

SAVAGE LAND 2 SLAVE OF KIMSHAH

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The year is 2063. The devastating Third World War in 2010 wiped out much of the world's population. The descendants of the war's survivors live in a savage, lawless world.

CHAPTER ONE

"Keep those chains quiet, girl, or I'll stake you out in the sun and leave you for the vultures!"

Angel took up the slack on the metal links which led from her fettered wrists and neck to the girl in front of her and tried to stop them rattling as she moved. She doubted that the guard who had spoken to her would carry out his threat: nubile young slave girls fetched good prices, whereas there was no profit in selling a corpse. However, he might easily whip her and she knew from life-long experience that the whip hurt. She could see lash marks on the bare bottom of the girl in front of her and had no wish to carry similar welts herself.

Angel was a slave, the result of one of the uncountable rapes of her mother, herself a slave. Since the number of men who had enjoyed her mother's helpless body was legion, Angel had no idea who her father was, nor did she care: she had her mother and that was that.

As soon as she was old enough to be useful, she had been put to work. It was a hard life, but she knew no other. They watched her grow, watched her chest expand and curves develop, watched her become a lovely young woman and they began to use her for their sport. Angel quickly became experienced in the ways of men, soon learning to part her legs with the minimum of fuss and ignore the hands which slipped up her ragged shift. She found herself unmoved by what they did to her, but was wise enough never to show it, for she did not want to be beaten, at least not more often than she could avoid.

Naked, as she so often found herself, Angel was certainly a wonderful sight to behold. Her ginger blonde hair was soft, flowing and sensuous, just brushing her flawless bare shoulders. Her big wide eyes suited her name, because they gave her an innocent, beguiling look, aided by the little girl smile which often played on her lips. Her round young breasts sat up perkily on her chest, the nipples seeming to stick out invitingly. Below the slim waist and flat stomach - which came from never having been pampered - and at the junction of the long, sensual legs, her delta was covered by a thin layer of downy fair hair, its very softness inviting invasion. Angel meant no such invitation, but she had long accepted such use of her as a fact of life. With a naturally positive outlook, she found life bearable.

Because she was lovely, she was popular with her masters. So too was her mother Carol, still beautiful herself: often, Angel and her mother had lain side by side naked in the dirt at a rape party and it had been a toss-up which of them had been the more in demand. Carol had jet black hair, so Angel's locks were evidently inherited from her unknown father, but there were other family resemblances, not the least of which was the fine figure: Carol could still turn a man's eye.

But when the crops failed and they needed money to buy food, the settlement leaders had to sell Angel to the traders who regularly passed by. Before then, of course, the men had all taken one last bite at the luscious cherry. Angel had been fucked silly. Now she was traipsing across the desert, naked and chained. They'd stripped her for the fat merchant to inspect before he bought her and he hadn't bothered to re-clothe her afterwards. This was the first time she had left the village in her life, but otherwise nothing had changed: she was still a slave; in her experience one master was very much like another. She expected nothing else: her only hope, or daydream, for the future was that she might be bought by a handsome young man who would fall in love with her and treat her like a pampered slave rather than be rough with her. It was unrealistic to aspire to anything more than that. Running away, even if it were possible, was hopeless, for like most slaves she was branded, the now traditional letter S burnt deep into her youthful flesh on the inside front of her right thigh. They had done that whilst she was still a little girl; she had dreaded the pain on the day it was done, but not the branding itself, for her mother carried the same brand and Angel had always known that one day she would too. She was thus born a slave, branded a slave and expected to die a slave: Angel was now seventeen, old enough to no longer believe in miracles.

She had been saying a tearful goodbye to her mother, doubting that she would ever see her again, when the news came that Carol, too, had been bought by the merchant. Now Angel trudged along, third in a line of eight naked females, guarded by four swordsmen on horseback and the slimy fat trader who had already had his repulsive way with her and most of her fellow slave girls. Frequently she glanced to the back of the line, concerned that her mother, nearly twenty years older than herself and as naked as her daughter, might be struggling to keep the pace, but years of slavery had toughened Carol: she was managing.

One of the horsemen had been scouting ahead. Now he returned to report to the trader. "Company's coming. Small wagon, drawn by four girls. Man and a woman, plus two guards."

The guards drew closer to the fat trader's horse as the other caravan neared. He looked the strangers over. The man was very handsome, with piercing blue eyes full of life and a devilish smile playing on the corners of his lips. He looked as if he could well handle the sword he carried. The woman was even better looking, flawless skin and a superb figure well set off by her tunic and tight trousers, her hair covered up by a scarf. The trader was amused to see a large sword hanging from her hip. Women couldn't use swords in his experience and although she looked fit, this blade was probably too heavy for her anyway. A dagger was a woman's weapon. Their two guards looked capable and the trader was glad that his own four guards outnumbered their two plus the man: guards were expensive, but worth it.

He cast a professional eye over the four slave girls, all naked, harnessed to the wagon by chains leading from their manacled wrists to the horizontal bars they were pushing. They were dripping with sweat from their labours in the considerable Australian heat and covered in dust, but they were very good-looking, nevertheless. The lead pair were undoubtedly sisters, probably not much more than a year different in their ages: the green eyes, short, curly dark hair, the slightly upturned noses and the fresh good looks were a mirror image of each other. Sisters sold as a pair often fetched a better price than selling them separately; so did mother and daughter combinations, which was why he had bought the mother of the ginger-blond beauty: her price had been low and her figure excellent for her age. He halted his caravan: an exchange of information with other travellers was often useful.

Both sets of guards dismounted, cautious but grateful for a chance to stretch legs. The man and woman got down and approached. The trader's guards stayed alert, but everything seemed all right.

Until the man spoke.

"I suggest," he said in a clear, confident voice with a hint of mockery, "that you save yourselves some trouble and surrender now."

Immediately the trader's guards drew their swords, as did the other side, the woman included. "We outnumber you," the fat trader said, although he himself carried no weapon. That was what you employed guards for. "Go your way and be damned."

The man smiled, a dazzling smile. "I don't think much of your arithmetic," he said, as he and the woman started towards the trader. Two of the guards immediately challenged them. There was a fast, furious clash of swords. The trader was astonished to see the woman wielding her sword not only as if it was as light as a feather, but also as an expert. The man, too, was clearly an adept swordsman, and after a brief onslaught the trader's two guards lay dead in twin pools of blood.

The man and woman now turned to face the remaining guards. It didn't look as if they would even need to use the two men who backed them up. "I think the odds favour us now," the woman said easily and reached up to pull her scarf off. Cascades of curly copper-blond hair, reaching a third of the way down her back, tumbled from beneath the scarf. The effect on the opposition was stunning.

"Goldenhair," breathed the trader, horrified.

There was a brief moment of silence. Then one of the trader's remaining guards yelled, "it's the Tigers! Run for it!" He and his fellow turned, scrambled up onto their horses and frantically raced off, ignoring their employer's desperate commands to stand and fight. His own beast was built to take his prodigious weight rather than for speed and so he was left alone, quaking with fear. The man and the woman watched the fleeing guards with cavalier laughter.

Angel stared, unbelieving. Up to now she had watched the brief fight with indifference: if the intruders won, it seemed the girls would simply exchange one master for another. But could these people really be the mythical Tigers, the raiders who went around freeing slaves and fighting tyrants? Of course she had heard the legends of the handsome devil they called the Lion and his stunningly beautiful woman whose hair shone like the sun itself, earning her the name Goldenhair; how she could wield a sword as well as any man and even without it defeat a man in hand to hand combat. Their band of outlaws was called The Tigers, they carried out the most audacious and brilliant raids. Her masters had claimed that they were just stories, which somebody had started telling a year or so ago as a cruel joke. Angel could believe that and yet, for the first time in her life, the tiniest flicker of hope stirred in her trim, bare young belly.

The fat trader asked fearfully, "are you indeed the Tigers?"

The man bowed. "The Lion and the Pussycat" - he indicated the lovely copper-blonde woman at his side, who smiled dazzlingly - "at your service." One of his men was already at the merchant's side, searching for the keys to the slaves' chains. Finding it, he began to unlock the disbelieving cackle of girls. Another man unlocked the chains of the four girls pushing the Tigers' wagon, although even after being freed from their fetters the girls remained at their stations.

The trader asked shakily, "what are you going to do with me?"

"It depends how you've treated the girls," replied the Lion easily. "If you've not been too harsh on them, we'll just strip you naked and send you on your way. Otherwise ..."

Meanwhile, the copper-blonde woman addressed the freed slave girls. "All right, ladies, if you want, you're free to go. However, you're naked and branded and even though we'll share the trader's goods and clothes amongst you, I doubt you'll get far. So, if you want, you can come with us. We'll take you to our camp, feed and clothe you and then you can sort out where you want to go and what you want to do."

There was at first a stunned silence: it was a long time since any of these women had been called upon to make a decision of their own, in many cases never. Eventually there was a general murmur of consent to the second option. There was no real alternative: where else could they go? How could they fend for themselves? Above all, though, most of them could still hardly believe they were being spoken to by the legendary Goldenhair. It was like meeting Robin Hood, or Superman, or Winston Churchill: names passed down through the ages, together with images such as a green outfit and a bow and arrow, a red and blue costume and flying through the air, a black hat and a cigar. But they were all myths, imaginary heroes fighting impossibly evil villains. Fairy tales did not come true.

And yet here was Goldenhair, speaking to them as their chains were unlocked.

"The girls pulling the wagon are all free women from our camp," she explained. "A few miles away, we've got horses hidden to take over the work, but until then we'd appreciate any volunteers to help out."

Angel hardly knew what volunteering meant. All her life, she had been given no choice but to do as she was told. Now, for the first time, she was being asked instead of being ordered under threat of the whip. It felt good: she wanted to do something of her own free will. She stepped forwards to take a position on the wooden lattice at the front of the wagon. All the other girls also took up positions. Angel's mother came to stand next to her. With the two bodies side by side, family resemblances were clear. Angel had inherited her mother's large, round breasts, although the teenager's youthful mounds stood up slightly more energetically whilst her mother's nestled in greater dignity on her chest. Both women had curvaceous bottoms and the older woman's shapely legs stood comparison with those of her daughter.

Angel did not want her mother putting in the extra exertion. Carol might be tough, but they had been on a forced march for three days. "Mum," the daughter hissed, "there are enough of us to pull this. Take a rest!"

She was rewarded by a playful but loving slap on her bare bottom. "The day I can't keep up with you, my girl, you can bury me there and then," the equally naked older woman said crustily. "Besides," she added more seriously, "you've never been free. I remember it and it's worth sweating for." Angel knew her mother too well to argue.

The caravan moved off. The fat trader, as promised, had been stripped and sent on his way. His naked body, podgy, pasty and sweating, revealed in all its disgusting pathos, he began to trudge miserably in the other direction, delicate feet treading gingerly on the hot sand, his horse, slaves and belongings all confiscated. With a heavy heart, he turned to watch his former possessions disappear, the nude women who but a short time ago had been his property now pushing the heavy wagon with far greater enthusiasm than they had marched for him. With twelve of them pulling the wagon, all quite used to being barefoot and to physical exertion, their bodies gleaming with perspiration, it was already moving rapidly away.

CHAPTER TWO

Angel pushed hard against the bar in front of her. A long wooden pole reached out from the wagon, with two more bars crossing it at right angles, making four bays. Each bay, designed for one or at most two human work-horses, now had three squeezed tightly together. On the one side of Angel was her mum, Carol, her side pushed tightly into Angel's own in the cramped conditions, their sweat mixing freely. On the other side, her hot body also rubbing against Angel's, was another black-haired girl who had introduced herself as Helen.

Angel was aware that she was actually working far harder than before they had been liberated, but she didn't mind. There were no chains on her wrists and neck and no whip scourging her back. She was putting in the effort because she wanted to, a novel experience. Even the guards were different. Like all men, they gazed admiringly at the girls, but the cruel lust she was so used to just wasn't there. Angel even realised that she was naked because there were no available clothes for her, not so that the men could leer at her.

Between gasps of effort, she began to pump Helen for information. The girl was just a few years older than herself and quite amiable. It seemed strange, though, to be able to talk openly, without fear of being whipped for it.

Her first question was, "are you free?" She had noted the brand on Helen's thigh, the simple letter S similar to her own and her mother's brands.

"Sure," Helen replied. "They freed me, just like they have you."

Angel couldn't conceptualise freedom. All she could think was that she was going somewhere where the masters were nicer, didn't use whips and you were not chained. She might even be able to choose her own master, a caring, gentle, handsome man, perhaps: that was as close to freedom as she could get.

"Goldenhair ... she's incredible," breathed Angel. "The way she handled that sword ..."

Helen smiled. "She and Vince practice together a lot."

"Vince?"

"The Lion. His name is Vince, hers is Selina, although he sometimes calls her Pussycat."

"They say she was a slave herself once."

"Don't ask her about that," Helen cautioned, "but yes, it's true. In fact, she and I met when we had both just been captured, before either of us were branded. Then we were sold separately. She ..." here Helen seemed a little cagey ... "learnt to fight, escaped, and met up with this band. I'll never forget how Selina then remembered me, tracked me down and freed me. She's the best friend I could ever have."

"Selina ... is that her name?" It was still difficult to believe that these legends were actually real people with ordinary names. It was like meeting Father Christmas. Still, there was nothing ordinary about the way Goldenhair had handled that sword.

Helen nodded. "She's English. Her family died, so she came to Australia to live with an uncle, but got captured and enslaved on the way. She had quite a varied slave career before she got free."

Angel's mother had a more practical question. "What will happen to us after we reach your camp?"

"That's up to you: you're free to go if and when you like, or you can stay and work for your keep, looking after the base, raising crops and so on." Helen smiled. "You don't have to, but pretty much all of the women make themselves available to the men. At one time or another, they've all risked their lives to free us, so we owe them and this is how we repay it. And if you're used to rough treatment, you'll find them kind and gentle. Having said that, it's up to you."

