference."

Adair was really tempted to laugh in Nallis's face, but that would have meant acknowledging those around her as alive, and she wasn't prepared to give them the satisfaction. Only men could owe their lives to someone, refuse to give that someone what she asked for, and then insist they cared for the someone. If they were speaking to someone else who was male the someone else would probably have believed them, but unfortunately for them they spoke to someone with a mind.

"Adair, you're not touching the food," Lethan said after a long moment, then the coaxing returned to his tone. "I know you have to be hungry, so let's make a deal. If you want to argue or even shout at Nallis and me, we'll make ourselves available right after the meal. But now it's time to eat, so let's do it together."

The room was filled with a soft buzz of conversation to be heard behind the music of the orchestra playing at one side of the very large room. Adair leaned back in her chair and listened to the music, not in the least tempted by the thought of eating. The king had said his plans were more important than she was, but that was his opinion. She was not about to let others use her life as a bargaining chip, not even if she lost that life entirely because of the refusal.

The meal dragged on and on, and after a while Lethan and Nallis stopped trying to coax Adair into eating. At each course full plates were put in front of her after the previous full plates were taken away, and then there was someone else who felt it necessary to comment.

"Adair, making yourself sick by going hungry won't accomplish anything at all," Mayne said, leaning past Nallis to speak to her. "If you really feel we're in the wrong, what you want to do is stay as strong as possible in order to speak out on your stance. If you let yourself weaken to the point of illness, all you'll be able to do is lie in bed while others decide your fate."

"She's not hearing you either, Mayne," Lethan pointed out after a moment when it was clear that Adair had no intention of commenting. "What she could have said, though, is that she's the only one in the room who isn't paying attention to what's going on here. Everyone else seems to have noticed that the guest of honor isn't touching her food, and at the very least they're wondering why."

"Wonder isn't what I've been seeing," Nallis put in dryly. "Those people all look disturbed to me, disturbed over the fact that someone who saved the lives of two of us can be treated in a way that makes her lose her appetite."

"Maybe we can spread the word that she's being punished for disrespect to her king," Mayne suggested after another awkward moment. "If the courtiers hear that she was spanked hard before the meal and was told that she'd have her pretty round bottom spanked again if she touched any of the food, they could well believe the story. Spanking a naughty girl and then sending her to bed hungry most often turns the naughty girl into a good girl."

"And the only way she can prove the story a lie is to eat something right now," Lethan said smoothly while Adair ground her teeth in furious anger. "If she doesn't disprove the story, pretty soon everyone will be picturing her bent over someone's lap, her skirt up and her drawers down, a hard hand being applied to her seat. By the time that seat grows red enough she'll be kicking and howling, but that won't stop the spanking."

"No, the spanking will go on and on, up to the time she begs to apologize and probably even beyond," Nallis put

in, his amusement not quite as well-swallowed as Lethan's had been. "By then she'd be crying as well as howling, and her kicking would be a lot less because of the growing ache in her backside. And all because she was too unreasonable to recognize sense when she heard it. We're just about up to dessert, Adair, but that doesn't matter. If I have a plate of food brought to you, will you eat it?"

Rather than answer in words, Adair stood up, shoved her chair back, then strode away from the table and out of the room. If anyone at all had tried to stop her she would have let the rage inside her flare out in all directions, but no one made the mistake of trying to get in her path. She went all the way to her apartment and inside, ordered the servants to leave and not come back, then went to a sideboard where decanters and glasses stood.

Drinking anything but tea and the occasional glass of wine wasn't usual for Adair, but she needed something to quiet the flames of rage burning so high inside her. As soon as everyone was looking another way she would be gone from this miserable place, but first she would have to wait until everyone stopped looking. A friend had once told her about "drowning his sorrows" in a glass, and from time to time since then she'd thought about trying the same herself.

Now she finally had a reason to try it, her hatred of the man called Mayne Toram. As a monstrous son to a horrible father he was more than perfect, and the first swallow from the glass she'd filled helped her build her hatred even higher...

* * *

Mayne slumped back in his chair as he watched Adair almost run out of the room, silently demanding of the gods to know why everything he tried with the girl turned out to be wrong. When she hadn't responded to his first try at getting her to eat he'd gone on to the idea his brothers' comments had given him, but that second idea had turned out to be a complete disaster.

"Well, so much for using her own pride against her," Lethan said, a sigh clear behind the words. "If I'd been threatened like that I probably would have stuffed down everything put in front of me, at the same time cursing at everyone doing the threatening. I'm afraid to ask what she'll do instead."

