

The Princess Slave Chronicles II

By Sullivan Clarke

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Chapter One

The chieftain's tent was round and as rough on the inside as the main hall. Unlike the royalty of Princess Phaedra's homeland, it did not appear that the clan leader lived any better than his people.

A rough fire pit served as the centerpiece of the tent. Phaedra lay dejectedly by the fire, staring at the blaze. She'd been despondent ever since she'd been separated from Gioni. When Wulfgar had taken her to his tent she'd expected to be beaten, raped or both. But instead he'd deposited her on a mat of furs and had even given her a second for a cover.

Now he sat nearby, stroking his long beard and pondering her. Phaedra tried to concentrate on the fire but found herself looking at her huge abductor.

"My father will come for us," she said sullenly. "He will come for us and kill you all."

Wulfgar leaned forward, his forearms resting on his trunk-like thighs.

"So you no longer deny that you are a princess?"

She stared at him sullenly and looked away.

"You demonstrate remarkable confidence for a princess who prefers the company of slaves to the comforts of a castle. It is hard for me to believe the king will come for a treasure he never truly valued."

Phaedra sat up and sniffed. "My father does value me," she said resentfully.

"Then why did you leave, girl?" he asked. "And do not tell me you did not. At any point you could have revealed your identity. You never did."

"I knew you would ransom me," Phaedra said.

He stood up and walked to the fire where meat turned on a spit. He pulled a piece off and walked over to Phaedra. He offered it to her. She looked at him suspiciously but her hunger was stronger than her fear. She took the meat.

Wulfgar crouched down beside her. Even crouching he was huge. She looked at his face and was surprised to see that his eyes were a soft brown and not so harsh in the firelight. He looked almost kind as he regarded her.

"It seemed a princess would not mind being ransomed," he continued. "Especially if she knew her father would pay to bring her home." He paused. "So tell me, lass. Why do you prefer the slaves to your own household?"

Phaedra swallowed the meat. She wanted more but the lump in her throat was taking up all the room she needed to swallow. Tears stung her eyes.

“If I tell you will you let me go back to him?” she asked.

“To your father?”

“No,” Phaedra said. “To Gioni.”

“The slave lad?”

She nodded as two fat tears escaped from her eyes and traced down through the dirt on her face.

“I will consider it,” he said. “If you will tell me the truth.”

She looked up at him.

“I was to be married to a man I didn’t love. He would never love me, could never love me. My parents knew this but were planning to pair me up just as they pair up our slaves. But at least the slaves love and protect their women. I have seen...” She colored up now. “I have seen The Claimings...”

Wulfgar nodded. “This I have heard of. The slaves have an admirable structure.”

“Yes,” Phaedra said. “The pairings are forced, but the claiming is part of their culture. I have heard them talking. They would do this even if they had choice in the matter.

“Choice...” Wulfgar stood and stroked his beard thoughtfully. His back was to Phaedra now. “People will do amazing things when they have freedom to choose.”

He stroked his beard some more, staring into the fire. “Perhaps I have been taking the wrong approach, wee lassie.”

Phaedra looked at him questioningly as he turned back to her.

“Do you think King Benedict will send his army?”

“Yes,” she said. “He will want to reclaim what his.” In her heart, she knew that he cared more for the slaves than for her. “You cannot match his numbers. I’ve heard him speak of your band. He said you are a would-be king leading a ragtag group in the mountains.”

Wulfgar smiled at this. “If we doubled the number of warriors, would that change the odds?”

Phaedra stared in confusion.

Wulfgar stood. “Rest here, Princess Slave. I must meet with your chosen people. Do not try to flee; there are guards outside.”

He bowed with flourish and then turned to leave the tent. Phaedra wondered if the bow had been meant to mock her, but found she didn't care. She was suddenly very tired. She laid her head down on the furs and was soon asleep.

But had she known why Wulfgar was meeting with Kane and the other slaves, she surely would not have been unable to rest. The clan chieftain had hatched a plan, and when he presented it to his captives they were all momentarily silent.

“You're offering us our freedom?” Kane asked.

“Would you rather not be free men and women?” Wulfgar asked, walking back and forth in front of the captives.

The slaves began to murmur among themselves. None of them had ever been free, and they had been slaves for so long that the stories of who their people had been before they'd entered a life of slavery had died away. Some among them raised that very point now.

“It is not a good thing, to lack knowledge of one's history,” Kane said. “I asked my grandfather once if our family had always been slaves. He said ‘no,’ but he said he did not know anything of our history before we became slaves. He said the kingdom forbade his grandfather's father and their father before them from speaking on it.” He paused. “He told me not to ever mention this, for he believed to do so would still bring punishment. But even by that time, our people had stopped asking questions...”

Gioni listened to all of this from the side. The conversation was the first thing he'd been able to concentrate on since Phaedra had been taken from him. His father had been forced to physically restrain him in the hall after he'd recovered from Wulfgar's blow. Gioni wanted to go after the woman he had claimed and now considered his own.

Now he stood and walked to where his father was standing. He wanted to ask about his Phaedra, but restrained himself.

“And what will it cost us?” he asked hotly. “As it is you respect us no more than the king did. If you did, you would not have...”

Kane took hold of his son's arm and squeezed it in warning.

“...taken your woman?” Wulfgar asked. “That is what happens to slaves. They can lose their women, their men. You all live under an illusion that your culture is solid. But you are property to King Benedict and nothing more. Your story changes by his leave, not your own. However, if you earned your freedom then no one would have a right to tear

your families apart, to pair your children up like breeding animals and convince you that such a thing is noble...”

The slaves murmured but suddenly Wulfgar was speaking over them.

“Things could be different if you joined us, not as slaves but as warriors....”

The men looked at one another.

“Fight? For you?” Layla’s husband Salaman stood, raising his voice as he asked the question.

“Not just for me,” Wulfgar said. “But also for yourselves. We did not take all of you on our raid. You left mothers, daughters, wives, sisters, sons, husbands and fathers in your village. Would you not like to liberate them? Would you not like to ride back not as slaves but as free men? Would you not like to show your families that there is something more than living and dying by another’s leave? Would you not like to have your children choose their own mates? To the young among you, would you not like to choose yours? I have talked to the princess. It would appear that she and this young man chose each other.” He gestured to Gioni. “Is it not time you all had that right? Is it not worth fighting for?”

Kane looked at his son and Gioni knew what he was thinking. His son was the only man in his memory who had chosen his own woman to claim. If the king’s army came and Wulfgar’s men lost the fight, they’d be returned as slaves. Gioni would never see Phaedra again. He may even be punished or killed for touching her. If they joined the fight and prevailed, then his son and the others would be able to decide whom they married.

But Kane knew there was more at stake. He did not know Wulfgar.

“How can we be certain that you will keep your word?” he asked.

“You can’t,” Wulfgar said simply. “I can tell you that I will, but I know there are those among you who will not believe me. You cannot be certain that I am honorable. But you can be certain of one thing. If we fight the king’s men and lose, your people will remain enslaved.”

The slaves murmured again and Wulfgar stood. “It is for you to decide.”

“Wait!” Gioni walked towards him. “The princess....”

“Is well. And unharmed.” Wulfgar knew the man before him had feared the worse when he’d taken Phaedra to the tent. “And now you want her back.”

“I do.” Gioni said. “And I would fight for her if necessary.”

Wulfgar threw back his bearded head and laughed. "Ah, just what I would hope to hear," he said. "A slave willing to become a warrior for what the value." He clapped Gioni on the shoulder. "I will send her back to you then. But remember; after that you will have to fight to keep her."

He looked knowingly at Gioni and then turned to walk to his tent. Gioni paced nervously until the chieftain returned. He was leading a confused, sleepy-looking Princess Phaedra who - upon seeing her slave-mate - tore away from the chieftain and ran towards him. Gioni caught her in his strong arms and buried his face in her hair. It was filthy from where she'd fallen into the mud, but he did not care.

"Come now," Kane said, walking towards them. He guided the couple towards the hall and the other slaves followed. On the way, Gioni gave Phaedra a brief account of what had been said.

Inside the hall, a debate immediately erupted.

"There is no shame in our service," Mara argued. "My husband served King Benedict faithfully and the realm always provided our needs, always gave us everything we wanted."

"Did it really?" Salaman asked. "Or did it give him the best of what he'd been told a slave could receive. Isn't that what we get? Our portion and no more? Yes, we are safe and clothed and fed. Yes, we are free from want. But so are the horses in the royal stables and the dogs in the royal kennels. King Benedict has no limits on what he can achieve. If he wants more lands he takes them. If he wants stronger slaves he breeds them."

"He breeds us, you mean," Gioni said.

"And why should we want more?" Another man stood. The group murmured.

"Speak, Banor," Kane said, holding his hand up to indicate the others should fall silent. They did.