"I can live with that," said Carol, and her daughter added easily, "sure." It must be quite nice, Helen reflected, for Angel to be able to openly talk about having sex in front of her mother. When Helen herself had been eighteen, older than Angel was now, her Puritan community did not discuss sex and she had never been able to talk about it to her own mother. She had been a virgin when the slavers had raided her settlement and carted her off with them, and her rare (in this day and age) innocence had been taken by one of the raiders very soon after. Only after Selina had

freed her and taken her to the colony which was now her home had she found that sex could be fun for the woman as well as the man.

"Is Goldenhair - Selina - in charge of this outfit?" Carol asked.

"No, Vince is, but we'd all lay down our lives for either of them."

"I could lay down for that handsome Vince any time he wanted," Angel said suggestively and then shut up, surprised at herself. Whilst she had been with many men, she'd never done it voluntarily and had never wanted to. Then again, she'd never met a hero before.

"I wouldn't, unless you fancy a fight with Selina," Helen warned.

"Are they an item?" Carol asked.

"Head over heels in love with one another," Helen replied cheerfully. "There's twelve nude girls on this wagon and Vince has barely looked at any of us. When we're not on a raid, the camp is one long orgy, but neither of them touch anybody else."

"You really think the world of them, don't you?" Carol said.

"Show me anyone in our band who doesn't," Helen replied. "When you've been a slave and been freed, to strip naked again and be chained is a terrible thing, but we all volunteered to man this wagon so that we could pretend to be a slave caravan and get close enough to your party to attack without a chase."

"And aren't we glad you did," observed Carol.

Angel had said nothing since her faux pas over Vince. Instead, she concentrated on pushing the bar, feeling the hot sun on her shoulders and the baking sand between her toes. She was tired from the forced march and the wagon was being moved at quite a pace, but she felt invigorated, refreshed, excited. Was this what it was like to be free? Her lovely young chest rose and fell as she drank in lungfuls of the dusty, dry air; she felt the sweat from her armpits trickling down her flanks; her thighs burned with the exertion of the fast pace, yet all she wanted to do was push harder. She was acutely aware that there was no cruel overseer standing over her with a whip. In the bay in front of her, she noticed, two of the three women were the two sisters, their bare bottoms smooth and unmarked, totally devoid of even residual evidence of the whip or cane. It was rare that Angel's buttocks had ever been completely free of marks: although the wounds usually faded quickly, they were more often than not equally quickly replaced with new ones. It was not because Angel was disobedient - she had learnt from a very young age the value of total co-operation - but simply because few men could resist a bare and vulnerable female bum.

Was she really going somewhere where such treatment would no longer be meted out to her at the drop of a hat?

Selina and Vince ambled along side by side, controlling their horses with an easy grace. Vince was still amused by their recent encounter. "Did you see the look on those guards' faces when they realised who you were?" he chortled.

Selina shifted in her saddle. She was slightly uncomfortable with the knowledge that she was better known than Vince. She wanted nothing to come between them, least of all any stupid jealousy which might develop from male pride. "He recognised both of us," she said.

"No he didn't, he recognised you, Pussycat," he teased her. He knew of her fears and had repeatedly tried to convince her they were groundless. For one thing, it was useful for him to be able to move incognito about the towns and case potential raids. For another thing, he was proud that his woman was so sensationally, strikingly beautiful, and a formidable fighter to boot. And above all, he loved her.

The use of his private name for her had the usual effect. "He recognised me as your pet pussycat, so he knew it was you and the Tigers he was up against," she purred and leaned over to nuzzle him, her nose rubbing affectionately under his chin. That brought her forehead level with his lips, so he duly kissed her there, drinking in the sweet womanly smell of her.

"However," he continued thoughtfully, "we have to face the fact that we're getting more and more famous. Sooner or later all the slavers in these parts are going to get together and come

hunting for us. We don't want King Michael of Torton hearing about you and figuring out who you are."

The smile left Selina's face and Vince regretted bringing the subject up. She was the bravest warrior he had ever met, male or female, but the one thing that did scare her was falling into that man's hands. "He's probably forgotten me by now," she said, but she did not sound very convinced.

"After you killed Prince Martin, his only brother, when you escaped from Torton?"

"It was a fair fight," she said defensively.

"Maybe so, but that didn't stop him putting one Hell of a huge price on your pretty blonde head. Anyway, even without him, we've got plenty of enemies. I'm just thinking, maybe it's time we moved somewhere else and started over again. There can't be too many more slaves to free around here anyway."

"Or fat slavers to rob," she agreed, regaining something of her good mood. "Did you see what that porky little trader looked like without his clothes?"

"I thought you fancied him," her lover teased her.

Selina blew him a raspberry and was about to make an earthy reply when something caught her eye. "Hey, there's the others and look what's next to them!"

They had left the scrubland and moved into greener pastures at the foot of some hills. Following Selina's gaze, Vince saw the dozen men of his main party, with fresh horses both for the wagon and the unfortunates they had rescued. Nearby was a waterfall leading into a large pool. As they got closer, he could hear the tinkling sound of the water as it fell, music to the ears of any desert dweller.

The girls dutifully hauled the wagon until they were within a dozen meters of the pool, then with delighted shouts and shrieks of laughter they dropped the bars and charged for the pool. Nubile bodies dived in and started splashing about. Selina smiled, turned to Vince, said, "see you later," and dismounted. The water looked so cool and inviting.

Angel, already immersed in the refreshing coolness, watched as Selina stripped off her sword and belt, tunic, boots and trousers. Naked, Goldenhair was spectacular, quite living up to her legendary status: delightful, firm round breasts, flat stomach, lightly haired Mound of Venus and lovely, shapely legs, but it was the brand Angel was looking for. Yes, there it was: on the outside of her thigh, the letter S, far browner even than Selina's deep tan, unmistakable. Unconscious or heedless of the young girl watching her, Selina executed a flawless dive into the waters, which seemed to open to receive her. Soon she was splashing about with the others, just one of the girls. Even Angel nervously but playfully splashed her and was rewarded with a giggle and a splash in turn.

Vince and the other men watched, admiring the wonderful view. None of the girls were bothered; as former slaves, they were all used to nudity before men.

Angel had swum over to her mother in the shallower area. Now she stood up, the water coming to just above her waist. Carol was enjoying her dip in the pool, but she was older than the others and didn't feel quite like frolicking with them. Besides, although she was doing her best to conceal it, she was exhausted. Angel waded over to her, feeling the water flow deliciously between her legs as she moved.

"Are you o.k., Mum?" she enquired solicitously.

Her mother smiled, and put her arm around her daughter's bare shoulders. Angel's mere presence always made her feel good. From the moment she had been told that her new-born baby was a girl, Carol had always worried for her. By being born a slave, the child was likely to have a hard life, and as she grew to puberty and it became clear that she had inherited her mother's good looks and figure, if not her jet-black hair, that life grew harder rather than easier. She had been made to work in the fields since she was six: the free boys in their village community groped and friggd her openly by the time she was twelve and she wasn't much older when Carol's owner deemed her sufficiently mature physically to be worth his vile attentions. There had been few tears shed when Angel's virginity was taken roughly from her: both the girl and her mother had known it would happen, and happen early. For slaves, such was life. But despite all that, and the many

indignities heaped on her since, Angel had remained a bright and happy girl, full of life and very close to her mum. She was the light of Carol's life; and now had come a possibility that Carol had never dared hope for: that she and her beloved daughter could both be freed.

"I feel great, Angel," she said with feeling. "And you?"

The ginger-haired teenager frowned slightly. "Fine, I suppose ... well, even better than that. I feel strange, but good. I don't quite understand it."

Her mother smiled, and a gentle finger touched her child's exposed nipple. It was very hard. "Your body's showing exactly what you're feeling, Angel dear," she said gently.

"You mean this is what it's like to feel ... horny?"

Carol smiled again. Her daughter was far from a virgin and yet she had never had a pleasurable sexual experience. Now, at last, overwhelmed by the excitement of their new freedom, infused with gratitude for the men who had given them that freedom, all that was about to change. "You remember what Helen said about looking after the men, dear," she told her daughter gently. "I think it's about time we started paying our dues." She hauled herself out of the water, and helped Angel follow her out. "But not as a chore: from now on, you do it for fun, if and when you want to."

Angel allowed herself to be helped out of the pool. She had never felt like this before, but she somehow understood instinctively what her mother was saying: it was what she wanted herself, but she was clearly uncertain about how to proceed. Poor girl, thought her mother: all the many times she's had sex and she's never had to chat a man up for it, much less be chatted up herself. She's just been taken and used.

"You want me to do the talking?" she asked kindly. Relieved, Angel nodded. "Come on then," her mother coaxed. "All we need to do is spot a couple of the men who are watching who've got bulges in their pants." Bulges in male pants was something Angel did know about. Carol looked around. "There's no shortage of them," she said brightly. "Let's try those two over there: we can get them away from the others discreetly."

Still Angel held back. Her mother looked at her, sure that she had not misread the signs. "You do want to do this?" she asked.

"Yes, definitely," Angel replied firmly, "but do you? I don't want you going through it just for me."

The older woman smiled. "My little baby, just 'cause I'm over thirty doesn't mean I'm dead from the waist down. And don't think you've got the edge on me on account of your little teenage body: Mama can still hold her own with you. Now remember, relax and enjoy it." She approached the two men, who admired her luscious curves as she posed for them. They looked admiringly at both females, but whilst Angel did have the advantage of youth, for all her experience of nudity she was standing awkwardly, unsure how the rules had changed now she was no longer a slave; whilst Carol, although it was a long time since she had been free, had not forgotten how to seduce a man. She winked at the two men, giving them clear come-on signals. "Hey, guys," she drawled, "you're looking a bit hot and bothered ..."

Selina pulled herself out of the water and stood dripping in front of Vince. Her copper-blond hair was slicked back from her lovely face, and water ran in rivulets down the deep valley between her firm, spherical breasts, glistened in the sparse covering of near blonde pubic hair; droplets of the clear liquid slithered down her thighs, even over the dark brown letter burnt forever into her flesh, which she tolerated but did not like to be reminded of, flowing down her shapely calves to collect in little pools around her neat feet.

Vince thought that she was the most unbelievably gorgeous sight he could ever wish to see.

Selina put her fists defiantly on her hips and stared at him. "And what are you looking at?" she demanded tartly, but there was a proud and playful edge to her voice.

"You," he replied simply and honestly and continued to drink in the vision before him.

"Can't say I blame him." Peter, third in command of the Tigers behind Vince and Selina, joined them. He too stared without disguise at Selina, who made no attempt to hide herself. Like

half the gang, he had the hots for her and they both knew it, but he respected her and Vince far too much to ever try and force himself on her, not that he was sure he could physically overcome her anyway. Peter and Selina were as close as brother and sister, and she valued his friendship and loyalty. Before Selina had joined the gang, Peter had been second in charge, but he didn't mind having her jump above him in the hierarchy. Selina was that sort of a woman.

"So why don't you get your clothes off and have a dip?" Selina demanded tauntingly of Vince.

"Us big cats don't like water," Vince teased back.

"Rumour has it he doesn't want to show his huge beer belly off," put in Peter.

"He could leave his corset on," Selina replied to him, ignoring Vince. "Did you know he wears a corset, Peter?"

Vince, whose superb body needed no such help, smiled infuriatingly. "I need a gut to keep the sun off my big todger," he said with mock arrogance.

"A piece of cloth would do the job just as well," Selina replied archly. "It wouldn't need to be too big: say the size of a fingernail."

"Oh, be fair," Peter protested, "a toe-nail when he's roused."

"When you two have finished," Vince began patiently but more seriously as his tormentors collapsed into giggles, "whilst you were flaunting yourself in the pool, my darling Selina, Peter here was telling me that our scouts report another slave caravan, a small one, only a couple of hours ride from here. Three slaves, all female, plus just one man and a guard. What do you think?"

Selina and Peter were both business-like once more. "It sounds too easy to be true," Selina observed. "It could be a trap."

"We checked very thoroughly," Peter replied. "Definitely only two men. Nobody else within miles."

"My idea is this," Vince explained. "Send these girls and the wagon back to base with most of the men to guard them. Meanwhile, we take just a small group on fast horses. If anything goes wrong, we can get away quickly."

Selina nodded. She was pleased with the last operation, but the brief conflict had done little to satisfy her lust for combat. She was a very different woman to the twenty year-old girl who had landed in Australia four years ago. Each slave experience had changed her, but above all the Torton arena had awoken a fighting spirit she had never known she had, as well as teaching her the skills of a warrior, skills she had taken delight in honing further after her escape. Although not violent by nature, she loved the adrenaline of combat. Furthermore, she delighted in the crusade; whereas the male Tigers liked the outlaw life and were doing something they felt generally noble about, and incidentally benefited from having a camp full of very grateful ex-slave girls around, for Selina it was rather more personal: every time she went into battle, she remembered the feel of the lash on her bare back and knew she was saving some other poor girl from similar treatment.

"Let's do it," she said simply.

"All right," said Vince. "Pick one more good horseman to come with us, brief Terry on leading the others back, and then if my betrothed would like to stop flaunting herself in front of the troops and get her clothes on, we can get going."

Selina, almost dry now from the fierce sun, grinned and reached for her knickers.

CHAPTER THREE

One of the many things Selina had learnt from Vince was the importance of becoming familiar with the local geography before making an attack.

The area around them was mostly gentle hills. The only exception was a much higher hill, almost a mountain, certainly steep and difficult to climb. At its peak was an old monastery, which stared down in a brooding way. On their rare visits to this area, Selina and her band had heard stories of weird goings-on there. Certainly no locals ever ventured near the place; but Selina had no time for legends and fables, except those of her own exploits and besides, the place was five or six miles away, too far to concern them.