"One of the things she did was walk out before the meal was completely over," their father said, leaning just a little past Lethan. "Most of my courtiers are in shock now, but I had no choice about letting her leave. If I'd tried to have her stopped and dragged back to the table..."

Mayne's nod joined those of his brothers, all of them understanding the point clearly. When you're supposedly giving someone official thanks for something they did, using guardsmen to force that someone into accepting the thanks tends to ruin the image you've been trying for.

"I don't know about you and Mayne, Lethan, but I really regret what I said to the girl," Nallis offered after a brief moment of silence among them. "If I'd stopped to think about it I would have known that Adair wasn't a girl to give in to blackmail, and it's just come to me that I still haven't really thanked her for saving my life. As soon as the meal is over I'm going to her apartment, and I'll get all apologies and thanks said even if it's while I'm being thrown out."

"And I have to go with you," Lethan said, defeat as clear in his voice as it had been in Nallis's. "I also have an apology and thanks to give, even if she refuses to hear them. As she probably will."

"That makes three of us who will be going," Mayne put in, fighting off the depression that was trying to cover him like a blanket. "Since I'm the one who started the nonsense, I'm the one who ought to apologize first. And after all the apologies, I will find a way to make her eat something."

"You might consider chaining her down first," Mayne's father suggested with a shake of his head. "If you don't use chains, I wouldn't put it past the headstrong brat to march out of here without permission. If she'd been born a man and decided she wanted my throne, I'd definitely have something to worry about."

Lethan and Nallis made comments that were basically amused agreement with what their father had said, but

Mayne was too busy with the idea he'd just gotten to pay attention to the talk. Chain her down, his father had said, certainly half joking, but that was exactly what he needed to do. He needed a way to keep Adair from walking out of his life even before they got to really know each other, but ordinary chains would do very little.

What Mayne needed was a different kind of chain, and now he'd thought of one that would be a delight to apply to Lady Adair Cantlen. He'd have to stop briefly at his own apartment before going on to hers, but then...

Chapter Eight

Adair had only been drinking for a little while when a knock came at her sitting room door. Since she couldn't have cared less who was at the door she made no effort to answer, but a moment later the effort was made for her. The door opened to let Lisni, Nossa, and Elmini walk in, and the three girls came right over to where she was sitting.

"Adair, what happened?" Lisni asked at once, concern clear on all three of her visitors. "When you came in on the arms of Lethan and Nallis we thought everything was all right, but after that..."

"After that you didn't touch any of the food, and when you left you looked positively murderous," Nossa added when Lisni's voice simply trailed off. "I thought the king was going to order you brought back to the table, but then he changed his mind and didn't say a word."

"Lisni said the princes were unhappy about something they said to you," Elmini put in, the words heavy with sympathy. "Was whatever they said the thing that made you leave like that? And why did you look so ... wooden when you first came in with the king and the princes?"

"The king is going to reward me for saving the lives of his sons," Adair said, not quite looking at her friends.

"The only problem is, he won't give me the one reward I'm willing to accept. He flatly refused to let me leave, which has to mean our guesses about what he's going to do at the end of the week are true."

Elmini groaned while Nossa and Lisni made sounds of commiseration, and then Elmini headed for the sideboard.

"I've decided you have a really good idea there, Adair, so I'm going to join you," Elmini said while she chose a glass and another decanter to bring to a chair near Adair's. "You and I have something to be depressed about, but I won't mind if those who are destined to stay free want to join us. They can celebrate while we get drunk."

"If you think I have something to celebrate, Elmini, you just haven't been paying attention," Nossa said with a sigh. "When I get back to my father's house he'll decide he was shamed because of me, and right after that I'll find myself married off to someone a lot less attractive than the princes. That means yes, I'll be joining you, but not to celebrate anything."

"What about you, Lisni?" Elmini asked while Nossa went for her own glass and decanter. "You're out from under all the way around, but we won't hold that against you. You're still welcome to join us."

"I will join you, but there's something I have to do first," Lisni answered, and Adair had the impression she'd been pulled out of deep thought. "Adair, you really ought to eat something if you're going to drink, so why don't one of you have a servant bring in a snack. When I come back I ought to have room for some snacking myself."