The horses in the stable and the dogs in the kennels may not have choice, but they are not left to the elements. No beast preys upon them. They bear their children in safety and do not worry about staying warm in the winter. It is the same with us. Would we trade the promise of potential riches for the certainty of security?

"Slavery, you mean," Salaman countered. "Call it what it is!"

"You would condemn us to an existence scratching in the soil for food?"

Another man stood. "Long ago, one of our forefathers was captured and made to scratch in the soil so that some rich man would not have to. Now that the rich man's ancestors give us a portion of what we reap for him, that does not set things to rights."

“True,” Gioni said. “And thanks to our royal owners, any knowledge of our history before becoming slaves has been stamped out. Benedict has songs of his ancestors to sing. We have none!”

“How do we know we can trust this Wulfgar?” Banor asked skeptically. “He speaks with two mouths. First he strikes Gioni and takes his woman, then he returns her with talk of giving us freedom. Bah.”

Kane turned to Phaedra. “It is a good point,” he said. “The change is curious. Tell us, Phaedra. What happened in the chieftain’s tent?”

Her voice was quiet as she recounted their conversation. “He asked me why I preferred the company of slaves to the company of my family. I could not....I could not give him adequate answer. I believe Wulfgar thinks if my father cannot retain the loyalty of his own child, then he could easily lose the loyalty of his slaves as well.”

Gioni rubbed the bump on his head left from where Wulfgar’s sword knocked him unconscious. “He is a shrewd man,” he told the others. “He sees more to be gained from our fighting for him than serving him. It would seem he thinks he could gain more even than he could from ransoming Phaedra...”

“So it would,” Kane said.

“I still don’t trust him,” Banor said. “If we fight King Benedict and lose he will not just punish us but those we left behind.”

“If we fight and win, we can liberate those we left behind and increase our strength,” Kane replied.

“But only if Wulfgar’s men would join the fight,” Gioni said.

“Then we’ll make it a condition, if that acceptable to the rest of you,” Kane replied. “If it is, then we will join Wulfgar, win our freedom and start our lives as a free people.”

“If this Wulfgar will let us,” Banor growled.

“He could force us to fight,” Kane suggested. “He could take our women and threaten to violate or harm them if we did not join his cause. I am sure it crossed his mind. But he did not. I think that says something of the man.”

“It only says he knows that a hopeful warrior will fight more savagely than one distracted by fear,” Banor said.

“True,” Kane said. “But something inside tells me that the man means what he says.”

“You ask us to follow your heart? Bah. You talk like a woman!” Banor began to pace the room.

“Perhaps you should ask the women what they think then,” Phaedra said.

“The men make the decisions here,” Kane said, looking first at Phaedra and then at his son. The two men locked eyes and the princess could read the unspoken message passed between them: She needed to learn her place. But Phaedra had never been one to stop herself from speaking out. Not even when it was not in her best interest.

“Would a free woman among free men be able to make speak up?” Phaedra asked. “Or would you keep us enslaved as you free yourselves?”

“Phaedra,” Gioni said. His voice was hard now. “Hold your tongue, lass.”

But she was getting angry. “No!” she said, standing. “Just because women follow men does not mean we should have no voice. This affects all of us!”

“Not you,” hissed Mara. “You are not one of us!”

“She is,” Gioni said. “I claimed her and that makes her mine.”

The slaves erupted into shouts now, with some hotly accusing Kane and Gioni of orchestrating the whole matter so his son would not be answerable to King Benedict should Wulfgar’s army fall.

Phaedra listened with growing anger, and finally stood. Her voice was imperious as she shouted down the slaves.

“I would turn myself in if I thought it would save Gioni! So do not think that this is some ruse by him or Kane! I consider myself one of you now, whether you like it or not. Gioni may have claimed me, but I consented. As a free person I consented. And I would have you all be given the same choice.”

Kane gave her a small smile. “She speaks her mind whether you want her to or not, son. Your mate is spirited.”

The others had settled down and were mulling over what they should do and Kane, having decided there’d been ample time for talk and the time had come to put it to a decision. Each man was given a stone and told to cast it into a wooden bowl if they favored joining Wulfgar. The stones were counted. There were twenty. Ten men had not cast their stones. Twice as many were in favor of making a bid for freedom.

Banor shook his head. “I disagree with this decision,” he said. “But I will not forsake my brothers. If this is what the majority wills, then so be it. But God help us if we do not

prevail. Should King Benedict's army defeat us, then we will not only return as slaves, but treacherous ones. We stand to lose as much as we stand to gain."

He looked at Phaedra and Gioni. "I hope it will be worth it."

"I will go speak to Wulfgar," Kane said. "And I will also request that we be allowed some water for a bath."

The women exclaimed excitedly at this news. It had been days and they were all grubby and uncomfortable, but none more than Princess Phaedra who was used to bathing daily and access to clean clothing when she needed it.

"You need to watch your tongue," Gioni said. "We will speak on this later, and on other things. Remember, lass, you have yet to answer to me for running away..."

Phaedra stomach lurched in fear. She'd been so preoccupied with what had been going on she'd forgotten that Gioni was still planning to hold her accountable for her escape. She tried not to think on it as she stood now and walked over to the table to get a bite of bread. She turned to see Layla at her side.

"I admire you," Layla said quietly. "And it's not just because you are royal born. Sal spans me so hard when I speak above my station. But you..." She smiled at Phaedra. "You are not afraid..."

"Perhaps it's because I don't yet know enough to be afraid to speak up," Phaedra replied. "And perhaps it is because I fault the men for not utilizing our strength. We could help them. I, for one, know my father's ways. I know something of his army and how it works. His men - at least the younger soldiers - have never fought in this terrain. Our country has known years of peace. This would be the first fight in the mountains in many, many years."

"You should tell them!" Layla said.

"I should," Phaedra agreed. "And I will. But I want to do more than advise." She turned to Layla, eyes blazing. "I want to fight!"

"Fight? Fight your father?"

"Why not?" She asked. "Women can fight..."

But Layla was skeptical. "Womens are keepers of the hearth," she said. "It is not our place to do as men do."

Phaedra dropped the subject. The men of her world had trained their women well. Would she end up as obedient? As much as she loved Gioni's sternness, she hoped not.

Chapter Two

There was a hot bath, but it was not as Phaedra had expected. The slaves were directed to a deep cave where a network of hot springs emitted an inviting warmth. The men went around a corner to find some for themselves while the women claimed three. Phaedra had always been dressed and undressed by slaves but felt uncomfortable as she disrobed now in the presence of Layla and an older, attractive dark-haired woman.

She could feel the woman's eyes on her as she sunk into the steaming water.

"Have you met Dagmar?" Layla said, obviously noticing the older woman's interest in Phaedra. "She is Banor's wife."

Phaedra nodded graciously. "I am pleased to make your acquaintance."

"And I yours," Dagmar said, "although my husband and I - along with others - fear your games put us at risk."

"I do not play games," Phaedra said.

"To your class, life is but a game," Dagmar said. "We simply exist to support it."

"Then I would think your husband would be eager to stop it," Phaedra said. "I would think you would, too."

"Many will die in the process," Dagmar said. "Kane and Gioni are the strongest, but not all here so strong. And if the men prevail here and venture down to the valley to liberate more of our people from your father's grasp, then there will surely be more loss of life."

Phaedra started to say that it would be worth it, but she stopped. Dagmar was right; the consequences could indeed be grave. But the decision had not been hers alone to make. Wulfgar had proposed it, and the majority of the male slaves had accepted it. She pointed this out to Dagmar as respectfully as she could.

"Besides," Phaedra said. "I am prepared to fight should I need to."

Dagmar gave a sharp laugh. "You? Fight? You're a princess. And, in case you've forgotten - a female! Women do not do the things men do."

"And why not?" Phaedra asked and realized as she did that the uncomfortable look had returned to Layla's face.

"Please," her friend said. "Stay your tongue, Phaedra. There are rules here. We are not to act as men, or speak of acting as men."

"Some rules are made to be broken," Phaedra replied, but dropped the subject.

Dagmar did not respond, and the sly smile that briefly crossed her face escaped Phaedra's attention.

The women bathed and washed their hair and clothes. One of the women from Wulfgar's clan brought them new clothes to wear. The slave women looked suspiciously at the dresses made of skin. They were soft and straight, but came only to the middle of the calf. The slave women were given fur boots to wear as well. It was different attire than what they were used to. Even Phaedra felt herself balk at what she considered an outward departure from her new identity. But she had no choice and donned the new clothing.

"I'll only wear this until my decent array is dry," grumbled Dagmar, wrinkling her nose at the well-made skin dress. Phaedra cast a sidelong glance at the woman's angry face and it occurred to her that Dagmar considered herself superior to the wild people who had taken them on as allies.