The party they were about to attack had probably come from the town-state called Glanville some ten miles away in the opposite direction. They were travelling towards the mountain, possibly to skirt the base of it and head into the desert towards one of the other towns rather further away, maybe even Torton, which was at least fifty miles away. Barely far enough away, in Selina's mind. They were passing through a small, gentle valley. At the top of the hill on one side, Selina and her group waited, hidden by trees.

"We could try the usual slave routine," suggested Peter.

"Anything to get me naked," Selina mocked him.

Vince shook his head. "No point. The slaves are on foot and they only have two horses. If they make a run for it, they have to leave the slaves behind, which achieves our aim for us. Also, if anything does go wrong, I want us all able to ride away fast, and you can't do that barefoot and shackled, Pussycat."

Selina nodded. "Point taken, but what can go wrong? Sometimes you worry too much, love."

Vince shrugged. "Maybe, but I'm enjoying the fact that I'm still alive. Come on, let's go."

They spurred their horses and charged down the slope. Selina, her glorious mane of hair flying in the wind, watched the reactions. That of the lone guard was one of consternation: he clearly realised straight away who they were. The response of the leader was much calmer. The three young slaves trudging along looked stunned: they too had evidently heard the legends. Selina smiled.

Vince, Peter, Selina and the fourth raider, a taciturn but capable fighter called Derek, came to a halt to confront the two men. Now that they were face to face, Selina could see that the robes the leader wore were those of a monk. Still, looking at the three chained and lovely girls he had with him, dressed only in rags and tatters which barely hid their charms, she didn't think too highly of the piety of his religious convictions.

Vince spoke with authority. "Do you know who we are?"

The guard looked terrified, but the monk merely raised a quizzical eyebrow. "Should I be interested?" he asked calmly.

The response took Vince by surprise. For a moment he remained nonplussed, then he declared, "we are the Tigers. We free slaves." He indicated clearly the three girls cowering back.

"Most commendable, no doubt, according to your own lights, but I fear that these young nymphs are not yours to free."

Again Vince did not know what to say. Selina cut in, feeling like being more direct. "We are four swords to your one" - the monk appeared to carry no weapon - "and I think you'll find that makes them ours." She doubted that the guard would raise his scimitar against them anyway: he looked ashen with fear.

The monk had locked eyes with Vince. Now he transferred his gaze to Selina. To her astonishment, she felt herself wilting under it. "I should really advise against it," he said mildly.

Like Vince, Selina could not think what to say. The man's attitude was quite incomprehensible, but more to the point she felt herself drowning in those deep dark eyes of his. Suddenly feeling vulnerable, she grasped at her sword, and a little more confidence flowed back into her. "Fight, or flee," she said simply.

The monk seemed to seriously consider the challenge, then he shrugged. "Very well, if you insist." He calmly turned his horse around, producing the key to the chains from under his robes and tossing it carelessly to the ground, then turned and rode unhurriedly away without a backward glance, taking the guard with him.

The four Tigers watched him go. Normally they would have robbed the slaver, giving the proceeds to the freed slaves, but on this occasion it just didn't seem an option. Peter dismounted, picked up the key, and began to unchain the girls. They were young and pretty, but no different to many others Selina had rescued, except that they didn't seem that elated by their rescue. Well, it was not uncommon for slaves to be unable to believe their luck, that they had been liberated.

"Climb up, girls, let's get out of here. I've had enough of this place," said Vince testily. Selina couldn't agree more.

One of the girls climbed hesitantly onto her own horse behind her. All three of them still seemed subdued. "Cheer up," Selina said: "you're free now. We'll take you away from here, then you can go wherever you want."

The girl just shook her head. "Thank you for trying, but it's no use. Do you realise who that was?"

"Does it matter?"

"That was one of the priests of Kimshah."

"Kimshah? Is that the place on the mountain?"

"Yes. They'll come and take us back, maybe you as well." She shuddered.

The raiders were already moving off at some pace. Selina shrugged. "It's got to be five miles minimum to the monastery or whatever it is, and the monk certainly wasn't moving very fast when he left us. When he gets there they have to get up a posse, then get back here: two or three hours at least, all told. We'll be long gone."

"It doesn't matter. They'll find us."

Selina wondered if the girl was drugged. Perhaps she was still just very frightened: she looked fairly new to slavery, and in any case being sold was a fearful experience, as Selina herself knew only too well. Well, the girls would soon see that there was no reason to be afraid. None at all.

It was less than an hour later when the attack came.

They had ridden fast and hard, skirting Glanville, which had to be avoided: after a couple of audacious raids in the town itself, they were known and wanted there. The area they were now travelling through contained woodland to either side.

It started with a roaring noise, like nothing any of them had ever heard; a bit like the sea beating against the shore, but far louder. That seemed to die away, and then a minute later they heard a voice all around them which made them jump almost out of their skins.

"You have taken that which does not belong to you. Surrender!"

It echoed around them, louder than any voice Selina had ever heard. Surely nobody could shout that loud.

Peter looked about. "Where the Hell is it coming from?" All four had instinctively drawn their swords.

Vince came to a sudden halt. Selina, who had been looking behind them, turned to face front and also stopped. Four monks stood in their path, calmly waiting for them. Two of them held innocuous looking wooden sticks, perhaps five feet long, otherwise they all seemed unarmed. They had not been there a few moments ago.

For a second, Vince considered trying to ride them down, but they were all four better fighters on their feet and besides, they were still carrying the three former slave girls with them. He dismounted and the other Tigers followed his lead. The liberated girls also dismounted and huddled back. Vince stared at the monks, one of whom seemed to be the one they had taken the girls from. How had he found his fellows and overtaken them? Selina saw no horses, nor did these men look

ready for or even capable of combat; and yet they blocked the Tigers' path, and looked unworried and confident. Perhaps they were just mad.

The lead monk spoke normally now. "You will return our goods to us and we shall take your woman as compensation for our time and trouble; then you may go on your way."

Vince laughed. "Dream on, pal," he replied.

The monk shrugged. Selina wondered if they had guns, although they were rare this far from the west coast of Australia where she had first arrived on the continent. In any case, the Tigers were close enough to rush them if they drew firearms. But the man drew something else casually from his cloak, and tossed it amongst them. Suddenly the world was filled with terribly bright light. They all staggered, dazed and struggling to see.

The monks moved forwards. Selina raised her sword hazily, but the monk facing her touched her lightly on her sword arm with his staff. Her arm seemed to go numb; the sword slipped from lifeless fingers.

The lead monk tossed something to Derek. He caught it instinctively, then a moment later a terrible scream issued from his lips. Selina turned to see him fall dead on the floor, his face black, his hair standing on end.

Another man tossed a bauble to Vince. Having seen what happened to Derek, he raised his sword to block it. It struck the flat of his blade and the following moment a strangled cry escaped him and he dropped his sword on the ground. He clutched his sword hand as if he had been burned there: he certainly seemed to have lost the use of it.

Peter, like Selina, lost his sword to the slightest touch of another pole. Selina, now weaponless, advanced towards the monk who faced her and, evading the staff, launched a strong side kick at him. She was rewarded by a satisfying thud and the winded monk staggered backwards. The relief was incredible: in the last few seconds she had been beginning to think of these foes as inhuman and untouchable. But even now he was getting to his feet. That shouldn't have happened: she had kicked far more muscular men than he like that and they had stayed down for a good while. As she momentarily hesitated; she felt the faintest touch of another monk's hand on her shoulder, and collapsed unconscious to the floor.

Peter had seen enough. He grabbed Vince and shouted, "let's get out of here!" Bewildered, Vince allowed himself to be dragged for a moment, then began to half run, half stumble on his own, following his third in command. Peter made for the horses, swung up into the saddle of his and kicked it into life. Vince, his hand useless and also limping heavily from another bauble which had just brushed his thigh, scrambled up into his saddle and grimly hung onto his reins as best he could with his left hand. Peter steered them into the trees, but a brief glance back showed him that the monks were not following.

Vince managed to pull up yards into the forest and looked around frantically. "Where's Selina?" he demanded in a confused voice.

Peter turned around and moved back to him, grabbing Vince's reins before he answered. "Back there with them," he said flatly.

"What!?" Vince exploded. "I'm going back for her!"

He would have, too, except that Peter held the reins of his horse tight. Vince started to gallop away, only to have his horse pull up short. With only one hand and leg working, he could not keep in the saddle and fell off. Even then, he began to limp back towards the way they had come. Thankful that the horses were extremely well trained and would not run off, Peter dismounted and stood in his way. "Listen to me, Vince," he began.

Vince tried to shove him out of the way and then lamely swung a punch at Peter, who saw it coming, blocked it and, with great regret, landed his own fist under Vince's jaw as gently as he could in the circumstances. With only one hand and leg and thoroughly dazed, Vince never saw it coming and couldn't have blocked it anyway. He landed on the grass and a moment later Peter was on top of him, holding him down. Their faces were scant inches from each other.

"Listen to me, Vince," Peter repeated with a snarl. "There's just two of us, weaponless, and you with a gammy arm and leg. Four of us armed and ready didn't last more than seconds against them, so what do you think two of us are going to do?"

“What are you suggesting: leave Selina to them?” Vince snarled.

“No, of course not. But we need reinforcements and a plan.”

Their eyes met for a long moment. Eventually, the look of madness faded from Vince’s face a little. “Let me go,” he said flatly.

Peter got off him, warily. Vince picked himself up and dusted himself down in silence.

“Vince,” Peter began, “I’m sorry I had to ...”

“Forget it,” Vince interrupted, his voice ice-cold. “You were right. Who the Hell were those men?”

Peter shook his head. “I don’t know - if they were men at all.”

“They were human,” Vince affirmed, although he sounded a little in need of convincing himself. “After she lost her sword, I saw Selina kick one of them. He went down. They’re not invincible. I didn’t see what happened next.”

“One of them touched her lightly and down she went,” Peter supplied. “I don’t think she was dead, just knocked out somehow. Derek’s dead.”

“I know: I saw that.” Vince was quiet for a moment as they both reflected on the loss of their friend, then he started up again. “All right, let’s see ...”

He was interrupted by a loud noise, similar to that they had heard before. They raced to the clearing, just in time to see the four monks on some sort of transparent platform, surrounded by a metal frame, flying - an incredible sight - away. The three slave girls stood listlessly on the platform, with Selina, still out cold, clearly visible on the floor of the thing. Speechlessly, they watched it go and it was soon clear where it was headed.

“So they do come from the mountain,” Peter said thoughtfully.

“Never a doubt about it,” Vince said tightly. “Let’s get back to the rest of our crew. We’re going to need every man we’ve got to get Selina back from those devils.”

Peter didn’t move, lost in thought. Vince stared at him. “Are you coming?” the leader of the Tigers demanded.

Peter didn’t reply or move for a moment. Then, quietly, he said “I still don’t think it’s enough, Vince. You, me and Selina are the best fighters we have and Derek was no slouch, poor sod. We lost out on open ground against four of them and they weren’t even trying. God knows what other tricks they’ve got. If we leave the girls completely unguarded, which ain’t very wise, we can get a dozen more men, half a dozen more still if we go all the way back home first. Against what? For all we know, there might be another two dozen monks in that monastery or more and they’ll be on home ground, to say nothing of the walls. How do we even get in?”

Vince scowled. “So what’s your plan?”

“I don’t have one,” Peter admitted.

Silence fell as Vince pondered. The shock of losing Selina had receded for now, but Peter knew that it wasn’t far from the surface, added to which was the fear of the unknown capabilities of their foes, not to mention the source of their strange power. Neither Vince nor Peter were superstitious, both knew that humanity had once possessed far greater technology than it did now, but in some ways that was even more frightening than if the monks were demons, for that technology had nearly destroyed the world. Somehow, too, there was a suggestion of something more, something unspeakably evil. Peter had never seen Vince more coldly determined, but he knew that his friend was only hanging on by a thread.

Eventually Vince looked up. “I don’t say you’re not right, Peter, but we’re going to need our other men either way. Let’s get going and see what else we can come up with on the way.” He flexed his injured arm, and was relieved to find some of the strength and movement restored to it. His leg, too, was gradually recovering. The two men were soon racing at breakneck speed towards the rest of their forces.

Selina felt soft velvet beneath her. She shook herself awake.

She was in a sparsely decorated room, lying on a circular dais. Watching her patiently was one of the monks, his robes more ornate than those of the others she had met earlier. She remembered the fight, and the incredible, unexpected one-sidedness of it and finally the feeling of nothingness as she had passed into oblivion. Looking around her with a heavy heart, she knew where she was. She found her voice, although it was shaky. "What do you want with me?"

He ignored her question. "I am the Master of Kimshah," he announced in a deep, frightening voice. He pulled his hood back and Selina shuddered. He was old, older by far than any man she had ever seen. His skin was almost withered on his face. His eyes were deeply sunken into his head, his thin lips pulled back to reveal uneven teeth, some of them no longer there. He looked like a living skeleton. "Many years ago, our fathers founded this place. The world was different then: your puny, savage mind cannot imagine how different. But our fathers were wise and had great knowledge. They moved here to be apart from the rest, to develop our unique skills still further. When the Final War came, we could protect ourselves from it. Afterwards, life became easier. You primitives were easily discouraged from prying. We were left in peace to further our studies still more."

None of this made much sense to Selina. "Then why did we meet one of your people bringing slaves back here?"

For the first time, he answered her question. "Although we are not as you, we are human, and male. We have not lost interest in certain ... pleasures. You were warned not to interfere with us: when you disregarded that warning, I decided that you would make a suitable extra addition to our pens. Your life was forfeit from that moment on."

"How did you know? You hadn't even seen me."

"I see far and wide, in ways you could never hope to comprehend. And I saw that you are very lovely, even in those unnecessary clothes. Divest yourself of those garments, now."

Selina put her hands on her hips and said defiantly, "go to Hell."

There was a movement behind her and she turned just too late. Two of the monks stood there, and one held one of those staffs. Before Selina could do anything, she felt the tip of the staff touch her. Immediately her legs seem to turn to jelly, and all her strength left her. She would have collapsed to the floor if the two monks had not grasped her, one holding each arm.