And with that she left them, heading back out to the hall. Elmini and Nossa were too busy pouring themselves drinks to take her advice about a snack, Adair noticed, and she herself had no interest in eating. Whatever it was that she drank had been difficult to swallow at first, but now it slid down her throat much more easily.

"At least there was one benefit in that nonsense of giving you official thanks, Adair," Elmini said once she'd tasted the drink she'd poured. "Dinra was livid, especially when she was put all the way at the end of the table. Even Aleena sat closer to the princes, and you have no idea how tempted I was to tell those two the truth. They spent the entire meal whining and complaining, breaking off only long enough for one or the other of them to threaten to get even with you."

"What do they think they'll be getting even for?" Nossa asked with a sound of ridicule after sipping at her own

drink. "It wasn't Adair's idea to make that kind of fuss, and it wasn't her idea to send assassins after the princes to give her a chance to save them. Dinra and Aleena don't have a whole brain between them."

"Which means they'll probably do something really stupid," Elmini pointed out. "It doesn't matter so much for Dinra when she'll be sent home at the end of the week, but Aleena is supposed to be one of the brides. If - when they get caught doing whatever they decide to do, the princes could become involved in a really nasty argument about which one of them gets stuck with her."

"I hope the one who gets stuck with her is Mayne," Adair found herself saying, the idea giving her unexpected delight. "He'll have to spend some time with her after they're married, and every time she opens her mouth she'll drive him crazy. If anyone deserves that terrible a fate it has to be Mayne."

Both Nossa and Elmini tried to ask why she thought Mayne deserved that fate, but Adair was too busy drinking from her refilled glass to answer them. The flames of rage inside her had not only been damped down a little, there was also a soft, see-through wall beginning to form between her and the world she found so painful. She'd had no idea that something like the wall would happen, and was curious to see just how thick the wall would become.

A short amount of time passed while Adair watched her wall to see how thick it would get, and then an interruption came. Lisni hadn't quite closed the sitting room door when she'd left, and two new arrivals took advantage of that fact to walk right in.

"Adair, we've come to apologize for what we said," Lethan offered as soon as he and Nallis were close enough. "We should have been thanking you for what you did instead of going along with stupid stories, and we're really sorry we did go along."

"It's just that we were worried about you not eating," Nallis put in, sounding as dejected as Lethan had. "But we still did wrong, and we wanted you to know that we really do apologize."

Adair heard every word the two men said, but didn't have to spend any time deciding whether to accept the apologies. She had a lot of experience with people being cruel to her and then thinking they could make everything right again with a few words. The words were usually spoken because of some reason other than actual regret, so Adair didn't care about the reason behind these apologies. All she knew was that pretending the men weren't there was easier than explaining how she felt.

"I'd say Adair doesn't want to hear from either of you," Elmini commented after a stretch of silence. "What do you think, Nossa?"

"I agree completely," Nossa said. "And very frankly, if I were her I wouldn't want to hear from you two either. I don't know what terrible thing you said to her, but you both ought to be really ashamed. Being mean is bad enough; being mean to someone who saved your life is unforgivable."

"But we weren't trying to be ... mean," Lethan protested as he turned to Nossa. "We were trying to help Adair and the method just got out of hand. It so happens we liked Adair even before we had what to be grateful about."

"Then you have a very strange way of showing you like someone," Elmini said as Lethan moved closer to Nossa. "Do you really believe you have to do everything your father tells you to?"

"Of course we have to do what our father wants us to," Nallis said as he turned to Elmini. "Not only do we love him, he also happens to be our king."

"So you have nothing in the way of minds of your own," Elmini concluded as Nallis walked closer to her. "You're just a couple of living dolls, pretending to be real people while your father decides everything about your lives. I was given a lot of pain whenever I tried to live my own life, but you two have never even tried. Well, maybe that's the best - the most painless - way after all."

"No, it isn't the best way," Nossa disagreed while the two men stared silently at Elmini. "I spent most of my life obeying my father and doing nothing but what I was told to do, and then I woke up to realize that the thing

making me a separate, special human being was almost dead. If you let other people make all your decisions for you, you might as well not be around at all.”

Now it was Nossa the two men stared at, and then each of them sat down beside the woman they were nearest and began to argue in lower voices. They began to argue, then the discussions separated and turned into something other than argument. Adair could see that clearly - almost clearly - but trying to hear what they were saying wasn't as interesting as watching to see how thick her wall would grow.

Adair spent some time watching the wall, and then there was someone sitting down in the chair next to hers. She'd - sort of - seen the someone coming in, but hadn't really been paying attention.