It was another shock for the women when the men emerged. They, too, were dressed like the other members of Wulfgar's clan. The growing stubble on their usually smooth faces made them appear even wilder. Phaedra's eyes searched until they found Gioni. She walked to him and found his eyes scanning her, no doubt assessing this new and more primal look.

"I look even less the princess," she said.

"You look a bit like a wood nymph," he said. "Wild and untamed." He paused. "And you know I must tame you now."

She dropped her eyes. She'd hoped he'd forgotten.

Phaedra wanted to run just as she'd done earlier, but she knew that was exactly what had gotten her in trouble in the first place. And with Kane in negotiations with Wulfgar, having to interrupt them to hunt her down again would only make things worse. So she resigned herself that Gioni would punish her as he said he would. She knew she deserved it, and what's more she knew some part of her had wanted to live with these kinds of consequences, even if facing them frightened her to the core. And she felt a sudden urge to feel those consequences and to be reminded that even if she was no longer in traditional slave garb, that even if Gioni and the others would be free, that she still would belong to him.

"Wulfgar has our hut ready," he said. And then Gioni was taking her by the arm and leading her from the cave. The walk was shorter than she hoped. Soon she was standing inside a small, round tent. Like Wulfgar's tent, it had a small firepit in the middle with a spit over it. Fur lined the floors.

Gioni turned her to face him.

"I know that even if you want to be with me, our ways are not going to come easily. I know that obedience is difficult for you. You were not obedient to your father to have run

away. And you were not obedient to me when you fled Wulfgar's hall and forced him to search for you. You are fortunate that he did not keep you for ransom. You were lucky he did not violate you. The rest of us were lucky he did not punish us for hiding you."

He paused. "My father is right, Phaedra. You have no respect for authority."

"Kane said that?" she asked.

Gioni nodded.

"He's wrong!" she stammered, even though she knew it was a lie. "I do respect authority. Or at least I am trying to."

"I'm afraid trying isn't enough, Phaedra. Each time you disobey you encourage the other women to do the same. You need to understand that even if we are free, we pride ourselves on our structure, on our culture. Our homes are strong because strong men who head them refuse to spend time sniping with the women. We are just and fair, but our word is the law. That will not change after we are free. I would not have you undermine the foundations of our society."

"Do you think that is what I am trying to do?" she asked incredulously.

"I do not think you are doing it purposefully," he said. "But I think that you could easily do it by planting seeds of rebellion and discord. I will not allow that to happen."

He reached then for a strip of animal hide laying at his feet. She'd not noticed it but found herself recoiling when she realized its intent.

"You mean to strap me?" she asked.

"Until you plead for mercy," he said. "Until you realize that I am to be obeyed instantly and without question in all matters. All matters, Phaedra."

She started at the strap, unable to speak. Phaedra's head was swimming.

"Bend over, now. And hold onto the support of the hut."

Phaedra walked on wooden legs over to the wall. Her hands were shaking as she took hold a piece of the wood that made up the framework for the tent. It took all her effort to bend at the waist, and when she felt Gioni lift the hem of her dress she whimpered in fear.

"You will get a dozen," he said. "And you will hold still. If you move I will begin anew. If you move more than once, I shall fetch a bundle of switches."

She'd seen the kind of rough plants that grew round the huts. She'd felt them scratch her skin. The idea of having a bundle of them applied to her bottom made her quake in fear.

“I won’t move,” she said bravely.

She heard the strap whoosh as it descended towards her bottom. The impact burned and stung, for the strap was thick and limber. She cried out but held her position. However, when the second one landed she screamed and jumped. Her hands moved reflexively to soothe the welts with frantic rubs.

“You disobeyed, Phaedra,” Gioni said. “We’re starting over.”

“NO!” she cried, unable to bear one - let alone a dozen - more.

“Turn around and get back into position.”

“Please don’t make me!” she cried, and sunk to the floor to grab his calves as she plead for mercy. She felt like an idiot, acting in such a weak manner after two simple blows of the strap. But she was not yet regularly chastised and did not think she could endure it.

But Gioni was guiding her to standing, his expression resolute. Somehow Phaedra managed to get back into position.

“Don’t! Don’t!” she repeated, even as she heard the strap whoosh towards her again.

She screamed, for this blow criss-crossed the two other welts and was even harder. Phaedra would have gone down to her knees had Gioni not helped her by supporting her elbow. She gripped the support even tighter and locked her knees, anticipating the next blistering descent of the strap. When it came she collapsed on the ground before he could catch her and tried to crawl away.

Four. Four was all she’d gotten and she’d been unable to take it. She couldn’t even make it halfway. Phaedra felt herself hauled up again but this time Giona sat on the ground and pulled her across his lap. Without more room for a backswing, the dozen strokes he delivered to his restrained princess were not as hard, but even so Phaedra could not imagine such pain. She cried out over and over, begging through a steady stream of tears. She babbled promises and apologies, her hands clawing at the furs surrounding them. When he was finished, Gioni pulled her to her feet and drug her back to where she’d previously stood.

Stand here, he said, forcing her hands on top of her head and then securing the hem of her skirt at her waist. Her throbbing bottom was bare and aching and burning beyond description. But Gioni did not sound the least bit sympathetic when he demanded that she hold her position without touching the injured flesh.

This was harder than it seemed, for the pain was getting worse with each passing moment. She could feel the puffy welts emerging low on her bottom, just above the thigh. How, she wondered, did women ever find the courage to sit again after such punishment?

But it was not over. He was coming back, and this time he held a bundle of switches.

Phaedra began to physically quake from fear.

"No. Please. Please no!" She looked at Gioni imploringly but knew from his resolute expression that she would get no mercy.

"Bend over," he ordered.

Her legs shook as she forced herself to obey. She could not outlast Gioni, and she knew he would suspend any sympathy and love when she was due punishment. Excessive pleas and attempts at avoidance would only make it worse.

"There will be six," he said.

Six. She could not weather more than four with a strap and with her bottom sore this would be a thousand times worse. Phaedra's head swam as she bent over. She shut her eyes as Gioni's arm went back. She saw the white starbursts before her mind registered what felt like a dozen little burning lines of fire cross her bottom. She screamed, the force of it hurting her throat. His response of another blow was immediate. This one landed across her thighs and she danced in place but did not move. Four more. Just four more. She retreated into a place in her mind where she fell into what had put her in this place. It had been her desire to submit, to be owned, to be completely at the command of one of the strong young men she'd seen working in and around the castle. They were so strong, and even though they were slaves they had carried themselves in a manner the young men her parents hoped to match her with could never hope to do. She'd longed for the day when she would feel the disciplinary lash of a righteous mate, and now it was happening. The pain was more than she had ever thought to comprehend, but now the comfort in submitting to it began to balance the hurt. Gioni landed a third and then a fourth Phaedra screamed with each one but concentrated on being obedient to his will. Five. She bit down on her own arm, wagging her bottom back and forth.

"Hold still, girl," he said, and she felt his large hand on the small over her back. She held her position, almost proudly, as the switches whistled through the air before landing the last terrible blow full across her cheeks. She screamed again and felt her legs go weak. But he was catching her now as he tossed the switches into the fire and lifted her up. Phaedra cried out as he laid her own the skins and positioned himself beside her. Gioni kissed her tears and then his lips were on hers. She felt herself guiding his hands to between her legs where she was inexplicably wet and achy. But he groaned and pulled his hand away.

"You've been punished," he said. "And as your leader I must not do anything to soften that. But later..." He inhaled the clean scent of her hair and stood. Her hand brushed the front of his tunic as he rose and she felt the hardness underneath. She was tempted to beg him to fall down on the rugs and take her, even if it meant grinding her sore bottom into the rocky floor of the hut. But he was gone then and she was left sobbing both from pain, and relief and happiness combined.

She did not know that the others had heard her screams. Kane met his son as he emerged

from the hut.

“You were firm with her, son,” he said. “That was the right thing to do. Phaedra must be kept in hand.”

“I know, father,” he replied. “And I promise I will.”

“It is more important than you know,” he said. “Dagmar has gone to Banor over something she overheard Phaedra telling Layla.”

“What?” he asked.

“She is implying that the women could fight along side us. You know this will not do. However, Layla has denied that Phaedra said such a thing.”

“And Salaman?”

Kane sighed. “He is not convinced. But I am sure that later he will extract the truth.”

Gioni shook his head in frustration. He was not pleased that his mate was causing discord between other couples. And he knew that if Phaedra knew her friend stood to be punished for her influence then she would surely regret it. Perhaps, he surmised, that would not be such a bad thing. But there was more on his mind than petty domestic issues.

“What of Wulfgar,” he asked his father. “Has he laid out a plan beyond mere promises?”