A third monk appeared and the master nodded to him. He moved in front of Selina, grasped her tunic and pulled hard. The buttons came flying off, revealing her superb breasts. Without difficulty, the monks slid the remains of the tunic over her shoulders and down her arms. Her shoes were pulled off, and then with one sharp tug they pulled her trousers off. As she was methodically stripped, Selina found herself totally unable to resist, weak as a kitten.

They forced her hands into metal cuffs, pushed her onto her knees, and secured the cuffs to a ring in the stone floor. With no play on the ring, Selina had to remain on her knees. She felt her strength gradually returning, but she was still helpless: she pulled with increasing vigour on the manacles, but of course they would not budge.

"A former slave," the Master said, observing her brand, "and a woman of spirit. When I was younger, I would have enjoyed much sport with you. But I am old and grow tired of such games. You will be quickly broken to my will."

"Go to Hell," Selina repeated.

"You could not imagine what Hell is truly like," he replied mildly. "At least," he added, "not yet."

One of the monks stood to either side of her, and both of them held long and wicked whips. Selina could see what was coming. She lowered her head, keeping her face protected: although it left her back a tempting target, there was nothing else she could do.

The first whip descended across her prostrate figure. Selina screamed in pain as red-hot agony was laid across her back. The whip from the other side descended only seconds later, drawing a fresh scream from her. She had been beaten many times during her time as a slave, but rarely as dreadfully as this.

The lash bit into her beautiful back again. Selina shuddered, but managed this time to remain silent, not wishing to give them the satisfaction of hearing her yell with pain. It had been a

long time since she had felt the leather, but now it all seemed to come back to her. Another stroke descended and she could not suppress a gasp, whilst her fingers clutched the stone floor, almost digging in. The next kiss of the wicked whip drew a moan of agony, as she felt her mental defences against calling out being washed away in the tidal wave of torture.

The whip descended again, and her scream echoed through the corridors ...

Ten very determined men made their way along the road to Glanville in the gathering gloom of evening.

Vince and Peter had caught up with the rest of their group. They had sent two men back to their temporary base nearby with the women, several of whom had wanted to go with them to try to help free Selina. Fortunately, as former slaves, they responded quickly to firm management. Vince had no time for niceties and he could not afford the luxury of passengers. Selina was the only fighting woman in their band; the others, keen though they might be, would only get in the way.

Vince also had a plan.

"Glanville has a decent sized army," he explained, "and they'd be equipped for making a siege. Now, the King of Glanville has a daughter, Yasmin I think her name is, who he dotes on. She has her own palace on the outskirts of the town; it shouldn't be too heavily guarded. What we do is kidnap the girl, then send an ultimatum to the king. Either he helps us defeat these monks, or his daughter ends up a slave in the fleshpots of Torton or somewhere equally unpleasant."

"That'll be another city after our blood," observed one of the men lightly.

Vince glowered at him through the gathering shadows of evening. "You got a better idea, mister?"

"Er, no, boss," the man replied, shaken by the ferocity of his leader. "I was just saying ..."

"Well, don't," said Peter shortly. He spoke more quietly to Vince. "He's right, though, old friend. We're going to have to handle this very carefully and afterwards it's definitely time we relocated somewhere far away."

"Sure," muttered Vince. "Afterwards."

If any of us are still alive by then, Peter thought to himself.

Getting into the town was bad enough, even in the dead of night. They hadn't got any money with them to bribe the gate guards, so instead they had to knock them out. Now they had to get the princess and get away before the guards were discovered. Peter was uncomfortably aware that they were riding their luck.

Still, it was for Selina. Not one of them would turn back; and even if they had, Vince would have carried on alone. He was like a man possessed.

The palace guards had to be knocked out silently. "I don't think much of these guys," Terry observed as the last one fell. "I've seen more alert things lying on their backs at the bottom of ponds."

"They weren't expecting trouble. Why should they be?" Peter said. Vince remained silent. They moved quickly, searching for the royal bedchamber. A couple of servants were encountered and quickly rendered unconscious before they found it. Peter pulled back the curtains from the window, letting the light from the full moon seep into the room and reveal a grand double bed, in the middle of which a single figure lay beneath silk sheets. Vince grabbed the sheets and pulled them back. The figure stirred and woke up.

Peter was stunned. He'd expected a plain Jane of some sort, but this girl was far from that. Even rising from sleep, she was beautiful. Glossy ebony black hair rolled back from her lovely face and over wonderful, naturally erotic shoulders. She wore a flimsy night-dress with a plunging neckline which hinted at the incredible beauty of her full breasts. Sculpted, perfect legs lay sprawled on the bed. The brief glimpses of her figure suggested a luscious body.

"What is this?" she asked sleepily. "Who are you?"

"Just get dressed, girl," Vince said gruffly, uncomfortable but committed. "You're coming with us."

"Don't be absurd," she said, the last vestiges of sleep leaving her. Her voice was one which was clearly used to being obeyed, and she eyed them without fear. "Get out of here," she demanded.

"We don't have time for this," Vince snapped. "Get dressed, or we'll drag you out as you are."

"I'll call the guards," she answered haughtily and opened her mouth to shout, but closed it rather more uncertainly as Vince neared her. She looked into his eyes and shrank from the barely contained rage and pain she saw there.

"I wouldn't bother calling anyway," Terry said smoothly, trying to defuse the situation: Vince's temper was close to the edge, although he was usually very calm and controlled. "We've already taken care of your men. Get changed, please, quickly."

The girl shook her head. "I can't possibly get dressed without my maid," she said firmly, "and certainly not in front of all of you." She pulled the bedclothes closer about her.

Impatiently, Vince moved forwards. He looked about ready to strike the girl.

"Wait!" cried Peter, although he was not sure why. All eyes, including hers, turned to him. He felt strangely hot and bothered under her gaze. He spoke again. "Miss, we don't usually do this sort of thing, but we are desperate. We are the Tigers."

Her eyes narrowed. "I've heard of you," she acknowledged quietly, her tone just slightly tinged with a grudging respect. Unlike lowly slaves, she would know that the Tigers were reality, not a myth.

"I'm afraid that you are going to have to come with us." He picked up a luxurious dressing gown, which had been cast carelessly on a chair. "If you put this and some shoes on, we'll grab some of your things and bring them with us. You can change into them later."

She got up from the bed and took the gown. Slowly, never taking her eyes off him, she put it on, plus shoes. One of the men was stuffing some of her clothes into a bag. She eyed him imperiously. "I don't like men going through my belongings," she said sharply.

The man grunted and handed her a filled bag. She raised her eyebrows and stared at it without taking it. "You carry it," she ordered. "You surely don't expect me to carry it myself, do you?"

The man looked about to explode, but Vince stopped him, although his own face was red. "Just bring it," he told the man, "and let's get out of here."

They began to leave the room. One of the men grasped the Princess by her arm. She stopped dead.

"Take your hands off me," she said quietly.

The man ignored her. He pushed her forwards and she resisted as hard as she could. Vince turned around to see what the matter was. She eyed him coldly. "As I seem to have no choice in the matter, I will come with you," she said loftily. "But I do not wish to be man-handled, especially by this ape."

Muttering an oath, Vince reached for a length of rough rope that one of the men had brought in case anybody else needed tying up. He made a noose and slipped it over her head, tightening it slightly. "Let her go," he told the man. "She'll come now, or strangle herself." He held the end of the rope tightly, then turned to the girl and produced a small dagger that he always carried on raids. "One word out of you, and I'll cut your throat. Understand?"

Despite her air of superiority, the princess paled. Peter went hot and cold: he was not at all sure that Vince was bluffing. Think of Selina, he told himself: God only knew what she was going through.

Released from the man's clutches, the princess ignored the rope, but moved forwards to follow Vince out of the room, going at her own pace which just happened to be enough to prevent herself being choked. They made their way out of the palace and Vince nodded to one man.

"You know what to do, Gary. Take care."

Gary nodded and moved off in one direction. The rest of them, surrounding the princess, went off in another.

They released the sobbing Selina from the ring in the floor, and pulled her to her feet.

Every movement was pure agony. Her back was covered in over twenty weals and lacerations. She felt her arms pulled roughly behind her. A heavy oak beam, some four feet long, was pushed horizontally between them and her back and thick ropes tied her arms to it. The rough surface of the bark rubbed atrociously against her wealed and welted back, but she could do nothing about it, especially after a few more ropes tied her body to the beam. In addition to the ropes, her hands remained in the cuffs.

The master approached her, holding three wicked looking pegs in his hands. A bony hand grasped her left bosom and a peg bit home. Fresh biting pain erupted: the pegs were extremely tight. It wasn't enough to take her mind off the blazing pain in her back, but it still hurt. The right breast received its own decoration and then he reached between her legs and put the third peg on her sex, right on her clitoris. She shuddered uncontrollably at the feel of his claw-like talons there, but she was too dazed and hurting from her whipping to resist.

"Take her to meet her fellow concubines," the master said. Selina was half led, half dragged from the room and down a corridor to a cell door. It was opened, she was pushed inside, the door clanged shut behind her, the key turned in the lock, and footsteps receded away.

At first she seemed alone in the gloomy cell. Slowly, however, eyes stared out from the darkness and frightened, nude girls started to emerge. They included the three girls she and the Tigers had temporarily rescued, now without the rags they had once worn, plus others, some in their teens, some their twenties, some a bit older. Altogether there must have been well over a dozen.

They gathered around her, wincing as they saw the extent of the wounds the whip had left. She was the first to speak. "I'm Selina," she said simply, her voice slightly hoarse from her earlier screaming. She was aware that her eyes were red and rheumy from her tears, but tried to act unaffected. She struggled momentarily with her bonds, then gave up. "I can't reach these blasted pegs on my boobs and downstairs. Can one of you take them off for me, please?"

They all shrank back, fearfully. Selina waited impatiently for someone to carry out her request. When no one did, she asked again. "Look, these damn things are hurting. All I'm asking is for someone to pull them off!"

"If they were put on by the masters," one girl said, not unsympathetically, "they must stay there."

Selina snorted, but clearly none of them dared to help her. "Who are you all?" she asked sharply.

"Who we once were isn't important any more. Now we are slaves of Kimshah," an older woman answered. "Just like you."

Selina's eyes flashed with fury. "I'm nobody's slave!" she said fiercely. But, naked, tightly bound, well whipped and with her brand very much on show, her words sounded rather hollow even to her.

One of the girls who Selina had temporarily rescued, the one who had been on her horse, said, "I'm sorry you had to end up here. It was good of you to try to help us, but you just didn't understand. Once the monk had bought us, no power in the world could have saved us."

"I wouldn't give up just yet," Selina replied. "If I know my friends, they'll find out I'm here and they'll be coming to rescue me. They'll free you, too."

Her words gave them no spark of hope; they seemed convinced that things were hopeless. Remembering the incredible things the monks had done during their brief and very one-sided battle, Selina wondered for a moment if they were right; but then she forced such weak thoughts from her mind. "That's a shame, whoever they are," said one of the older women, one of those who had been here a long time, judging from their haunted looks. "They'll be coming to their deaths."

Selina felt suddenly very cold. Wordlessly, she pushed through the crowd of naked women to the single cell window which illuminated the place and looked out. The twin pegs on her breasts clinked softly against the stone wall below the barred aperture, reminding her of the biting pain which continued to assail her nipples and pussy lips. It was a long way down to the foot of the

monastery wall and then a treacherous slope of loose stone down the mountain. Even without the awesome powers of the monks, this place was close to impregnable. A small force here could hold off an army and the Tigers, for all their camaraderie and skill, were scarcely an army. None of that, however, would stop Vince from making the attempt.

Dear God! Was his love for her going to lure him here to his death? For that matter, he could already be dead: she hadn't been conscious for the last of the battle, although she had seen what had happened to poor Derek. No; if Vince was dead, she would surely know it in her heart. He was alive and he would come.

CHAPTER FOUR

Vince pulled up short as they rode swiftly through the early morning.

"Are you all right?" Peter asked.

"I ... thought I could hear Selina's voice," Vince said quietly. "I must have imagined it."

Peter frowned: Vince was not usually the fanciful type. "We could use a rest," he suggested. "When we get to the mountain, we can't do anything until the King of Glanville gets to us with his forces."

Vince nodded. "Take a break, everybody. Peter, use the chance to get that girl dressed."

Peter turned to the princess. She had insisted on riding his horse, but right at the front near the animal's neck, clinging to the mane, keeping a proper distance between herself and Peter. The faint wafts of her scent had intoxicated him, but she had loftily ignored every attempt he had made to speak to her. In any case, what could he say?

He made her dismount and then did so himself. Securing his horse, he took the bag of clothes and led her around a bend in the road. He handed her the bag. "I'm sorry we don't have a maid to help you," he said. He had intended the remark to be sarcastic, but it came out almost apologetically.

She ignored it, looked around to satisfy herself that none of the other men were in sight, then said frostily, "kindly turn your back."

Peter hesitated; but there were plenty of sticks and stones hanging around: it would be all too easy for her to brain him and run for it. "I can't trust you. I'm sorry," he said, and meant it.

She glared at him for a moment, and then sniffed aristocratically. "In that case, I hope you enjoy the show," she said coldly and, turning her back, let her dressing gown fall to the floor. Then she slipped the tiny shoulder straps of her night-dress off her alabaster shoulders, and let the diaphanous slip fall to the floor.

Peter liked to think of himself as a gentleman and had intended not to look, but he found himself spellbound. She was absolutely ravishing, her hourglass figure perfection itself, her skin unblemished and soft as a baby's. Her glossy hair seemed to reflect the early morning sunlight as it streamed through the trees. Her pale bottom and back, which looked as though they had rarely seen the sun, were in total contrast to Selina's all-over tan and her flowing, delicate, sensual movements also contrasted with Selina's more energetic, lithe way of moving. Peter, who had admired Selina for so long, found himself surprisingly hard put to say which of them was the more beautiful. All too soon, she had put on tunic, long shorts and boots and turned to face him again.