“I apologize for not being here first to - apologize - for what I said at dinner,” the someone murmured softly from where he sat at Adair's left. “I would never really embarrass you like that in front of everyone.”

“The word is humiliate, but even that doesn't matter,” Adair found herself answering without turning her head. “No one cares about humiliating women, not when women are around for no other purpose than to be used. What difference does a little humiliation make when it's only a woman who's the object of it?”

“But that isn't true,” the someone protested, reaching over to take Adair's left hand. “Women are the most wonderful people around, much better than men, and that's why they have to be carefully protected. Men don't want to see women hurt because of some mistake the women may make.”

“Making mistakes is part of being alive, so all you're doing is offering fine-sounding excuses,” Adair countered, doing nothing to return the gentle grasp on her fingers. “Men are in charge of everything because life is more pleasant for them that way, and anything else said about the situation is a lie. Liars deserve whatever they get, and I can't wait until Mayne gets his.”

“What kind of thing do you expect to see Mayne getting?” the someone asked after a brief hesitation while Adair sipped at her drink again. “And why are you so eager to see him get that something?” “Mayne is the worst liar of all,” Adair explained, the words coming out again without her willing effort. “He tried to make me believe he cared about me, tried to pretend I was important to him, but the only thing of importance was to get me to this horrible place. After that I wasn't even important enough to look at, not to mention talk to. Except when I saved his brother's life. Then I became important to him again - for a whole minute and a half.”

And that, Adair realized, was a point that had been bothering her all along. The man had actually paid some attention to her, an effort even her father had never had the time or interest to make. But once they reached the palace he'd disappeared, his duty to his father the king all done and over with. When he'd taken her hand after the attack on Lethan was over, she'd felt so ... strange that she'd had to try getting her hand back again.

She was sure Mayne really felt nothing for her, and then he'd proven the point - by using her to get his precious brother away from where the attack had taken place.

“And what I'm hoping Mayne will get is Aleena as a wife,” Adair continued into the silence that had fallen. “Aleena is an idiot who will make his life a living hell, and that's the least he deserves. All men who pretend to care about someone deserve that kind of life.”

“But what if the man isn't pretending?” the someone asked then, his voice a bit unsteady. “What if the man just stayed away from the woman because it was necessary?”

“Why would a man who really cared about someone think it was necessary to stay away from her?” that talkative part of Adair countered at once. “If he was the one who thought staying away was necessary, then his caring obviously doesn't run as deep as his consideration of other things. If he stayed away because someone else told him to, then he isn't a real man, he's that living doll Elmini mentioned, doing nothing he isn't told to. Either way his claim about caring is nothing but a lie.”

There was another stretch of silence, and after sipping again from her glass Adair noticed that the hold on her hand had gotten tighter. The grip was so tight it was close to pain, but before Adair could say anything about it

her hand was abruptly released.

“You know something? You’re absolutely right.” The someone’s voice wasn’t unsteady any longer, and when Adair turned her head to finally look at him she didn’t quite recognize the blur she saw. “A man who really cares about a woman needs to show that caring all the time, no matter what anyone else thinks about what he’s doing. Hanging back being cautious is for frail old maiden ladies, not for a man who knows what he wants. Jumping right in may make for a few problems, but nothing he shouldn’t be able to handle. With that in mind, let’s go.”

The glass was suddenly gone from Adair’s right hand, but before she could figure out where the glass had gone she found herself out of the chair. The someone she’d been talking to had picked her up in his arms, and now was carrying her somewhere.

“Where are we going?” Adair asked, feeling the least bit dizzy. “I don’t remember wanting to go somewhere.”

“We’re going somewhere to get even with Mayne,” the someone said after an odd pause that didn’t do anything to slow his pace. “Don’t you want to get even with Mayne for lying to you?”

“Of course I do,” Adair agreed, liking the idea as soon as it actually filtered through her wall. “What are we going to do to get even with him?”

“Something you’ll enjoy,” the someone answered as he stopped to open a door awkwardly before he carried her into the next room. He used his foot to close the door again, and it finally came through to Adair that it was her bedchamber she’d been carried into.

“How do you know I’ll enjoy it?” Adair asked when the question came to her. “Is it something you’ve seen me do before?”

“No, I don’t think it’s anything you’ve done before, and that’s why I’ve brought something to help make the time enjoyable,” the someone answered. “You don’t mind a little help, do you?”