Kane told his son that he had indeed planned to meet with the men to outline what must be done. Walking towards Wulfgar’s tent, the slave men looked like any other member of the clan except for being less heavily bearded and lighter of skin. Gioni found it odd but somewhat invigorating to be walking from one point to the other in the clan settlement without being watched. At home in the village, soldiers rode through several times a day. They had been cordial, cordial enough that over time it had been easy to forget that armed visitors were not just there for protection but to remind the slaves of the power of the crown. Sometimes whole platoons would move through on maneuvers within sight of their villages. It had always made them feel safe. Now in retrospect Gioni saw the activity in a whole new light.

Wulfgar had laid out a feast for the men in the hall. The torso of a deer roasted on a spit, the fat hissing when it hit the fire below. Large loaves of bread sat in wooden bowls on the table. Hammered metal pitchers and wooden tankards held pungent ale. A large map lay across another table. The legend showed the mountains, Benedicts kingdom and the lands beyond. Small figures stood poised to move. They represented both armies. Another group of figures was off to the side. By count Gioni could tell that those represented him and his people.

“Eat! Eat!” Wulfgar urged to the men who’d gathered to look at the map. The women were serving them - both Wulfgar’s and the slave women. Giona was surprised to see

Phaedra among them. Her eyes were still puffy and red-rimmed but she carried out her duties along with the other females. Gioni looked towards his father, hoping that Kane would notice how obedient and compliant the princess was since being punished.

After feasting, the men moved back to the table and the women took their place. Wulfgar spread his hands out, indicating the map. His men were two hundred strong, he said. With the slaves they would now be two hundred and thirty. His plan was to raid the slave village again - this time with the help of Kane and his men - and take more slaves back to the mountains - at least as many as on the first trip. It had already been several days, he said, and surmised that King Benedict was too preoccupied looking for his lost daughter to concern himself with the slaves.

“He probably doesn’t think it is likely that she’d run off with slaves,” he said. “This buys us time. However, if we raid again he will most certainly come after us. But by then, we will be increased in numbers and can cut them down at the pass. It will send a strong message to King Benedict.”

“It is a good plan,” one of the slave men said.

“It is a terrible plan,” came another voice. All turned to see the source. Princess Phaedra was striding towards the men, and Gioni could clearly see that he had obviously not been firm enough.

Chapter Three

“Sit down, Phaedra,” Gioni said. But Wulfgar held up his hand.

“No,” he said. “She may be just a woman, but she is the only one here who has knowledge of the kingdom. Let her speak.”

Phaedra looked nervously at Gioni. She knew she may pay for interrupting the men, but she also knew she’d rather be beaten again than see them die because she withheld information she knew could help them.

She walked to the map, surveying it with practiced eyes. She’d seen similar maps in her father’s study and as a child had amused herself by playing with the little pieces. She and her father would play make believe war games. He’d done it to entertain her, but Phaedra had learned something of strategy from the pastime.

“My father’s men have not fought in the mountains since anyone could remember. The exercise and spar often, but it is usually in the plains or in the open forest at much lower altitudes. If you take the fight to them there, you will be at a disadvantage. If you let them come to you, everything about the mountains will weaken them. The air here is thinner and colder. The terrain is unfriendly. Everyone in my father’s kingdom is spoiled. We have lived too easily, even the soldiers. Being here has made me realize how harsh the land can be and how soft our own guards are. All who can train should start training now. Then you should wait for my father to come.”

“And what makes you think he will?” Wulfgar asked.

“Because my mother is not a fool,” she said. “We had an altercation the day I fled. I told her then that I would rather be a slave. She slapped me and I went to my room. That night I struck out for the slave huts. I had simply wanted to observe them, to dream. Now I find myself among them and I would stay here and live by their laws and rules.” She paused and glanced at Gioni. “As best I can at least.”

Wulfgar nodded at her respectfully.

“Thank you, lass,” he said. He turned to Kane. “You should listen to your women more. Females can be both obedient and good advisors.” He chuckled. “And I would match ours in combat against any one of you.”

Now the slave men were laughing, but Wulfgar was no. “You doubt me?” He stood and pointed to a woman who had been serving with the others. She had long black hair that hung in untamed waves down her back. Her skin was ruddy from the wind, but even so she was still beautiful. Her movements were almost catlike as she walked towards the men.

“This is Shira, my wife,” Wulfgar said. He reached for a blade leaning against a post and tossed it to her. She caught it by the handle in mid-air. Wulfgar’s eyes scanned the men

assembled around the table. He pointed to Kane.

“You,” he said, handing him another blade. “Fight her.”

The other slaves had always looked to Kane as a leader. He’d never exhibited anything beyond total confidence. Now he looked uncertain.

“I am not a swordsman,” he said. “And even if I were, I would not fight a female.”

“Why?” asked Wulfgar. “Do you think swordplay is about strength? You do not want to fight her? Very well. Ramanth!”

A younger man came forward. He was nearly as tall as Wulfgar, but his beard was closely cropped. His eyes glittered with sport and he smiled as he swaggered towards Shira. She smiled back. The slaves watched, mesmerized.

Shira lifted the sword and spread her legs for balance. Ramanth drew his and with a cry lunged at her. She dodged out of the way and he fell forward, spun and advanced again. The sounds of metal against metal were sharp and keen in the hall. The pair dodged and weaved, looking for advantage. The cocky smile was gone from Ramanth’s face now as he battled the woman who was only half his size. The fight became fiercer and the slaves glanced nervously at Wulfgar, wondering why he was not interceding. Ramanth had Shira on the defensive now. She was backing up towards the table where the women were sitting. The scattered as she leapt atop it, scattering bowls and cups. With a cry she leaped off, towards Ramanth and sliced his shoulder with the blade as she descended. He cried out and she turned as soon as her feet hit the ground. The tip of her blade was at his throat. He glared at her, his nostrils flaring. She smiled, and then he smiled too.

Wulfgar roared with laughter.

“That,” he said. “Is a woman of heart.”

“That is a farce,” Salaman interjected. “A show.”

“Really?” Wulfgar asked. He walked over and handed a blade to Salaman. “You fight her, then.”

Salaman swallowed nervously. At the table, Layla stood. “Sal, don’t!” Salaman cast an irritated glance at Layla, who fell silent. He took the blade from Wulfgar and approached Shira. She smiled confidently. Salaman was not a warrior. The slaves had not been trained to fight, probably because Benedict knew that slaves with fighting skills may rebel. He tried to mimic what he had seen Ramanth do. The result was total humiliation for Salaman. Shira spun, weaved and sent his blade flying from his hand in what looked like one seamless move. Before Salaman could even react, she’d leapt forth with a war cry and hit him in the solar plexus with the hilt of her sword. Salaman fell back with an “oomph,” slamming into a support post. He slid down. Wulfgar watched without emotion, as if seeing his wife beat men in combat were an everyday occurrence.

Salaman staggered to his feet, looking sheepish.

“How do you control your women if they fight like that?” he asked.

“We are good leaders,” Salaman said. “And we are just. Because of that, we have no fear of teaching them to fight. It is a fearful leader who keeps his women..” He gestured to the room. “...or his slaves helpless. King Benedict never taught you to fight because he feared you would think for yourselves. I can sleep peacefully at night knowing that Shira would never turn her blade on me, for I lead her firmly but with respect. She trusts me and obeys me.”

He leaned against the edge of the table and propped his foot on a nearby trunk. “Shira,” he said, motioning towards her. The woman moved towards the clan leader. He pointed to his knee and she obediently positioned herself over it. Wulfgar raised the hem of her skirt, revealing a firm, well-muscled bottom. He began to spank her, the sounds of the forceful smacks resounding off the walls of the hall. The men watched, fascinated. The women winced and squirmed in empathy as the toned bottom quickly reddened. Wulfgar spanked Shira methodically, and only stopped when her cheeks were covered in angry handprints.

“Rise,” he said. She did and turned. Tears glistened in her eyes, but she did not cry.

“For what cause was that?” Kane asked.

“The women here do not ask. They trust us. They understand they can be punished for no other reason than we want to see their bottoms redden.” He pointed to the men. “Respect. Give it to your subjects, your slaves, your allies, your women...and they will return it tenfold. Lead them justly and they will follow.”

Phaedra looked at Gioni. She could see him pondering what Wulfgar said. She did not know that he was also pondering the insightfulness of the woman he’d claimed. Was she the troublemaker? Or was Dagmar?

“Our women will not fight,” Salaman was saying.

Phaedra started to speak in opposition, but Gioni’s look silenced her. He knew that his friend’s humiliating defeat at the hands of Wulfgar’s woman had wounded Salaman’s pride.

“Think on it,” Wulfgar said. “As a free people this will be one of the decisions you will want to make. Don’t want your women to fight? Keep them at home. Want them to have the ability to kill an intruder who may savage them in your absence, teach them swordplay.” He smiled towards Salaman. “Unless you secretly fear her.”