He could not help but comment on her beauty. "You're very lovely," he breathed.

She tried to ignore him, but could not stop herself from colouring slightly. To cover it, she asked imperiously, "how long will this pointless charade continue?"

"Until we get what we need, Princess. I'm sorry about all of this, but we're desperate."

"So you said before, but I still don't understand what you need me for. All you will do is bring my father's wrath down on your heads."

"We'll risk that," replied Peter.

"I hope you feel the same way when the noose is around your neck and you are hanging from the gallows," she said harshly, gingerly fingering her own neck where the makeshift rope collar, now removed, had left the faintest of abrasions. Selina would have ignored far worse.

"We'll risk that too," Peter said grimly.

"Why?" she asked. "What is it you need me for so badly?"

So he told her the whole story and the original plan to blackmail her father into sending his army to help them, which had since been slightly modified: now the intention was for Gary to tell the king that the monks had captured the princess. The Tigers, known opponents of slavery, would offer to join forces with the king, possibly, or not as circumstances dictated, revealing the fact that the fabled Goldenhair was also a prisoner.

"It's a pathetic plan," the princess dismissed it. "My father will capture you, torture you into returning me, then have you all hanged."

"Maybe, but it's the only chance we have."

“Why bother? Why not leave her there and find some other strumpet to keep you all warm at nights?”

A red mist blazed in front of Peter’s eyes. He approached her menacingly. “Don’t you ever, ever, say anything like that about Selina again,” he hissed.

She faced him unflinchingly, although even he himself wasn’t certain if he was going to hit her. She’s got guts, he found himself thinking, for all her airs and graces and blasted arrogance. She might be a spoiled brat, but he could respect her courage. Eventually he calmed down slightly and backed off a little.

Only now did she speak again, very quietly this time. “She must mean a great deal to you.” Her tone was still far too lofty to be apologetic, but there was a hint, to his surprise, that she was withdrawing her previous comment.

For a moment he wanted to explain everything to her: the respect which Selina’s bravery inspired, the comradeship of the Tigers standing shoulder to shoulder for something decent in a depraved world, but it was hopeless to try with this luxury-loving Sybarite. “You could never understand,” he said pityingly.

“Perhaps not,” she said to his surprise, but then the mask was there again. “I might try, though. Before my father has her put to death, I think I will meet her and see what she is like.”

Peter decided he had enough of her jibes. Outlaws were always sensitive about subjects such as execution. He decided to have a dig back. “Perhaps, if and when he does capture and execute us, you won’t be around. Perhaps we’ll have sold you to some slave trader, who won’t believe your fantastic stories of being royalty. Perhaps you’ll be serving as some tavern wench in a Torton bar, naked and branded and with the marks of the strap on your bare arse.”

She looked at him, and her deep brown eyes were as steady as a rock which his words had bounced off. “I am the Princess Yasmin, only daughter of King James the First of Glanville. A tavern wench? I think not.”

And she would say nothing more.

Gary Webster lingered in an alleyway outside the Glanville royal palace.

He was only too aware how precarious his situation was. If he played this wrong, the king would have him tortured to reveal all he knew, then probably killed. But, like all the Tigers, he was prepared to put his life on the line for Selina. The disappearance of the princess had already been discovered and the fur was well and truly flying. Well, thought Gary, here goes.

He stepped up to the palace gates. “I think I may have information about the missing princess,” he said to the two guards.

“Yeah, you and a hundred others,” one of them said laconically. “There isn’t even details of a reward yet, but everybody thinks they know something which will earn ‘em some cash.”

“But it’s true: I saw a group of people leave as I came into the city. There was a girl with them and she didn’t look as if she was going voluntarily.”

The guard shrugged. “Slaves come and go all the time and in case you ain’t noticed, not all of them want to be slaves.”

Gary hadn’t expected this. “Look, just let me speak to someone in authority,” he pleaded.

“Try me,” said a more reasonable voice from behind him. Gary spun around to see a captain of the guard standing there. Obviously he had heard the tail end of the conversation. “So, you saw some men take our princess away, did you? Can you describe them?”

“It was very dark,” said Gary, going into his rehearsed lines, “but I’m sure that at least two of them were wearing monk’s outfits. It was the priests of Kimshah!”

All three of the men in his audience paled slightly at that, but the captain recovered quickly. “Very curious,” he said thoughtfully. “At least two of them, you say? Are you sure?”

Gary nodded. “Absolutely certain.”

“Well, that’s very strange. You see, for one thing, the monks only appear very occasionally and never, in my lifetime at least, more than one of them at once. You, an outsider, wouldn’t know that.” He looked at Gary more closely. “You are an outsider, aren’t you?”

There was no point denying that. “I’m a travelling trader.”

“I see,” the captain said. “Now, the other thing is this. I’ve just come back from interviewing the palace servants. As it happens, the kidnapping was discovered rather earlier than most people would think: one of the maids returned very late from a rendezvous with a boy friend and discovered everybody else all bound and gagged. So, I’ve already had a chance to interview them. Now, we happened on a bit of luck. One of them recognised some of the kidnappers from a group of bandits who pulled off a daring robbery of slaves here a while ago. You might have heard of them: they call themselves the Tigers.”

Gary was stuck for what to say: the plan was unravelling before his eyes. The two guards might be mentally challenged, but this guy was disturbingly on the ball. The captain probed deeper. “So how is it that you saw the monks taking this woman away? And can you prove that you are what you say you are?”

“Yes, of course ... I’ll go and get my wares to show you. They’re at the inn where I stayed last night.” Gary began to back away.

“Not so fast, mister: I said hold it!”

He was reaching out to grab Gary, who had decided that it was definitely time to depart. The lone Tiger turned and ran. The quick-witted captain was after him like a shot, but Gary had by pure chance timed his retreat perfectly. A trading caravan was just making its way across the square behind them. Gary darted in front of the horses pulling the long wagon, just before they blocked up the street and only narrowly avoiding getting trampled beneath the plodding hooves. By the time the angry captain had tried to get by, waved the slow-moving vehicle on and scrambled around it, his prey had gone.

In the throne room, King James the First, grand ruler of Glanville, paced up and down furiously. His two army generals, Hague and McAllister, stood trembling, only too aware that this could cost them both their heads.

“What do you mean, no tracks?” he thundered. “And you still haven’t explained how they broke into Yasmin’s palace so easily.”

“The ground is hard and the sands are blowing about and covering any hoof marks, majesty,” Hague said. “As for the palace guards, rest assured that I will personally deal with those dullards ...”

The king stopped his pacing and stood face to face with the ashen, beer-ravaged face. “Someone once said the buck stops here, whatever a buck is,” he observed. “It means, so my teacher told me, that the commander in chief is responsible for the efficiency of his men.”

The commander in chief grew even redder. “Yes, Majesty.”

In an ornate seat at the side of the room, Morton Anderson shifted impatiently, cursing his luck. He had only a couple of days to conclude a trade deal and send details back to his own king, otherwise his chances wouldn’t be much better than those of these inept generals.

Morton Anderson was the ambassador from Torton to this area. Most cities didn’t have ambassadors, but Torton’s King Michael was an ambitious man, keen to extend his city’s empire, already the biggest and most powerful in the area. It was one of the two driving desires in his life, the other being to find the escaping slave girl who had killed his brother, Prince Martin: but that trail had gone cold long ago. Anyway, Morton had been sent to this area to recruit allies, or more accurately vassals, through a trade agreement. The problem was, he had spent too much of his time in the Glanville fleshpots and the deal was still not quite concluded, although it only remained to sort out a few details. But the impatient King Michael had sent him a deadline and now King James was fully occupied with the abduction of his daughter ...

His reverie was interrupted by the sudden flinging open of the doors and the hurried entry of the captain of the guard into the hall. He had not even knocked, a fact he was only now aware of. "Majesty, a thousand pardons," he began.

King James waved that to one side. This young man had already shown considerable initiative, far more so than his superiors. "Captain Thompson," he boomed, "if you have news, don't stand on ceremony. Let's hear it, man!"

"Yes, sire," the captain said, with a nervous glance at his commanders, who the king was ignoring totally. "I've finished interviewing the palace staff. Their descriptions seem to confirm it. I am sure that our princess was taken by the Tigers."

Morton's ears pricked up. He had heard whispers of these Tigers amongst the slave girls at the brothels he had visited. Nothing else: they were evidently not things an owner wishes to hear a slave mention. However, such snippets of information were often useful.

"And yet you say Goldenhair was not with them," the king commented.

"No, Majesty, but it was most certainly the Lion leading them."

"Goldenhair? The Lion?" Morton asked, but everybody ignored him, to his irritation.

"So, perhaps they are turning to the ransom game to provide for their old age," the king suggested.

"Perhaps, sire, and yet ..." Thompson suddenly realised that he was taking an awful lot of liberties. "Permission to speak freely, sire?"

The king grunted. "Man, you have my permission to do whatever you need. So far you've been more useful than the rest of my army put together."

"Er, thank you, sire," the young captain replied. He took a deep breath. "Majesty, it is not the way they operate. There are two brothels in this town full of slaves and practically unguarded once you get past the gate. Why didn't they raid them, as they did before? In addition to the slaves, there would be plenty of gold there, if that's what they wanted. Why go for such a dangerous kidnap?"

The king mulled this over. It seemed reasonable. "So?"

"Here's one more piece to the puzzle, sire. Just a few minutes ago, a man came to the palace gates claiming to have information. The brain-dead morons who call themselves guards didn't want to know, but his story sounded false to me and when I started questioning it carefully, he ran off." He skipped over his own failure to apprehend the man, not for the sake of his ego, but because the king was in a dangerous mood. "He might have been a reward hunter spinning a story, or he might not. I have put an alarm out for him, naturally, but nothing yet. For whatever reason, he tried to put the blame for the kidnappings on the monks of Kimshah."

Now Morton knew a little bit more about the monks than he did about the Tigers. A fort-like monastery high on the hillside would have been a useful ally for Morton, but he could find no guide prepared to take him anywhere near the place, and he had also heard that those foolish few who had ventured too close had never returned. Very occasionally a monk would come into Glanville to buy things, including slave girls, hiring a bodyguard whom he would dismiss when they neared the monastery. The guards were never really needed: the local populace seemed far too afraid of the monks to interfere with them. The slaves they bought were never seen again and they paid in very pure gold. Morton had decided that a visit to the monastery was ill-advised, discretion being the better part of valour, but had cursed missing the monk who had visited recently. It could be at least a year before another appeared. He noticed that even King James was uneasy at the mention of Kimshah.

"One last point, sire," Captain Thompson said. "I sent word to the patrol searching in the direction of the mountain to see if they had any indications that the kidnappers had gone that way. They report someone in a farmhouse who thinks they heard between six and a dozen horses pass that way at speed last night."

The king sat down in his throne and digested all this; then he studied the captain. "What is your opinion, Thompson?"

The young man blew out his cheeks. "I'm convinced that it was the Tigers, sire, but I don't know why. They might have gone towards Kimshah, for reasons unknown, or they might not. But I can't think of anywhere else to go looking."

"And I'm sure you two fools can't think of anything at all?" the king growled, turning his attention to the generals. They both shook their heads fearfully. "All right, let's concentrate the search around that area for now without, needless to say, interfering with the monks. I want every available man ready to march inside an hour. Dismissed." He waved the military men away.

Ambassador Anderson remained in his seat. "I don't know much about these Tigers, majesty," he said hopefully. "You mentioned two names, Lion and Goldenhair? The men who lead them, I take it?"

The king grunted. "They're bandits who go around stealing slaves: to liberate them, according to rumours. Blasted nuisance to good honest trade. The Lion is their leader. Goldenhair is a woman, actually. She's called that because she has this shock of blonde hair. She's a fighter, just like Lion, maybe even better with a sword. According to the stories, she's supposed to be incredibly beautiful and some say she's a former slave herself. But, they've always appeared together before. Why not now, I wonder?"

But Morton Anderson was not listening. His mind was racing furiously, because he had a wild idea that he knew just who this Goldenhair was.

Morton excused himself from the royal presence as quickly as he could. Royal presence, he thought sourly: a trumped up little local despot, more like. Still, he told himself, don't go too hard on the good King James: he might just have handed you the key to a fortune, the huge reward offered by his own liege for the killer of Prince Martin.

Back in his room, Morton wrote a quick note explaining this to King Michael. He couched it carefully, in case he was wrong, but how many stunning blonde ex-slaves might there be who wielded a sword as if they were born to it? The wench who had killed Prince Martin had done so in a sword fight and the Prince had been a fair swordsman himself. At any rate, it was well worth calling for some troops. He signed and sealed the letter, then called for his aide. "Get this letter to our king in Torton as fast as you can. Get your horse and go!"

The startled man was almost pushed out of the room. Morton sat back and pondered his next move.

Selina hadn't got much out of the concubines. All her efforts to stir and rouse them against their masters failed dismally. Even the newest of them were totally resigned to their fate.

She could hardly blame them. Most were local folk who had lived under the shadow of the monastery all their lives. The monks were regarded almost as gods, although apparently they rutted like men. There was also, as Selina knew full well, having been there herself, something about being a slave: you become used to obedience, your outlook becomes one of fawning subservience. Eventually, seeing that she was totally wasting her time, Selina gave up the attempt.

She had to admit to herself that these men frightened her, too. Like most people, Selina knew that there had been a powerful science-based technology in the world before the Final War. Was it that which the monks employed, or were they truly wizards? She didn't know, nor really care: it was what they could do that counted. In mere seconds they had effortlessly routed the best fighters in the Tigers. How could she, alone, naked, shackled and swordless, her back and buttocks laced with welts, fight them on her own and how could Vince, even with all the Tigers, storm this high-walled mountain fortress?