“I don’t know,” Adair said, distantly noticing that she’d been put back on her feet. “I can’t remember ever getting help of any kind before... Why am I lying down?”

“You’re not really lying down,” the someone said as Adair stared at the carpeting beyond the someone’s legs.

“You’re simply helping me help you... So you’re wearing drawers after all, just very thin ones. And I don’t think I mentioned how beautiful you looked when I first saw you in this red gown. You still look beautiful, of course, but soon you won’t be wearing the gown any longer.”

“I don’t understand what’s happening,” Adair managed to get out as she was helped back to her feet. It seemed as if something had been done to her while she was lying down, and now there was the oddest feeling in her bottom. Moving made the oddness even more intense, but the someone didn’t seem to know that.

“Nothing very special is happening yet,” the someone said, his hands at the back of her gown. “We’ll just help you out of these clothes, and then we’ll go on to the next step.”

Adair had the feeling there was something she should be asking about, but before she could figure out what that something should be her gown was opened and then lifted off her. Once the gown was gone, the someone took her left arm in his left hand, which kind of put him a short distance behind her.

“Now we’re going to take a little walk around the room,” the someone said, and his voice had turned kind of husky. “I don’t want you passing out before we get to the enjoyable part, and walking for a couple of minutes will also let the ... help work on you more strongly.”

“My shoes are gone,” Adair said as the hand on her arm started her moving. “But I’m still wearing my drawers, so I guess that’s all right... But walking isn’t all right. It’s making me feel very strange so I want to stop walking - Ow.”

“The walking is necessary, so you’ll just have to keep doing it,” the someone said from his place to her left and still behind her. “The smack on the bottom you got - and the rest of the smacks you’ll be getting - is another thing

that's necessary, and for more than one reason. Would you like to know a couple of those reasons?"

"Ow! Sure, I guess," Adair answered. She was getting a smack at almost every step, and the thin material of her drawers did nothing to keep the smacks from hurting. But the slowly growing ache in her bottom was actually taking less of her attention than the way that strange feeling kept increasing...

"One of the reasons you're being smacked is to keep you moving," the someone supplied even as his hand kept whacking away at her poor seat. "The more chance the ... help is given, the more enjoyment you'll eventually have. But the smacks could be more gentle, and would be if not for how cruel you were a little while ago. Wishing Aleena on anyone is a fate too horrible to contemplate, even for as big a fool as Mayne."

Adair didn't know if she agreed with that, but trying to decide was much too hard. Between walking and getting smacked on the bottom she was quickly losing some kind of control, but everything was much too confusing for her to understand what that meant. She just kept walking and getting smacked, walking and getting smacked, walking...

And then there was something in front of her that looked very much like her bed. She wanted to lie down on that bed to stop what the walking and smacking had made her feel so strongly, but the hand on her arm refused to let her do it.

"You're just about squirming where you stand," the someone behind her murmured in her ear while his hand kept her from lying down. "I know you've started to feel very ... anxious and I can help you with that, but you have to ask me to do it. I very much want to help, but I can't do it unless you ask. Mayne will hate it if you ask me for the help, and that way you'll get even with him."

Adair had almost forgotten that they were going to do something that would let her get even with Mayne, and that point caused her to make up her mind. Asking someone for any kind of help at all was very nearly beyond her, but if asking let her get even then she'd just have to do it.

"Yes, all right, I'm ... asking for your help," Adair managed to get out.

"But I don't understand how this is supposed to let me get even with Mayne."

"When Mayne finds out that you let someone other than him ... help you, he'll feel terrible," the someone said, the words still soft but somehow filled with a kind of aching. "But that's perfectly all right, because he deserves to feel terrible after the way he treated you. I promise you that he'll feel even worse than the way he made you feel."

"I don't know if that's possible," Adair said after a moment, hearing some odd sounds from behind her. The hand was gone from her arm, but she noticed that only distantly. "Him feeling worse than the way he made me feel, I mean. No one ever really cared about me, not even if they said they did, and Mayne is just like all the rest. If they didn't feel terrible, why should he?"

"He'll feel terrible because he does care about you," the someone said, and then there were hands at her waist.

"Here, let me help you get out of these drawers... That's right, just step out of them... The help you asked me to give you is something Mayne wants very badly to do himself, and when he finds out that you let someone else help he'll definitely feel terrible."