Shira walked over to Wulfgar to nuzzle him as he fondled her bottom. Salaman looked away, humiliated anew.

“Tomorrow,” Wulfgar boomed, “we begin training. All who would learn to wield a sword or a bow or a mace, meet me in the field behind the huts. Until then, return to your own and get a good night’s rest. Tomorrow you learn to fight like free men!”

Everyone exited the hall. Phaedra was quiet as she trailed Gioni. As they walked, she kept her eyes on Salaman, who looked sullen. Layla was trying to appease him, it seemed, but his body seemed tense.

When she and Gioni entered the hut, she approached him cautiously.

“Are you angry with me?” she asked.

“I was,” he said.

“And now?”

“You make things difficult, Phaedra,” he said. “But you also make them interesting. I sometimes worry that you will never be obedient. If I let you fight, I can only imagine that you would be more headstrong.”

Phaedra looked at him, then looked down at the ground as if thinking. She said nothing for several long moments, but then pulled her dress off in one fluid motion, leaving herself naked except for her fur boots. She smiled knowingly at Gioni and walked over. Pushing him gently to the ground, she laid herself across his lap. Her bottom still bore the angry marks from his spanking. Some of the marks from the switches had dried blood on them. Gioni remembered her screams of pain. And yet here she was, offering herself to him. He knew what she was doing. She was doing just what Shira had done to Wulfgar; she was presenting herself to him in a perfect posture of submission.

Gioni swallowed nervously. There was something almost intimidating in her self-assuredness. His hand lowered to her bottom. He ran his palm across the surface roughened still by welts. He massaged her gently and then raised his hand, bringing it down lightly, but hard enough to sting the already tortured flesh. He felt her gasp and flinch, but she did not move. He smacked her again and again, fascinated by how she writhed but did not fight. Her bottom was slightly warm and under her stomach his cock was rock hard. He put a finger between her legs and inserted it. She was wet and throbbing with need. He pushed her from his lap almost roughly and positioned her on her knees. Phaedra parted her legs and steeled herself for his brutal thrust. She gasped as he entered her roughly. Leaning forward, he sunk his teeth into her soft shoulder as he rammed into her over and over. Phaedra pushed back against him hard, timing herself to maximize his thrusts. Soon their bodies were glistening in sweat. She was crying out in passion and he was moaning uncontrollably. He collapsed on her, pushing her into the furs by the fire. They said nothing as they fell asleep.

Later, it was the fire going out that woke her up. Phaedra carefully extricated herself from Gioni’s grip and wrapped herself in a fur. There were a few logs by the firepit. She threw them in and decided to go outside and get more. Her dress was lying where she’d thrown

it down. She donned it, took the fur wrap and went outside.

The sky was clear as a bell, but the wind was blowing. It was cold and on the horizon she could see clouds forming. The wind whistled and she heard it moan and cry. But then she stopped what she was doing and turned. The cry sounded again. It was not the wind. It was the sound of a woman.

She followed the sound, knowing as she did that her mate would not approve. The cries led her to the hut Sal shared with Layla. She recognized the voice as that of her friend and, circling the hut, found a small gap in the fabric through which to spy.

"Tell me exactly why you are being punished," Sal commanded.

Looking at the floor, her bare bottom clenching and unclenching, her voice trembling, Layla struggled to comply.

"I lied when you asked me if Dagmar spoke the truth about Phaedra. But please understand! I did not want to get her in trouble, and now I know I was correct to protect her."

"You are not correct unless I tell you that you are!" Sal was saying.

Layla began to sob anew, babbling apologies as the hut resounded with a dozen sharp, hard spansks. Phaedra winced as she saw her friend try to stay still but by the fifth she was squirming and twisting. By the eighth she was unable to catch her breath. By the tenth, Sal was forced to restrain the hand that sought to cover her bottom. He delivered the last four to the back of her thighs - two each.

There was a short pause while Layla choked on her sobs. But after just a moment's reprieve, Sal renewed his assault on his mate. Her anguished howls resounded through the hut and it was all she could do to hold still. Sal was forced to lock her legs with his own to keep Layla from bucking off his lap. After spanking her for a full three minutes, he stopped to survey his handiwork. Even though it had been a hand spanking, the relentless nature had taken its toll on the nude woman stretched out on Salaman's lap.

Phaedra felt a terrible pang of guilt. This had happened because of her. She should have waited until the meeting with Wulfgar to suggest that women be warriors. But instead she'd stupidly said something in the presence of the two-faced Dagmar. She hated the woman. And she decided then and there she'd get revenge for her friend.

But she was not just angry at Dagmar. She was also angry at Salaman. He'd had his pride bruised, but to take it out on the gentle Layla was unfair. She wondered if she should say something to Gioni or Kane, but knew if she did they would chide her for spying and may even punish her.

She crept back to the hut and was halfway there when she heard someone. "Psst.."

Phaedra paused and ducked, looking around.

“Psst.”

She peered through the darkness. It was Shira.

“You leave your man’s side to spy on your friend. Why?”

“He’s beating her,” Phaedra said resentfully. “He’s beating her because he is angry with you.”

Shira looked towards the hut and nodded. “I know,” she said. “I feared this would happen. Your men are cowards.”

“The are not!” Phaedra said hotly. She stared at Shira, searching her sly eyes. “Is that what Wulfgar says?”

Shira shrugged almost disinterestedly, and it occurred to Phaedra that this mountain warrior was as arrogant and as disdainful as any highborn princess she’d ever met.

“They are not,” Phaedra repeated. The cries were still coming from Layla’s hut. “At least not all of them. They are just different from your men.”

“And from you,” she added begrudgingly.

Shira smiled her enigmatic smile.

“Will you teach me to fight?” Phaedra asked suddenly.

“Are your men going to let you learn?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Phaedra said. “But I want to learn anyway.”

Shira smiled broadly now. “Then I shall teach you, and your friend too if she wants to learn. After tonight she may.”

“I’ll ask her,” Phaedra said.

“Then we’ll meet tomorrow,” Shira said. “I shall call upon you.”

And then like a cat in the dark, Wulfgar’s woman was gone. Phaedra sat shivering in the darkness for a few long moments, listening to the cold wind carrying Layla’s plaintive cries, and trying not to hate the man and the culture that had caused them.

Chapter Four

“There’s still no word.” The messenger delivered the news to King Benedict fearfully. Since his daughter’s disappearance, the monarch had become increasingly agitated.

“And no word on the slaves either,” the messenger said. “We’ve sent scouts as far as the mouth of the pass. There are no sign of Wulfgar’s men, and we are still reasonably sure that they are responsible for the theft of our slaves.”

Queen Ariana, who was pacing behind her husband’s throne, stopped.

“I told you,” she said. “Phaedra is with the slaves! Find them and you find her!”

“That’s preposterous,” the king said curtly. “She is our daughter.”

“Yes!” the queen said. “She is our daughter. And that makes her stubborn and willful and..”

“...and I have heard enough! Get out of my sight now!” The king bellowed the command and Queen Ariana shrunk back, still angry but reminded of her station. And, ironically, reminded of how her daughter must have felt the night she fled. Helpless. Inconsequential.

“Please!” she said, adopting a solicitous tone. “We argued the night of the raids. She told me that she’d rather be a slave than be our daughter. In the morning they were gone, and so was she. You must find the slaves. If you search for them among Wulfgar’s men you may find her....”

The queen collapsed at the king’s feet. “Please! Please listen to me Benedict. Please...just this one time!”

The king stood and stepped over the prone woman at the foot of his throne. Queen Ariana rose to find the messenger looking at her sympathetically.

“What are you gawking at?” she hissed. “Continue to stare and I shall have you beaten from the palace!”

The messenger turned and scurried away, leaving the queen feeling alone and desolate. She’d been riddled with guilt since the morning after the raids. News had reached the palace just before daybreak. In the ensuing chaos, at first no one noticed that Phaedra had not come down from her rooms. One of the slaves informed the queen when at mid-morning the princess still had not emerged.

“She’s pouting,” the queen had said with certainty. “When she’s hungry enough, she’ll come out. The stubborn thing can starve for all I care.”

Of course, the queen had not meant this any more than she’d meant the slap she’d given

her daughter - the slap she'd regretted but had been too proud to apologize for. By the time noon rolled around a concerned servant fetched a key and let herself into the princess' room. She found it empty and - screaming - went to fetch the queen and king.

Suddenly the dire news of the missing slaves seemed less dire - at least to the king and queen - and the castle slaves, many of whom were related to the ones abducted, stood by resentfully as the monarch's full attention turned to finding his daughter.