She managed to get the pegs off her boobs, by sitting down and levering them off with her knees. Pulling them off instead of releasing them had hurt considerably, but there was nothing else

for it. The clip between her legs, however, which squashed her clitoris intolerably, she could not dislodge. After a while, the throbbing pain in her sex faded into a numb, gnawing ache.

Eventually the monks called for her again. She struggled to her feet, the heavy beam behind her back to which her arms were tied hampering her movements. The rubbing of it had also constantly aggravated the weals. There was no way to fight tied as she was, but she had decided to show at least some defiance to try to spark these other women. It was not to be: her resistance was again quickly quelled with a touch of the staff. As before, all the energy just drained out of her body and she was left barely able to stand. They shoved her out into the corridor, and she had to be almost carried to the Master's chamber. This time the women were ordered to follow.

The first thing she saw in the chamber was her sword, mounted as a trophy. It was the same sword she had snatched at the Torton palace when she had escaped, the sword which had killed Prince Martin and which had rarely ever left her side since. It was a good sword, a stalwart friend which she had named Excalibur after some vague half-remembered legend from her English home. It was not nice to see it mockingly displayed, but she was pleased to find it was here and noted where it was for future retrieval.

They made her stand in the middle of the room and one of the monks roughly pulled the peg off her pussy. It was deeply embedded in the soft flesh which stuck to it as it was pulled away. Selina could not suppress a gasp with the atrocious pain. Moments later, the circulation began to return; pins and needles brought fresh torment as they secured her to two lengths of chain descended from the ceiling.

On a table were four bunches of stinging nettles. The Master picked four of the other slave girls and indicated the bunches. The girls unhappily moved over to the table and each grasped a bunch, wincing as they themselves were stung and then all stood in front of Selina. They all looked at her with apologetic eyes, but shied away from the anger blazing from her own sky-blue orbs. However, they were obviously far more afraid of the monks than of her and so it began.

They covered all of her front, from the top of her chest to the fronts of her legs down to her knees. The impact of the flimsy foliage was painless in itself, but each touch brought a sting as the nettles did their work. Soon, Selina's whole front was throbbing with the stings and her soft flesh was covered with tiny red lumps where the poison had got below the skin.

By the time the Master allowed them to desist, the once fresh bunches were little more than broken stalks and a few leaves. Selina was hurting, but dry-eyed: she had experienced worse. Now, however, one of the monks stood to the right side of her, holding a long, thin whip and swung a long backhand. The leather buried itself across Selina's defenceless breasts; a yelp of anguish escaped her lips and a thin but bright red line immediately showed the upper regions of her twin mounds. Another backhand slashed into her: another yelp, another angry crimson line. Yet another, and another ... Selina lost count and only by examining the weals later did she establish that the whip had bitten into her boobs six times: three on the upper curves, two awful strokes over her nipples and one on the lower, particularly sensitive underhang flesh. She had cried out with each stroke and her eyes were watery, but she fought back the tears: they would not have the satisfaction of seeing her cry or plead. At least, not yet.

Her legs had given way and she slumped in her bonds, held up by the chains. Any question of regaining her feet was rendered out of the question when some of the slave girls, on orders from the Master, knelt before her. Two each of them grasped her slender ankles and pulled her legs apart, exposing her womanly entrance. Beneath the fluffy but sparse coppery hair, the imprints of the peg could still clearly be seen and, although the tiny red lumps were difficult to distinguish from the bases of her pubic hairs, the nettles had not neglected even that most holy of holy places.

Selina felt as exposed as she looked, her labia clearly visible. Was the Master going to rape her, here and now? Once, rape had been an everyday occurrence for her, but she had been tasted by no man except Vince for well over a year now. But he produced instead a wicked looking riding crop with a flat tab at the end. Time and time again, the crop was used on her, the flat tab landing between her legs with a slapping sound, bringing a fresh stinging burn to the already battered flesh designed for love, not the sadistic abuse now being heaped upon it. Selina found herself drowning

in a stormy sea of pain. She screamed and yelled, but somehow managed to keep herself from the ultimate self-degradation of pleading for mercy.

In fact, when they had finished and began to release her pain-wracked body from the chains, a little pride fought its way back to the surface. Tears were falling now, escaping from the azure eyes past her eyelashes and inching slowly down her lovely cheeks, but she was not sobbing and she managed to stay on her feet when the chains fell away.

The effects of the staff had long since faded, but her torments had left her weak as a kitten and she could offer little resistance as they put her into some mobile stocks, two hinged pieces of wood with three holes, one for her head and two for her wrists. Once locked into it, she was helpless once more and with three of the monks holding her there was no way to avoid it. It was heavier than it looked, though lighter than the beam and she was relieved that the beam no longer rubbed the sores on her back: now they could start to heal. The monks escorted her back to the cell, although this time the other women were not sent with her: the show had clearly stirred the monks and now the concubines were to fulfil their functions. Selina, it seemed, was being saved for a special treat for the Master. Whatever the reason, she was grateful for the solitude and rest. As soon as the heavy door had clanged shut behind her, she slumped to the cold concrete floor. Lying on her inflamed front, however, was out of the question, whilst her back was hardly any better and yet she barely had the strength to remain standing, certainly not for long with the heavy yoke. Eventually, she managed to adopt an extremely uncomfortable position on her side and fell into an exhausted but pain-filled sleep.

Vince watched with barely concealed impatience as the rider galloped across the plain towards them, raising a cloud of dust behind him.

He was concerned that there was only one figure approaching when according to the plan there should be two. The usually cool Peter looked just as anxious, in contrast to Princess Yasmin beside him who had adopted an air of regal indifference. The other men were watering the horses in a cool stream and filling water bottles.

The rider arrived, breathless, and faced Vince, who looked as if he would tear him limb from limb if he did not make his report quickly. "The Glanville army is on its way. Quite a big force, maybe two hundred men, but they're moving slowly, checking very carefully for ambushes. King James is with them, I could see him clearly." He indicated the binoculars hung around his neck. Working pairs were a rarity these days and the Tigers had often found them invaluable.

"Gary?" Vince asked tersely.

"No sign of him with the army or at the rendezvous. I scouted the Glanville city walls, but they were all locked up and guarded. With the army away, they were taking no chances on a surprise attack."

"Or he's on the run inside and they're trying to make sure he can't get out," Peter suggested.

"Could be. Anyway, I couldn't have got inside if I wanted to and I hadn't got a clue where he might be hiding if he isn't in custody, so I thought it best to get back and report. Fortunately, I could take a short cut through the hills whilst the army goes the long way round."

Vince nodded thoughtfully. "You did right," he said absently. "Gary can look after himself."

"What now, Vince?" someone asked. "We don't know if the Glanville men are on our side or not."

"They'll be on our side as long as we have this little ace in the hole," Vince replied, nodding at Yasmin who glowered back at him.

"My father's men will have you strung up ..." she began.

"Oh, put a sock in it," another man said and a brief nervous laugh rippled among them, relieving the tension. Peter reddened just slightly. The princess gave the man who had spoken a look of pure scorn, but she fell quiet, nevertheless.

"We'll have to try to parley with them," Vince said. "Up there is a ledge which we can talk down from, but where they can't get up to quickly. We'll try talking from there, and if they turn nasty we can get away before they reach us."

"Vince, I been thinking," yet another man said. Vince turned and looked at him: he had always listened to what his men said. "We didn't realise it until we saw her, but this girl is one hell of a wench," the man went on, pointing at Yasmin who regarded him with contempt. "Properly tamed, she'd warm the bed of any man quite nicely. How about offering an exchange to the monks, her for Selina?"

There was silence. Yasmin tried not to show it, but the thought frightened her. Peter's mouth felt dry, his tongue seemed to stick to the roof of it. One or two men shuffled uneasily.

Vince took a long time to speak. "That's not the way we do things," he said at last. "We're supposed to be about freeing slaves, not delivering more women into lifelong chains."

"Nobody appointed us angels," the man pointed out.

"We have enslaved a few slavers," another man joined in. "Hell, once Selina herself castrated one slaver and sold him to the mines."

"He had it coming," someone countered. "This ain't no slaver."

"But she lived in a palace and probably had slaves of her own and a hot tempered spoilt little rich bitch like her would give out whippings like sweets," the second man said.

Another man turned to Yasmin. "Is that true?" he asked bluntly.

She stared back, fixing her gaze over his head as if he were unimportant. "What I do in my palace," she said, deliberately using the present tense, "is my business."

"For God's sake, girl, do something to help your own cause," Peter blurted out. "Answer the point!"

Yasmin turned and eyed him coldly. "You will kindly address me as Princess Yasmin," she said flatly. "However, to answer your question, I do have slaves, but I do not whip them."

Half a dozen voices started at once and Vince had to shout for silence. "We don't have time for this," he stated at last. "I admit that trying to swap this girl with Selina is an idea." Peter, he noted, looked furious. "I've faced these priests and they have powers we don't understand and I tell you honestly I'm not certain we can beat them, with or without this army. But this girl, pampered rich brat though she might be, is not a slaver and to give her to them, even assuming they'd accept the deal - and they could take both girls - would be a mockery of all we've done over the past few years. Then there's Derek to remember and avenge. But most of all, consider this: would Selina agree to this deal?"

Heads shook quietly. Up to that last question, his audience had remained uncertain and divided on the idea, but that one point had changed the whole mood. Without any further discussion, the group slowly dispersed. Presently only Peter and Yasmin remained.

She looked at him, her thoughts unreadable. Eventually, she took refuge in taunts once more. "The mighty and noble Tigers, considering becoming slave traders," she observed acidly.

He rounded on her. "I've already told you, for your own sake, think before you open your pretty little mouth," he said angrily. "There's a dozen of us against these monks and I've seen what they can do and that was in an open fight, not when they have the advantage of being behind their castle walls. God knows what else they are capable of. And even assuming we can get your father's men fighting alongside us, which personally I can't see, I'm not sure we can beat them."

The princess considered this. "You are very probably right," she said reasonably. "My grandfather once tried to bring the monastery under his control. His army were wiped out before they even got to the mountain and there are stories of bright lights, terrible noises, flying demons and other things. Only a few soldiers survived and some of them were driven mad by the experience, so the real story is very hazy, but we certainly lost a lot of men."

"Well, that's what we're facing. Some of us are probably going to die up there trying to rescue Selina; maybe we all will, without achieving anything: so don't you think the idea is quite attractive, to avoid all this by swapping Selina for an arrogant ..."

His voice trailed off, his anger spent. Yasmin finished for him: “hot tempered, spoilt little rich bitch,” she quoted mildly, without offence. “Tell me, what would this Selina have said about the deal?”

Peter smiled. “Given the choice between a life of slavery and letting some poor innocent suffer in her place, she would have sent us all away with a tongue lashing,” he said with conviction and fond memory. “Or, if we forced the deal and got her away, she would have drawn her sword and gone back fighting to free you.” He purposefully emphasised the last word.

“How stupid, to risk your life for someone you don’t know.”

Peter shrugged. “That’s Selina.”

“You know, I hope I do meet this girl. In fact, she’s innocent of my kidnap, so I’ll make sure daddy lets her go whilst this rest of this lot are hanging by the neck from the Glanville gallows.”

He regarded her. “And what about me?” he asked. “Will you stand there enjoying the sight of me gasping my last breath?” He wasn’t sure why he was asking.

She considered the question. “I did notice that you had hand on sword when they were talking about offering me to the monks. Would you have defended me?” Somehow there was an mischievous impishness to the question. Peter was impressed, though, with her powers of observation: he had thought, correctly, his movement had been as small and unobtrusive as it was instinctive.

He shifted uncomfortably. “The Tigers are like a family,” he said, avoiding a direct answer. “But I don’t think what they were proposing was right.”

“Perhaps I would tell my father to spare you and let me have you as a slave.” A tiny, unexpected smile played on the edges of her lovely mouth. “Domesticated, you would make a nice pet.”

Peter frowned. He looked into her honey-brown eyes, trying to read her mood. “I think you’re forgetting you’re the captive around here,” he countered. “If we try to trade you with the monks and they don’t want you, I might brand you and keep you myself.”

It was meant to goad her, but somehow it lacked the sting required. Even so, her reaction was not the outrage or the lordly sneer he expected. Instead, she fixed him with those mesmeric eyes and said with another of those bewildering changes of tack of hers, “and would I make a good slave?”

Deciding to play her at her own game, Peter looked her up and down. She endured his gaze without complaint. “Take away those clothes and add a touch of discipline and I’m sure I could make something of you,” he said airily, still trying to goad her.

Again her reaction was unexpected. “I’ll take that as a compliment,” she said. She had a knack of keeping him off balance by always refusing to respond predictably. Perhaps, in spite of everything, she still saw it all as just a game; her father’s army, or just the fact of who she was, would keep her from harm. Then her mood turned serious again. “But enjoy your dreams while you can. My father’s troops are coming and it will go easier with all of you if I am returned unharmed and quickly to them.”

Peter’s own smile faded and his gaze returned to the mountain not so far away. There were many ways to make things go easier with them; but unfortunately, none of them helped Selina.

Generals Hague and McAllister flanked King James as they approached the hills.

“I see two possibilities,” Hague had said to the king, determined to make up the ground lost to that young upstart Thompson: the king’s patronage was vital. “One is that the Kimshah priests did indeed kidnap the princess, knowing,” he added ingratiatingly but accurately, “of her great beauty. They used the Tigers as cat’s paws. The man Thompson spoke to genuinely saw them. Alternatively, the Tigers kidnapped her for ransom or even to sell her on the slave market and to avoid the heat they tried to fix the blame on the monks. Since the monks have never done anything like this before, I favour the second idea.”

The king undoubtedly preferred the second idea, too: he had no desire to attack the monastery, which he regarded as tantamount to suicide. McAllister, though, also keen to make his mark, suggested that perhaps the monks were now ready to expand their empire and had kidnapped the princess to lure the Glanville army out where they could be ambushed and slaughtered. Although this idea was also unpopular and unlikely, it dictated that the army take a cautious route, scouting thoroughly ahead. King James was unhappy about the delay, but he had to admit that McAllister had a point. Morton Anderson lent his weight to this, knowing it would give his messenger more time to get to Torton. It was now the morning of the second day since the princess had been abducted. If King Michael acted on his suggestion and sent a cavalry unit, they might arrive on the scene sometime today.