"Then I'm glad I asked," Adair decided aloud, just before she was picked up again and put down on the bed. It actually stung her bottom to lie like that, but the someone didn't let her turn over. He followed her down and held her in his arms, and a moment later he was kissing her. The kiss felt strangely good, especially when she kissed him back, her hands touching the someone's body.

It took quite some time before Adair realized that there should have been clothes on the body, and she didn't know why there wasn't. She really wanted to ask where the someone's clothes had gone, but by the time the kiss ended, the question was forgotten. The feeling the someone had called anxiety had gotten much, much stronger, and all she could do was lie in his arms and moan.

And then the someone moved between her knees, a moment before she felt something she'd never felt before. The something was unexpected and should have been unpleasant, but then it came to Adair that the something was exactly what she wanted. There was a bit of discomfort at first, not to mention a small increase in the ache in her bottom, but then there was delicious movement inside her, movement that matched her feelings perfectly. She moaned again in delight, trying to add movement of her own, and that made it all even better.

The movement went on and on, accompanied every now and then by a strange kind of spasming that sent her floating in delight, only to bring her back to more movement and then to delight again. Adair had no idea how long it all went on, but when everything finally stopped after one last spasm the world slid into the blackness of sleep.

* * *

Mayne lay still beside Adair for a time, trying to get his breath and strength back. Making love to her had been like nothing he'd ever experienced before, and not just because he'd avoided involving himself with virgins. Just talking to Adair and holding her hand made him feel good; making love to her was beyond description.

Or should have been like that. Rolling over toward Adair let him see that she'd finally passed out from all that drinking she'd done, that and the lovemaking. Mayne reached a hand out to stroke her hair, forced to admit that he hadn't really been lying to her. The elation he'd felt had disappeared behind self-hatred and loathing.

"And now Mayne feels as terrible as I said he would, because the woman he loves invited another man into her bed," he murmured as he looked down at the sleeping woman. "It was perfectly clear that you didn't recognize me, didn't know it was me you were talking to. If I had been a stranger you would have gone with me just as willingly, and I have only myself to blame for that. I shouldn't have let my father's plans interfere with telling you how I really felt."

And all the back and forth had ended up with Adair so depressed that she'd taken to drink. Mayne cursed himself as something worse than a fool as he got up, put Adair under the covers, then started to get dressed again. It might be too late to do tonight, but first thing in the morning he would tell his father that all pretense was now over. He had the chain on her he'd wanted, and now he'd use that chain to put himself where he belonged.

If a woman invites a man into her bed, that man is then free to claim the woman if he cares to, Mayne thought as he finished dressing by putting on his swordbelt. Adair did invite me, I made very sure she would by putting the dissolvable love ball into her bottom, so now she can't complain that someone else is making her be my wife. And since she is my wife, no one will be able to object when I have her moved into my apartment.

Or at least no one had better object. Mayne was even willing to stand against his father to make things right with Adair; facing down anyone else would be child's play. And if that anyone else didn't like what he saw, the next thing seen would be one of the dueling halls.

Mayne turned down the lamps before leaving Adair's bedchamber, but he missed the chance to announce to his brothers what he meant to do. Lethan and Nallis were gone from the sitting room, and so were Elmini and Nossa. It wasn't clear when the four had left, but for Adair's sake he was glad they were no longer here. If they knew for certain what had gone on between him and Adair, Adair would probably be embarrassed.

But not humiliated, Mayne promised himself as he headed for the door out of the sitting room. Adair had been hurt much too often in her young life, and if he had anything to say about it she'd never be hurt again.

* * *

Adair awoke to morning sunlight to find she had something of a headache, but aside from that there was a very strange satisfaction in her body. The headache must be from the drinking she'd done last night, but where the satisfaction could have come from she had no idea. The last thing she remembered was Lethan and Nallis arriving, and after that everything was a blur.

Sitting up slowly helped, but it was perfectly clear to Adair that she would need even more help if she meant to do

as she'd decided and simply leave the palace today. She had no real interest in accepting any more of the king's marvelous hospitality, but as soon as she was dressed she would have breakfast brought. The shaky way she felt had to be a hangover, and she'd heard that the best way to get over a hangover was to eat.

But as soon as the meal was finished she would leave, hangover or no hangover. Everyone agreed she was due a reward for having saved the lives of two princes, and now she meant to give herself that reward. If the king didn't like it, he could have her arrested and executed. What he couldn't do was make her marry, a truth he didn't really know yet.

But he would find out. One way or another, the king would be taught that very painful truth...