The grounds were searched. The forests were searched. Foul play was expected. Slaves were sent into the pond with poles to poke at the bottom while the queen stood on the shore, wringing her hands for fear they'd find her daughter, drowned in a fit of despondency over her mother's treatment.

The king became angry, the queen depressed. And the servants in the raided village began to slowly realize that all the loyalty they felt was shared between their class and the rulers had been nothing more than an illusion. When the slaves were discovered missing, rather than sympathy for the families the king and queen expressed outrage over lost "property." When their daughter was discovered to be missing, they all but ignored the comments from slaves expressing sympathy. It was noted among the slaves that even the shared experience was not bridged between the classes. The king and queen wanted no comfort from mere slaves in their time of worry, and they offered no comfort to the men and women whose relatives were stolen by Wulfgar.

The king stationed soldiers at the slave village in case more raids were in the offing. This infuriated the slaves, who were told they could not leave the village after dark to look for traces of their loved ones even though by day they were forced to comb the woods looking for signs of Princess Phaedra.

The loss of Kane was especially significant. With the rulers having let them down, they desperately needed someone to turn to. Among the slaves, Kane was that man. But now he was gone, too.

It was decided that they would strike out on their own to find their loved ones. The slaves knew it was risky, but did not believe the king was at all focused on finding their kin. The only problem was the guards; how would they get past them?

It was to their advantage that the guards really were focusing on looking for intruders. Because the king and queen took the slaves' loyalty for granted, they were impervious to the hurt and resentment among the serving class. The guards were not told to look for unrest and so they did not. And when in the pre-dawn hours when the burliest remaining male slaves systematically waylaid the guards - two of whom were dozing - and tied them up, the operation went quite well.

The soldiers' horses were taken, along with all the provisions the slaves could fit into their wagons. By the time the king and queen realized that they were short-staffed - which by that time was late morning on the next day - the band of escaped slaves were making their way through the snowy pass that led to Wulfgar's camp.

At the moment the slaves came into view, Gioni was getting a lesson in swordsmanship as Phaedra watched proudly - and somewhat enviously - from within a gaggle of other female slaves. The men had decided that morning that only the men would be trained to fight, that they would not emulate Wulfgar's social model for females. The decision would have moved Phaedra to tears had she not been so angry. It did not matter to her that Gioni had voted in favor of letting women fight if they wanted. The other men, lead by Banor and Salaman, had pushed for women to maintain traditional roles. It did not help that Layla had refused to speak to her all day. Salaman had treated his mate terribly; the way Phaedra saw it, he'd spanked her as much work out his anger over having been bested by Shira than for any wrongdoing on her part. The fact that he'd used the punishment to turn Layla against her was worse for Phaedra than being spanked herself.

She was thinking back to Shira's offer when she heard the first cries. Riders were coming through the pass.

"Wulfgar's men! Wulfgar's men!" someone shouted.

Everyone went running in that direction, but Wulfgar halted them.

"We don't know how many they have. Hide in the trees above the pass and wait for my signal to fire. I'll send warriors to prevent their retreat and drive them into the village. We'll cut them down as they enter."

Male and female warriors - about fifty - ran ahead and took a path that would lead them down into the pass behind the soldiers. Everyone else followed Wulfgar.

The men had left the field so suddenly that some had dropped the blades they were using for practice. Phaedra, seized by a moment of impetuous bravery, walked over and picked one up.

"What are you doing?" Layla marched over, speaking the first words she'd spoken to the princess all day.

"What do you care?" asked Phaedra angrily.

"I don't want you to get in trouble," Layla said.

"I'd rather get in trouble defending the people I care about than live in fear," Phaedra said, pulling away.

She did not wait for an answer. Instead, she raced to where the other men were gathering. If Gioni would punish her later, so be it. Still, Phaedra stayed out of the way of the men at the last minute, instead sprinting up to a rocky outcrop. She was eager to see how many men her father had brought. Above her, Wulfgar's warriors were poised with their arrows drawn. She looked down into the pass. She recognized the horses her father's men used, but realized rather quickly that the men astride them weren't soldiers. Neither were the people following.

“WAIT!” she cried. “DO NOT ATTACK!” Her voice rang crystal clear through the pass and the travelers looked up now, their faces fearful.

All eyes were on the lone girl on the rock.

“These are not the king’s men! They are more of our people!”

Our people. It had come so naturally to see them that way, to think of them that way. The news spread in a chain reaction along the rock and then she could see Kane and Gioni and the other men running back towards her so they could head into the pass. She was smiling and relieved it was the others from the village and not her father’s men.

Giona was coming past her. He smiled and then stopped in his tracks, staring. Phaedra had forgotten that she held the sword. He looked around before swiping it from her with a frown.

“I wanted to help,” she said.

“And you did,” he reminded her. “Were it not for your warning, Wulfgar’s men would have cut them down before they made it through the pass.”

“But I wanted to help fight, too, had it not been our people,” she said.

“You know the decision that was made,” he said, sheathing the sword he had taken from her.

“You opposed it,” she said.

“I did, but more favored it,” he replied. “And I am not going to allow you to break rules on a whim. Go to the hut, Phaedra. You will be punished for what you have done.”

“You would punish me after I saved so many?”

“It does not matter. You disobeyed me. Now go.”

When she didn’t move he grabbed her by the arm, turned her, and swatted her hard across the bottom. Phaedra yelped and headed for the hut, her frustration growing with every step. She paced back and forth in front of the firepit, her eyes stinging with tears. Outside she could hear the excited voices of families reuniting. And it gave her pause. She was not among them and no one missed her, because she really was not one of them. Not really.

She saw the flap to her tent open and looked up expectantly, thinking for a moment that it was Gioni come to apologize and introduce her to the others as his woman. But it was Shira.

“Oh, hello,” she said.

“You seem sad,” Shira said.

“They won’t let us fight,” she said.

“Then fight without permission,” she said with a shrug.

Phaedra regarded her. “Does Wulfgar approve when you do things like this?”

“He is too busy leading to follow my every move,” she said. “And he prefers me to think for myself, even if it vexes him.” She walked over to Phaedra. “And he thinks your men are wrong to keep you from fighting.”

“Does he know you are encouraging me?”

“No,” she said. “But I think he would laugh if he did.”

“Would you like to go for a walk and practice with the sword?” Shira asked. “It may improve your mood.”

Phaedra considered this. “No,” she said, reluctantly declining. “Gioni will be here soon and he...forbade me from leaving.”

Shira shrugged. “As you wish. But if you change your mind I’ll be down in the glen.”

Phaedra watched her go, taking hollow satisfaction in obeying Gioni. She wanted to please him, even if he disappointed her. She paced the floor some more, waiting for him to show up. When he did not, she went outside to look for him. Phaedra stayed behind the huts, not wanting him to know that she’d disobeyed again. When finally she spied him, he was with the group of the abducted slaves and the newcomers, who were excitedly filling him in on what had happened.

“...didn’t even care about us once their selfish chit of a princess turned up missing,” a woman was saying. “Shows you what they really think of is!”

“The whole family is a heartless bunch who pretends to care when it suits their own ends,” said her mate, a tall red-haired man.

Through this, Gioni listened without explanation - or defense. The man had called her spoiled and neither her mate nor his father stepped forward to say that she was not only among them, but it was by her own will and that she’d even just saved them by warning Wulfgar’s men of their presence.

A tear slipped from her eye. She could listen no more. Turning, she headed back to the hut she shared with Gioni. She knew now that the sword was nothing more than an excuse to keep her hidden until he could prepare the others for the embarrassment of claiming her.

She was wiping a tear away when he entered the tent.

“Thank goodness they are all safe,” were his first words.

Phaedra stared at him wordlessly for a moment.

“Have you told them that they will be a free people now?” she asked.

“Father is telling them now.”

“Have you told them of me?”

“Father is telling them,” he said. “He’s telling them that you are indeed here.”

She regarded him. “But you told them nothing more. You did not tell them that you claimed me.”

He looked away. “Not yet. There is some anger at your family, at you. It is misguided, but it is still there. It complicates matters.”

She sighed. “I would not have your life ‘complicated.’” She said. “I release you from your vow to me.”

“What?” he looked up, confused.

“I release you from your vow to claim me, to love me, protect me...whatever else comes with it.”

“I never said I did not want that,” he said. “I do.”

“I no longer want you to,” Phaedra said. “I walked out a moment ago. I watched you stay silent as one of the new men called me a selfish chit. You refuse to allow me to take up a sword but when I need you to defend me you let me down. You are no better than the weak prince my parents tried to marry me off to.”

“Phaedra,” he said, his voice angry. “Do not vex me. I am warning you..”

“That what? You’ll beat me? Go ahead. It would not hurt me any more than you just did.”

“Don’t say such things,” he said. “You are wrong. I love you.”

“Gioni!” Someone called to him from outside. He turned towards the sound.