The Glanville men approached the foothills which surrounded the mountain. The scouts had already reported that there were some men in that area; they seemed to be waiting for the Glanville forces. "Looks like they want a meeting," the scout reported.

Hague took command, with deference to the king. "If they are connected with the monastery, we need to cut them off from their base. We'll send a group of men to the plain to out-flank them," he said. He put Thompson in charge, mainly to remove his influence on the king. The young captain and his men galloped off.

"How do we handle the parley?" the king asked.

"A show of force," Hague replied. "Let the archers feather the first negotiator, then the others will co-operate to save their lives. Always be firm with villains, Majesty."

The king fervently hoped that he was right.

CHAPTER FIVE

Vince eyed the approaching men nervously. He wished he knew what had happened to Gary. It seemed best to proceed as if Gary's message had got through as intended: he might, after all, simply have been detained for further questioning.

This ledge was a perfect place to talk from. The forces some way below would take ten minutes up a winding path to get to him, whilst he could disappear the other way around the bend to his right and take any one of several paths, one of which led to where the rest of his group were waiting, save one, Henry, who had stayed with him.

He opened his mouth to hail the leader of the men staring balefully up at him, and then saw a movement behind them. Archers!

A hail of sharp-tipped arrows arrived at the spot where he had been just seconds before. Somehow Vince managed to scramble around the corner without being hit as a second salvo took flight towards him. Henry wasn't quite so lucky: an arrow stuck out of his sleeve. "Is it bad?" Vince asked as he leapt onto his horse.

"Only a scratch," Henry replied, pulling the arrow out with a grimace. "I don't think they were pleased to see us."

Another hail of arrows came around the corner. The rocks still just about covered Vince and Henry. "Jesus!" Vince exclaimed. Mounted troops would be racing up the path. "Let's get out of here!"

They turned and galloped off. "Change of plan, guys!" Vince shouted without stopping when they reached the others. "Leg it!"

Already on horseback, they turned and followed him. Yasmin sat on Peter's horse, in front of him. If she objected to his arms around her as he held the reins, she said nothing. It would have made no difference: he wasn't going to let her fall or jump off. They moved quickly after Vince and Peter caught up with him in the lead.

"Hostile reaction?" Peter enquired.

"You're telling me! There was about three trees' worth of arrows flying in my direction!"

"Where to now?"

"The monastery. God knows what these people know or think, but if we can persuade them that we went there, they might still attack."

"Or you could let me go and I'll try to persuade my father to call his troops off," Yasmin offered.

"Shut it," snapped Vince. "I ..."

He was interrupted, as they burst into a clearing, by an arrow which whizzed past his ear and buried itself in a tree next to him. Ahead of them, some way off, waited Captain Thompson and his men.

"Hell's bells! I thought tiger hunting was out of season!" Peter exclaimed as Vince pulled his horse around and led them in another direction. Yasmin looked up at Peter with an amused twinkle in her eye, apparently impressed with his dry witticism in such dire circumstances.

It was almost worth being shot at.

"Hold your fire, you blithering idiot!"

Captain Thompson nearly knocked the man from his horse.

"But sir, it was the Tigers: I'm sure of it!"

"Yes and on one of the horses was our precious princess! Do you want to face the king if a stray arrow of yours spears the heart of his only daughter? All right, men, let's get after them, but no shooting!"

The soldiers from Glanville, however, were only average horsemen, whilst each of the Tigers was an expert in the saddle and their horses were superbly trained. The gap grew to several minutes, but they were being forced away from the mountain. Ahead, however, the valley opened out into scrubland. By veering to the right around another set of rocks, they could get back on course.

“Vince!”

It was the scout with the binoculars, using them to look ahead of them. Slowing to a fast trot, Vince took the glasses and looked in the direction indicated. “Strewth,” he breathed.

“What is it?” Peter asked.

“Looks like Glanville has a bigger army than we thought,” Vince replied, handing his deputy the binoculars. “There’s a huge force out there heading towards us.”

“You’re not kidding,” Peter breathed. “There must be five hundred of them.”

Yasmin frowned. “Let me see?” she asked politely - a first for her. Perhaps that was why Peter handed her the glasses. She panned them over the approaching dust cloud, then gave them back.

“They’re not part of my father’s troops,” she said quietly. “We don’t have that many horsemen in Glanville in total.”

“Reinforcements from some neighbours?” Peter suggested.

“I don’t think so,” she said. Somehow nobody questioned if she was trying to mislead them, or why she was giving them any information at all. “No other town near here has that many men under arms either. Whoever these people are, they’re not local.”

Peter studied them through the lenses again. “No wagons, but plenty of spare horses. You could be right. So who the Hell are they?”

“More to the point, what do we do about it?” Terry asked urgently. “Don’t forget we’ve got two lots chasing us already.”

Vince nodded, and quickly made his mind up. “Peter, take everybody off to the right and work your way back to the mountain as we planned. Try to get the Glanville forces to attack the monastery any way you can. I repeat, ANY way.” He looked at Yasmin apologetically and for the first time his tone to her was gentle. “I’m sorry, princess, but for Selina, you’re expendable. I hope it doesn’t come to that.” She returned his gaze, but said nothing.

“What are you going to do?” Peter asked.

“I’m going out to meet this new lot,” Vince said grimly. “Maybe somehow we can turn their appearance to our advantage.”

“Vince, that’s suicide,” Henry said. “You know the reception you just had. If they know who you are, you’ll be dead or worse within a minute!”

Vince shrugged. “And if they join up with the Glanville forces, we’ll never get Selina back, if we even escape ourselves.” He glanced behind him. “Those others could arrive any time. Move!”

Without any further comments, Vince raced off.

Selina had been there for two days. A while after her second torture session, two of the experienced Kimshah slave girls arrived at her cell with food and water. Her arms still locked in the pillory device, she had to allow them to feed her. She was ravenously hungry, but fortunately they had brought plenty. What was left was put into bowls on the cell floor, where she could just about kneel before it and eat it directly from the bowls, albeit rather messily.

They also washed her and bathed her wounds. The cool water in the humid cell stung but refreshed her and she felt better afterwards.

“What will they do to me?” she asked one of the women.

Neither of them was keen to speak at first, but eventually one said, “they will break you to their will, then enjoy you, like the rest of us. When you grow old and your charms fade ... we don’t know. One day they come for such women. We never see them again.”

“They sacrifice them to their dark gods,” the other opined.

Selina could get no more out of them and was not sorry when they left. She stared out of the small cell window, thoughtfully. Vince would come, she knew; but what if he failed? Worse still, what if he died trying to free her?

If he died, she would kill herself, first chance she got. If he lived, then at least she could rejoice in that and hope that he led a long and enjoyable life without her.

And she herself, if she was stuck here for good?

Then she would have to surrender to the monks. She could not face torture like this indefinitely and they knew it as well as she. She had been a slave before, and she would be a slave again; but she would remember the time in-between, when she had bathed in the glow of being mistress of her own destiny, when she had gloried in her exploits and adventures, most of all those with Vince. She had carved out a small legend, that of Goldenhair, who rode with Lion and the Tigers, and matched them all for fighting skill and courage. If she spent the rest of her years as a sex slave, sordidly satisfying the lust of these aged and revolting devils, she would still cherish, without any regrets, that short period of wonderful mayhem and the love of a wonderful, brave man; and she would be content with her memories, her spirit contained, but not broken, within her chains.

Selina moaned softly each time the whips caressed her flesh.

She was beyond screaming. This particular torture session had started with her once more trying to bite back on her yelps, trying not to give them the satisfaction, but clenched teeth had given way to the tiniest of breathy gasps, which in turn had grown steadily in volume to yelps and then screams of pain, which had now degenerated into an almost continuous moan of anguish.

She was tied in mid-air, arms and legs secured to taut chains which in turn led to eyes in the roof and floor. She was spread-eagled, her legs wide apart and her arms similarly spread and stretched. It had the effect of making almost any point on her body open to the lash.

Which was exactly what was intended. Her back and bottom now red raw, her breasts also copiously marked with horizontal red stripes, her tummy and thighs also well decorated and her pussy lips bruised and swollen, they were turning their attention to other areas. Two of the monks were engaged in target practice, one with a martinet, a set of multitudinous short straps at the end of a short stick, the other with a longer, single-tailed whip. Both seemed very skilled, although Selina was scarcely in a state to appreciate it. The one with the longer whip would curl it around her trunk, or legs, so that the end would wrap around her, increasing in speed until the tip, which some true sadist had imbued with a small but devastating knot, would bite into her with terrible force. It was beyond enduring and yet she had to endure it. Amongst the worst times were when the monk wrapped it around her waist so that the tip lashed into her stomach, catching her just on the belly button and worst of all when it came six inches or so lower, wrapping around her thighs, the end burying itself with outrageous agony into her battered love nest.

The other monk with the martinet was scarcely less awful. He had started systematically with the soles of her feet, then worked up the fronts and backs of her thighs. With her legs forcibly spread, the insides of her thighs were terribly vulnerable and he took full advantage, lashing that most sensitive of areas for what seemed an interminable age. It was hardly any better when he had finished there, since he moved on to her delta, swinging the martinet up between her legs to bury the straps in her Mound of Venus or her vulva. After that, her back, stomach and breasts all got their share and then it was her armpits, her shoulders, even her upper arms and forearms. Only her face and head escaped. Once he had finished, he started randomly targeting areas he had already covered, areas now sore and smarting.

Selina hung listlessly, her body wracked with sobs. How long could she last out, before she fell to her knees before the Master's feet and begged him to make her his slave?

They had taken her back to collapse prostrate in her cell. The other women looked at her with sympathy, but did not interfere. Dazed at first and later drifting into a listless, pain-wracked sleep, Selina hardly knew they were there. Some time later - she had no idea how long - she had recovered just a little when the monks again came for her. It seemed better to co-operate rather than get another debilitating touch of the staff, so she followed them, staggering stiffly, meekly back to the master's chamber. On the way, she felt their hands crawling over her body, feeling her supple, womanly curves. It reminded her of her days as a tavern wench, or as a harem slave, except that never had she been as thoroughly tortured as she had been in the last two days. Her back and bottom were laced with uncountable weals and welts which hurt every time she moved. More red lines decorated her firm bosom, whilst below her slender waist her bruised and puffy sex lips showed clearly though the scant covering of light-coloured pubic hair.

Actually, her pubic hair no longer quite matched the golden mane on her head. When she had first arrived in Australia, her hair had been rather more golden brown than golden blonde, but long exposure to the fierce sun had almost bleached it to this stunning colour. As she had fallen victim to slavers soon after her arrival, who had soon stripped her naked, her pubic hair went the same way, but after her escape from slavery, her more intimate hair had been covered up and, although it had never quite reverted to its former colour, had lost a little of the sparkling lightness of hue.

She hadn't really noticed it, until the Master commented upon it. "I see that you have something of a two-tone complexion," was all that he said to her, and since he looked for no reply, she gave him none. His remedy, however, was not pleasant. She was taken to the flat roof of the keep, which was a sun-trap, and staked out, arms and legs spread wide, facing upwards. After three hours, they turned her over, allowing the sun to get onto her back and bottom.

Selina almost sizzled under the hot sun and with her legs spread as wide as they would go, even her most delicate areas were open to its burning rays. She steamed and wilted in the blazing heat and that heat absorbed earlier by the stone floor now singed whichever part of her body was in contact with it. To keep her from dehydrating, from time to time one of the slave girls would come onto the roof with a bucket of water and tip it over her, mostly over her head, or even put a cup of it to her dry lips, from which she drank greedily. Much of the water poured over her steamed off very quickly, but there was almost an orgasmic feeling of relief when it drenched her.

At the end of the session, they put her back in her pillory and brought her back to the Master. She stood before him, and he got up and reached out to stroke her pubic hair. Instinctively, Selina tried to twist away, despite the two monks holding her.

"Tut, tut," the Master said. He picked up the thin whip which had marked Selina's breasts so painfully. "Do you recognise this?"

She said nothing, staring defiantly at him. "Well, let's remind you of it," he said.

Selina remembered the awful pain across her tits when he had used it before. She did not want more of that. "NO!" She blurted out. He waited for her to continue. "That's not necessary," she was forced to go on. "I recognise it."

Was this the first step towards her new slavery? But that was less important than avoiding the pain. She couldn't face any more of that right now, not over the multitudinous welts she already carried on her lithe form.

"Good," he said. "It's your tit whip, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"That's better," he said. "What is it?"

"It's my tit whip," she repeated tonelessly. At least he hadn't yet demanded that she call him master. That would come, but she could endure more pain yet before she lowered herself to calling him that. She would have to give in eventually, but she felt she owed it to herself to put up some resistance. The legend of Goldenhair would not be tarnished with a quick and easy capitulation.

He looked at the brand on her thigh. "Now, you will tell me where you were a slave, and what sort of things you did." His face came closer to hers. "If you lie to me, I will know."

Selina felt herself drowning in his awful presence. She did not doubt his last warning. "I was a slave in many places," she said, hoping he would not press her on that point. "I was a labour slave, pushing a wheel to make electricity; a tavern wench, then a harem pleasure slave and finally I was sent to the arena."

"A harem girl, eh? Fully trained?"

There was no point in denying it. "Yes," she confirmed quietly.

"You seem to have forgotten the correct mode of address, though."

Selina did not reply. She was not going to call him "master" yet, not if she could help it.

Suddenly she felt one of the monks forcing her forwards, whilst the other one held her legs. Unable to resist, she was bent over, shapely posterior rising into the air. The master brandished a cane.