“Go,” she said.

“No. I do not want to leave you.”

“Go,” she repeated. “Go to your people.”

“Come with me,” he said.

“No,” she said. “I am no longer yours to command.”

“It doesn’t work like that,” he said hotly. “Once I claim you..”

“...you are honor-bound to cherish and protect and guide me. Yes, I remember your hollow promises. But Gioni, you cannot shirk the first two responsibilities, or carry them out only when it’s easy, and think I will still accept the third. It does not work like *that*. Not for me. So go.”

“GIONI!” It’s snowing! We must find shelter. Where are you?”

The hut opened and Kane appeared. He looked from her face to his.

“Is something amiss?” he asked.

“Your son was just leaving,” Pheadra said. “Go to your father, boy.”

“Phaedra, don’t...” Gioni began.

“Settle the matter with your woman, later,” Kane said impatiently. “Our people need us.”

It was the wrong thing for his father to say, even if it was an innocent statement. But duty called and Gioni reluctantly allowed himself to be pulled away.

“I will return soon,” he said. “I promise.”

She turned away without answering. It did not matter. His promises were wasted on her. She was done with him. She’d gathered enough from the conversation to know that her parents were grieved. That was something, at least. If she returned, perhaps they would be soothed enough to leave the slaves in peace, especially since they’d fled this time. Did her father really want to force their return? She did not want to think about what it would be like to staff the palace with people ready for an uprising at any moment. Betrayal, she thought, once carried out cannot be undone.

Gioni was right. It was snowing outside. Through the front flap of the tent she could see that they were herding the newcomers into the great hall. The men would be occupied by settling them in. Now, she realized, was as good a time as any.

She dressed warmly, wrapping herself in furs and stuffing what food she could into a pouch. She took one of the swords that Gioni had been given and slung it over her shoulder.

She opened the flap of the tent and looked around. The snow was falling harder. She was

still not missed. She edged out slowly and was almost nearly outside the tent when she felt a hand on her arm. It was Shira.

“You’re leaving?” the woman asked.

Phaedra stood stock still in her tracks. “I must,” she said. “I do not belong here. I was wrong to think I could be one of them and as long as I stay, I risk bringing danger to her people.”

“I agree,” Shira said.

This surprised Phaedra. “I was going to tell you that you should leave. But if I did, Wulfgar...” Her voice trailed off, and Phaedra knew what she was thinking. If the chieftain spanked as hard as he did for pleasure, what must punishment be like?

“The slaves are capable, but not yet battle ready. If your father sends an army in we may still lose, especially since your men refuse to let the women learn to fight.”

Phaedra nodded. “They will not change in that regard,” she said. “They are stubborn.”

Shira smiled. “Stubborn yes, and foolish. I knew when I met you that you were stronger than most of them. I wish you could stay. We could become friends. But I fear what will happen you do.”

Phaedra was seized by a sudden affection for Wulfgar’s mate and reached out to hug her.

“We must hurry if we are to make it out before we are noticed,” Shira said. “The new ones left good horses tethered at the mouth of the pass. You can take one. It will bear you home fast. I will guide you to the forest, but not beyond.”

Phaedra swallowed the lump in her throat and nodded. Then she began to follow Phaedra towards the pass before she lost courage for what she knew she had to do.

Chapter Five

Wulfgar looked angrily at Gioni and Kane.

“Gone? How can she be gone?”

“She was in the hut,” Gioni said. “I told her to wait for me. When I went back she was nowhere to be found.”

Wulfgar leaned forward in his chair. At his side, Shira’s face was unreadable. “I gave her back to you knowing the value she had. I did this in good faith, and because I trusted you to watch her carefully. And now she is *gone*?”

“If we could take some men...”

Wulfgar scowled. “So all of King Bendict’s men search for her in the valley and now you would have me send all my men to search for her here?” He shook his head. “There are now a hundred more people to house, feed and train. We have work to do. Find your woman yourself.”

Kane and Gioni turned, Wulfgar’s voice following them. “Do not return without her.”

Outside the clan leader’s tent, Kane turned to his son. “How did this happen? I thought you had her well in hand!”

“I thought I did, too. But she got angry with me, Father.”

Kane stopped walking. “She got angry? Why?”

Gioni turned. “She had a sword when she came down from the rock after warning everyone that there were slaves in the pass and not soldiers. I told her we’d decided that women were forbidden from having swords and that she should return to the hut for punishment. She snuck out and heard us talking with the others. She heard some of the things that were said about her family, and about her.” He sighed. “But it was what she did not hear that upset her. I was going to wait until everyone got settled to tell them that I had claimed her. She mistook the omission for shame. She told me that I was weak and now that Wulfgar had freed our people she no longer wanted to be my mate.”

Kane shook his head in disbelief. “She told you these things and you left her alone, angry?”

“I had other things to do!” he said. “I left her in the hut. She was supposed to stay there.”

Kane furrowed his brow and looked around the settlement. He could waste no more time chiding his son, especially when he felt some responsibility. He’d voted with Gioni for

women to be allowed to take up arms, but he'd not argued as vigorously for it as he had argued for independence because in truth he'd not cared if they lost. The ones who'd voted to keep women obedient and helpless had been the same ones opposed to independence. He figured that a victory for them might soothe some of the pangs they felt over the changes that were about to take place. But he knew that some of the women - especially Phaedra - were sufficiently capable of learning how to use a sword. And he knew that Phaedra resented freedom being handed to the men while the women were essentially kept enslaved. He thought back to Wulfgar's treatment of Shira. He'd displayed her strength and his power over her for a reason - to show the newcomers that a man could have both strength and obedience from his woman. Phaedra was capable of providing both, but the choices they made were limiting her to just obedience.

"Do you think she ran down into the valley as she did before?"

"No," Kane answered. "The first time she escaped, she had no bearings. She does now. If she's off, she's off for home."

Gioni shook his head. "I don't think so," he said. "She loathes her parents."

"Perhaps, but she may feel that's all she has now."

Kane's words cut Gioni, who followed his father guiltily. They were heading towards the pass now. As they moved past the entrance, Kane stopped.

"How many of the guards' horses did the other say they took?" he asked.

"Four," Gioni said, glancing at his father. "But now there are three."

The snow was falling harder now and the men began to follow the tracks. There were two pairs but also one coming back in the new snow.

"She had help if she took one of the horses," Gioni said. "Someone showed her the way out of the pass and returned. A traitor. One of ours?"

"I don't think so," Kane said. "The newcomers found their way here by chance. We were in a closed wagon. Even I'm not sure I'd take the right path to the village if I left." He turned to his son. "But you could. The tracks are still readable in the snow."

He took the reins of the nearest horse. "Follow them. You must bring her back."

Gioni looked down. "What if she does not want to come?"

"Did you claim her?"

"I did."

"Did you mean it?"

“I did,” he said. “But I would have her love me.”

“Then talk to her, son,” Kane said. “Perhaps we have been wrong, Gioni. Perhaps Wulfgar’s way is right. We should all be free to disobey, or to obey. We have only had one choice as slaves. Our women should have the same choice. Phaedra left not because she didn’t have love for you, but because she did not have choices. Give them to her and she will make the right ones.”

He held the reins of the horse as his son mounted it.

“Now go!” he said. “Make haste!”

Kane hit the animal on the rump and it surged forward, bearing a rider now desperate to find his mate.

Kane watched son ride off, praying he would be safe. He was about to walk back when he spied something on the ground. It was a hammered metal bracelet. Kane picked it up, turned it over in his hand and then went to inform Wulfgar that his son was on the way to fetch Phaedra back to the valley.

He was worried for Gioni’s safety, of course, but Gioni was making good time. The horse had been given time to rest and despite the cold thin air was moving along at a rapid pace. But the snow was falling rapidly, too, and Gioni found himself squinting to keep up with the rapidly fading tracks. Paths departed from the main path, and he knew to take one would leave him lost. But he also knew his father would likely send other men if he did not return. He wondered if he should have waited for a guide and decided that it was better that he had not. He needed to find Phaedra before her father’s guards did. By now they would have discovered that the rest of the slaves were gone. They may even be on the way.

But unbeknownst to him, Phaedra had already figured that out. Shira had taken her to the point where the path widened. “Keep straight from here,” she said. “You should make it by nightfall.” So Phaedra had kept to the path, and all had gone well until she heard the horse she was riding began to prick its ears forward and snort excitedly.

“Easy,” she said. “Easy.”

He’d snorted again and then neighed loudly. Another horse, then two, answered. There were riders coming, and she had to make a decision. The horse seemed to recognize the calls, judging by how hard he pulled now in his eagerness to reach the horses further up the path. Phaedra tried to haul him back, but he would not listen. She was sure if she kept going she would meet her father’s soldiers on the path and suddenly she did not want to. She wanted Gioni.

She turned the horse around but it balked, its feet drumming in the snow and its tail swishing in agitation.

“Please!” she said. “Come on!” But the animal would not listen. Phaedra looked down the path she’d just traveled. Beyond the ridge lay the man she loved and a world that would never really accept her. If she turned, she’d go back to a world she could never accept. But there was a difference, she knew. If she went back to her father’s, she could try to convince him to leave the slaves be. She could avoid bloodshed. She could tell him how harsh the land was in the mountains. She could embellish the strength and size of Wulfgar’s army to dissuade him. Had she not argued that she should be allowed to fight? Had she not been willing to sacrifice her very life for the freed slaves? She decided she was still willing to make that sacrifice. Wheeling her horse around, she gave him his head. He bolted towards the oncoming riders. When the guards saw her, they shouted. For they did not recognize her covered in furs. She felt the arrow pierce her shoulder before she realized what happened, and then the ground was rushing up to meet her. She heard the sounds of snow crunching under boots as the men approached her. She was aware of a red stain growing in the snow beside her.

She looked up into the face of one of her father’s guards. His satisfied expression turned to one of horror and his skin became as pale as snow as he realized he’d just shot the Princess Phaedra.

“Bring a blanket!” the guard yelled. Already her teeth were chattering and she felt weak from the bleeding wound. “Bring bandages. Bring whiskey!”

The guard picked her up, cradling her like a child. He apologized when she cried out in pain. She was weak both from having the wind knocked from her lungs and from the rapid blood loss. The guard carried her to a glen. Two more hastily built a fire in the mouth of a nearby cave under the direction of their commanding officer. A medic rushed forward to assess the wound.

“We need to get the arrow out,” Phaedra heard him say. “Lift her up.” She was pushed to sitting, groaning from the searing pain.

“This is going to hurt, Princess. Forgive me.” Two sets of arms restrained her as someone withdrew with arrow that had broken when she fell. Her scream rent the air. Whiskey was poured on the wound to disinfect it. She screamed again and then her world went black.

“The weather is worse,” one of the guards said. “We can hardly see for the snow.”

The commanding officer looked around. “No, and she’s not fit to move. She needs warmth. Build the fire up. We’ll hold here for the night. Tomorrow we head out, snow or no.”

They moved her to the cave, but further down the path Gioni had stopped. Was it the wind he heard howling? He listened, wondering if his ears had been playing tricks on him. He heard the sound again, the sound of a woman’s cry. It was Phaedra. He just knew it. The sound was distant, but there was no mistaking it. He urged his horse forward but the deepening snow made for difficult going. Soon he’d lost the tracks in the driving snow.

He called for her, but the cries were lost on the wind. Gioni's chest filled with fear. Had she fallen from her horse? Was she lying in a ravine, twisted and broken? Were there wolves? His fears drove him forward, compelling him to push the horse that now floundered and slipped in the snow.

He prayed to whatever gods might be listening for a sign. Almost immediately he smelled the faint scent of smoke on the air. He strained his eyes and through the snow he could see the rising tendrils of smoke. Someone was building a fire. He wanted to rush forward, thinking at first that it was Pheadra. But he realized that she had probably never had a reason to build a fire, and likely no experience. The guards had likely come for her. He still wondered what the screams had meant. He hoped it was only from fear as he proceeded with caution towards their camp.

But he was not the only one who was worried. Back at Wulfgar's village, Kane had reported sending his son off to find Phaedra.

"She had help escaping," he informed the chieftain. "There were two sets of horse tracks leading into the pass. Only one coming back." He held out the bracelet that he'd found on the ground. "I discovered this by one of the horses."

Wulfgar took the bracelet and turned it over and over in his hand. At his side, Shira saw it and began to move discreetly away, but suddenly Wulfgar reached out and grasped her. He moved surprisingly fast for such a large man and everyone was surprised when he threw her over his knee and raised her skirts.

His hand went out and a man to his side immediately placed a thick leather strap in it. Kane and the other slaves looked at one another in surprise.

"That is your bracelet, Shira," he said calmly. "What was it doing on the path?"

"I must have dropped it when we went there with the men," she said.

He raised the strap and brought it down across the lowest portion of her buttocks. She screamed.

"No," Wulfgar said calmly. "You were on the ridge with me. The truth, wife."

She said nothing.

Wulfgar sighed and spread her legs, trapping one between his. The effect was to expose her completely to everyone in the room. When he brought the strap down this time, it caught not just the lower portion of her cheeks, but her nether lips as well. Shira shrieked and bucked, but he ignored her distress and brought the strap down rapidly in five more brutal blows.

"The truth," he said.

She was sobbing now. "She did not want to be here," Shira said. "As long as she was she put us at risk. She needed to be home, among her own people. She is royalty and will always have the mind of a royal. She is used to giving commands. These people have yet to unlearn slavishness!"

"So you helped her leave?"

"Yes!" she said. "And I don't regret it!"

"Not yet," Wulfgar said, and raised the strap again. Never before had any of Kane's people punished a woman so harshly. Wulfgar targeted Shira's thighs and bottom so severely that he left her striped and bruised. She fought him as best she could, until she could fight no more and collapsed onto the floor as he pushed her from his lap. Shira curled into a ball at Wulfgar's feet. He stared at her for a moment before reaching down to pat her reassuringly. Then he looked up at Kane.

"It is too snowy to send my men into the pass. Your son is at risk. So his woman. If they are lost, my wife will be to blame and will be accountable. When the snow stops, we will send a party to search."

Kane nodded as an unfamiliar lump formed in his throat. His pity for Shira was gone. Phaedra and his son were out there, but he knew in his heart that Wulfgar's wife alone was not to blame. Gioni had misjudged the independence of his woman, and there was some truth in what Shira had said. He wondered if - should Phaedra return - she would ever be happy among them.

The wind howled all night. Kane could not sleep. His mind was plagued by images of Phaedra and his son lost in the snow. When the first light of dawn came over the mountains, he decided he could take it no more. It was still snowing, but he had to help.

Wulfgar allowed him a band of warriors; even though he worried that they might not be able to navigate the pass. Some Kane recognized, some he did not because they were so bundled up. Together they entered the pass, their horses struggling through the snow but doing better than the guard's horses, which weren't bred for it. Up ahead, they saw what Gioni had seen the day before - smoke from a fire. They navigated their way towards it.

"There is a narrower path. It will take us to a ridge above them," the guide said. "Half of us can keep to the road and hem them in." He gave a signal and Kane and the others followed him up a steep, winding grade. The horses were silent as they traveled. Soon they were above the camp, looking down. Kane could see inside the cave, where Princess Phaedra lay pale and sleeping, wrapped in blankets. His son was nowhere to be found. The guards were just starting to stir, but somewhere still asleep. The scout nodded, indicating that now was the best time to attack. They came down the grade at a risky speed, and Kane was worried that his horse would lose its footing. But it did not and Wulfgar's men quickly cut half the guards down before they could even get to their weapons. In the confusion, the guard's horses, tethered to a string, broke free and bolted. One slammed into the mount of a warrior, sending him flying. A member of the royal

guard who had been awake when the attack happened rushed up with a cry, his blade drawn ready to strike the hooded man. But one of Wulfgar's warriors rushed up with an even higher cry and drove a blade through the man's back. He fell to the ground atop Wulfgar's man who pushed him off, scrambled back, and pushed the hood back from his head to get a better look at his rescuer. They pushed their hood back, too, and Salaman was shocked to see that it had been Layla who had saved him. She gave him a hard, determined look and wheeled her horse away as he struggled to his feet to find his.

"Kane!" Salaman was on his feet for a split second when he spotted another guard rushing his leader. A sword whistled through the air and caught the guard in the chest, sending him sprawling. And Gioni stepped from behind a tree to smile at the father he'd just saved.

The king's guard was no match for Wulfgar's men, and the newly-freed slaves fared well, even with their limited training. The surviving guards fled and it was decided that they would not give chase. There was no way, now, that conflict could be avoided. King Benedict would know by nightfall that his daughter was in the company of the slaves, who had rallied to join Wulfgar. War would come to the mountain valley.

But at that moment, all Gioni cared about was taking his mate home.

"You came for me!" she said.

"Aye, and I fought for you, lass. I defended you as I should have back at the village."

"I've been wounded," she said weakly.

"I see," he said. "But it is not mortal. And you will heal." He pushed a strand of hair from her face. "Are you ready to go home?"

"To the valley?" she asked.

"I have claimed you, Phaedra," he said. "That means forever."

"Take me home, then," she said, her eyes locking with his. He kissed her, and then Gioni picked his mate up, preparing to take her back to the valley. The future they faced was yet uncertain, but whatever happened, they would face it together.

THE END OF BOOK TWO

(The series will conclude with Book Three)