Selina shrieked as it cut viciously into her rear. On its own it was bad enough, but the additional aggravation of the welts she already had made it unbearable. It bit again and again and she shrieked each time. On her welted bottom it was dreadful, but worse still was when it strayed onto her previously less marked thighs, always a tenderly vulnerable target.

After the twelfth stroke, she pleaded with her master for mercy.

After the twentieth stroke, she got it.

And the sobbing blonde was taken back to her cell, fresh pain blazing in her heavily battered ass.

Vince had barely got fifty yards from the rest of the Tigers before having second thoughts about his impulsive idea. Henry's suggestion that it was suicide increasingly seemed fair comment. If they recognised him, he was dead. Even if they didn't, they still might kill him, for all sorts of reasons. He didn't even have a good story ready.

Still, it seemed like a huge coincidence that such a large armed force, travelling with such urgency, should appear at this moment in time. He needed to know. Anyway, it was too late to turn back now.

The task of the Tigers, getting the Glanville army to attack the monks, seemed impossible, but Peter would have as good a chance of succeeding as he himself would. Vince's only worry about Peter was that he was very obviously falling for the captive Yasmin. That could spell trouble in all sorts of ways, not least of which was that Peter was unlikely to get very far with the snobbish princess; but more to the point right now, if the rest of the men pushed this rather impractical idea of trying to swap the girl for Selina, would Peter fight them to protect her? His parting comment had been intended to warn Peter that such a swap might still be on the cards, but it might well have backfired.

Problems, multiplying all the time. And now, the strangers were upon him. "You there," their leader hailed Vince, "perhaps you can help us."

Acting as a wary local, Vince replied cautiously, "if I can. You're not from these parts, are you?"

"No; we come from Torton."

Torton? That was a long way away. What on earth were they doing here? The only connection with Torton anybody involved with this whole fracas had was ...

Oh, boy. And he thought they had troubles before.

As if to confirm his thoughts, the soldier went on: "we believe that an escaped slave we have been seeking for a long time may be in this area. Have you seen her?"

He unrolled a poster. Vince, like most people in this world, could not read, but he got the idea. The drawing of Selina was a fair likeness and the reward offered for capturing her looked a hefty sum.

What the Hell had Gary been up to in Glanville, or where else had these people got their information from? And how much did they know? To stall, he replied, "can't say I know her; who is she?"

“Our intelligence suggests that she is part of a group of raiders called the Tigers.”

Vince thought fast. He was now very grateful for the impulsive decision he had taken to meet this army. Whatever happened, he must not let them and the Glanville expedition join forces. There seemed little point in trying to deny Selina’s presence altogether: if these men had come this far, they would hardly turn back on the say-so of one unknown wayfarer.

“I’ve heard of the Tigers,” he admitted. “They say a pretty blonde girl rides with them: could be the one you want. Folks say that their base is up in the hills over there, in an old monastery.”

The man looked rather doubtful. “First I’ve heard of that.”

Vince was clever enough not to push the point. “Well, it’s only rumour, like everything else about the Tigers. Anyway, if they are there, you’re out of luck. They reckon the fort’s impregnable.”

“We’ll see about that, if she’s there,” the man replied arrogantly. “Anyway, it’s as good a place as anywhere to start our search. Can you direct us there?”

Vince saw his chance. “I could lead you there.”

The man frowned. “Why should you?”

Vince had his answer ready. “A reward like that one? Even a small share in it would be a tidy sum.”

“Very well; lead on.”

Got it! Now, all he had to do was keep this lot away from both the Glanville troops and his own men, engineer a confrontation between them and the monks without getting caught in the middle of it and rescue Selina while all that was going on. Well, at least it was a start!

Peter stared moodily up the hillside to the imposing, brooding castle.

They had lost their pursuers: he theorised that the small Glanville force had gone back to join the main host. They would doubtless arrive here before too long - there was only one real way to the monastery, right up this treacherous path of scree to where the front gate of the place should be, although he hadn’t located it as yet, finding only unyielding high walls - but at least he had some breathing space. Yet he saw no way of bridging the gap to the next stage in Vince’s rather hopeful plan. As to where Vince was now and who the large new army were, God alone knew. Meanwhile, the Tigers were sheltered from the view of the monks by an outcrop of rock, half way up the slope.

“Any ideas?” someone asked. Peter felt all eyes on him.

“Only one and it has more holes than I can count. We could wait for the Glanville mob to get here, with you lot out of sight and I’ll go out to them with a dagger held to Yasmin’s throat. I tell them where Selina is and give them a choice: either they storm the fortress and rescue her or I kill her there and then.”

Everything fell quiet. Yasmin stared at him, her face inscrutable but her hazel eyes seemingly darker than usual. “If you did that,” she said quietly and emotionlessly, “they would make sure you died very, very slowly.” Peter shrugged, not trusting himself to speak. Yasmin coldly pressed her attack. “And if they refused to co-operate, would you slit my throat?”

He could not meet her stare. “Of course,” he said, trying to sound off-handed. But the light returned to her eyes the moment he spoke. She knew now, and he knew she knew, that he was bluffing. He was almost relieved that she did not believe him.

The general consensus was that the plan had no chance. Peter tended to agree, but no other sensible ideas emerged and time was running out. Suddenly, the Glanville forces appeared at the foot of the plain, some little distance away, but they would be on the unprepared Tigers within minutes.

And then, Peter’s attention was drawn to a noise above them. He looked out from behind the rock and muttered, “Jesus Christ.”

What looked like the hordes of Satan himself were descending the slope towards them.

Once more they staked Selina out for hours in the sun, spread-eagled, face upwards. They seemed to think that she was weakening. When they released her, they did not replace the pillory; the two monks simply marched her back to the Master's hall, staffs relaxed.

In fact, the opposite was the case. Although her back and front both remained heavily welted, Selina was growing stronger. She had been left a plentiful supply of water in her cell and, anticipating the possibility of another stake-out, had drunk plenty. What was more, the most recent application of the cane on her had generated a surprise effect. Instead of a helpless female tortured at whim, she had received those strokes for defiance. That seemed to make a difference: it had kick-started her spirit back into full life. The old Selina was back, her temporary weakness gone. She would call nobody master ever again.

She let them escort her to the main hall, knowing that she would get nowhere without her sword and so, feigning both weakness and subservience, when one of them put a hand between her legs, she even relaxed, letting him in. One had to make sacrifices.

It worked. Once inside the hall, they marched her to the Master's throne, one of them on each side, but left their staffs by the door. The Master was examining one of the other new slave girls: as she stood before him, wincing but without resistance, his gnarled hands closed over her nubile, bare young breasts and felt their succulent vitality. The young girl looked close to tears, but did not pull away.

The Master turned to look at Selina, his hands still on the girl and made the slightest gesture of annoyance. Realising they had been sloppy, the monks moved in to secure her. It was too late.

With every ounce of force she could muster, Selina drove her left elbow into the kidneys of the monk to her left. Swivelling to her right even as the first monk fell, she reached her hand under the second one's jaw, whilst her fingers thrust upwards into his eyes, driving his head back. As she did, her left foot came behind his legs and swept back, lifting his left leg well off the ground and carrying his other with it. He crashed to the floor.

Normal men might not have got up in a hurry, but neither of these devils looked as if they would stay down for long. Selina had only moments to bound across the room, leap up and snatch her sword from its scabbard. The moment her slender fingers closed around the hilt, she felt an incredible relief. Live or die, they would not separate her from this weapon again. If she should perish here and now, which was a high possibility, they could damn well bury her still clutching it.

The one monk was already on his feet and reaching inside his habit for something. Selina didn't wait to see what it was. She swung the sword and buried it into the side of his neck. The blow would have severed the heads of men burlier than this one from their shoulders, but although he went down, Selina had time to see that she had only inflicted a deep gash. However, go down he did.

She turned for the door, but out of the corner of her eye she saw the Master. He seemed to have nothing in his hand, but when he gestured in her direction some instinct made her throw herself flat to the floor. It was not a bad idea. Behind her, the door exploded with a noise that hurt her ears. She bounced back onto her feet and, taking advantage of the smouldering hole now gaping in what had been a heavy wooden door, raced out before he could hurl another thunderbolt.

The one corridor led back to her cell and beyond that up to the roof where she had been staked out. Unhesitatingly, Selina raced barefoot in the opposite direction. She came to a fork, guessed a direction and took it, came to another and did the same. Behind her the sounds of pursuit gradually faded as they lost her in the labyrinthine maze, but suddenly the corridor she was racing down came to a dead end. Only one door beckoned. She opened it and hurled herself inside. The door swung shut behind her.

Selina pulled up. This was a chapel of some sort and in front of her another monk knelt with his back to her, apparently praying. Slowly, he came to his feet, and turned to face her. She hadn't seen this one before, and he was somehow different to the others: older than most of them except the Master, stern but not so cruel.

Still, he was another monk and any moment now would be tossing baubles or thunderbolts or whatever else her way. She lifted her sword to strike.

"You must not use a weapon here."

The voice was calm and unhurried, yet firm. It was only a voice, but Selina felt herself paralysed. It was as if her sword was a lead weight. She tried to let go of it, to attack him with her fists, but she could not take her hands off it.

"You did not want to ever let go of your sword again," he reminded her as she tried to free herself.

She went cold. "How do you know that? I only thought it and you weren't there anyway."

He ignored her question, but instead looked her up and down. Her nudity, despite her stunning beauty, seemed to make no impact on him: he seemed more interested in the many welts covering her voluptuous body. Even then, it did not seem to be the sadistic interest of the other monks: instead, there seemed a sad look on his aged face.

"Did the Master do this to you?"

"Yes and he'll do far worse if he finds me." She struggled ineffectually to lift her sword.

He sighed sadly. "Our talents were meant for so much more than just pursuing such sins of the flesh," he said. "Our fathers had other, loftier aims even before the Final War."

In spite of her pressing situation, Selina had to ask: "do you remember before that time?" The war had ended half a century ago. She had met nobody in her adult life old enough to remember with clarity how the world had once been.

He shook his head. "That is not for such as you to know, little one. However, you stand in the only remaining truly holy place in Kimshah. You must leave this room at once."

"I can't move," Selina pointed out.

"Can you not?"

She tried again and found that she now could. Slowly, Selina lowered her sword. She was not stupid enough to raise it towards this man again. He came with her as she moved to the door and opened it, quite unaffected by her considerable naked charms. She looked anxiously out: there was no sign of her hunters.

"Can you tell me how to get out?" she asked.

"You will find your own way," he replied serenely, but then looked slightly more closely at the many, overlapping welts on her back and reached out to gently touch the back of her left hand. "I will give you this and a piece of advice. Turn right outside the door. Go now, and ... good luck." He let go of her hand and stepped back.

"But that's a dead end," she turned to protest, but the door had closed behind her. Should she open it, intrude again? She thought not: he might be less amenable if she trespassed a second time. Turn right, she mused, but she found herself staring at a brick wall. Puzzled, she reached out to touch it with her hand ... and found nothing there.

Her fingers met empty space. Hesitatingly, she moved forwards. Her knee also sank into the illusion and she took a breath and stepped into it. The wall seemed to fade and instead she found herself at the top of a winding stone staircase.

Cautiously, she began to descend. After days of agony, she felt alive once more, although she was far from immune to the welts and cane marks which decorated her lithe form. She could feel a cool draught playing around her lovely limbs; the breeze tickled her exposed pubic hairs. The steps went down, down, down. Surely she was at ground level by now, maybe even below it. The light faded into almost total darkness as the steps came to an end and the stairway turned into a tunnel. As she moved along it, having to feel her way now, she pondered his last words to her. "I will give you this and some advice," he had said. "And"? What else had he given her, as well as the clue about the wall? He had touched her hand, but left nothing in it.

In the dim gloom, her sharp eyes made out a pit ahead. Peering into it, she saw spikes jutting up towards her. Nasty, she thought wryly. There was a narrow ledge around the rim, however, and she was able to circumvent the drop and move on.

The darkness was total now. Nerves jangling, Selina could only feel her way along the cold wall, with no idea of what other nightmares might be in here with her. The musty tunnel seemed to

be becoming airless, too. She fought for breath, and then she could not breathe at all. She staggered against the wall, feeling as if she was drowning. She could see nothing, do nothing: this was the end.

Some instinct told her to bring her left hand up to her face. She put her nose against the back of her hand where he had touched it and suddenly she breathed the sweetest pure air she had ever smelt. She inhaled deeply, and started again on her way. A few moments later, she tentatively took her hand away from her nose. The air vanished again and the drowning sensation engulfed her once more. Quickly she raised her hand to her nose once more and beautiful air came again.

After a while she found herself able to breathe normally again. So that was his gift to her, however he did it. She wanted to thank him: perhaps, she hoped, he could read that thought too.

The tunnel turned a couple of corners and then there was a light. It seemed to be just a glowing rock, but it cast a welcome amber glow. The tunnel widened.

And Selina came to a full stop.

Ahead lay a deep pit. She stared down, but could not see the bottom. Some distance away she saw the tunnel resume, but too far to jump and there was no way around, no ledge at all this time, nothing to bridge the gap with, and the walls were too sheer to scale.

So what now? Selina pondered the problem. There had to be a solution: the monk would not otherwise have sent her this way. There had to be an answer. She looked around, grateful that at least this part of the tunnel was lit, so she could see her difficulties. And with that she smiled, because now she understood. It was so simple and revolved around the question: why was this part of the tunnel lit, when the rest was in darkness?

She stooped down, gathered a handful of dust and tiny stones from the floor and tossed it into the pit. It did not fall, but seemed to hover in mid-air, although she could hear it strike the floor. Selina's smile broadened. Another illusion. Without the light, of course, it would not have been any use, which was why the light was there. And, if one was coming the other way up the tunnel and had not encountered the illusion of the wall ...

Even so, it was nerve-wracking to set foot into what seemed like open space, but, whatever her eyes told her, her bare toes felt cold, solid rock. Gingerly, she took another step, testing the ground each time, until she reached the other side. She took a deep breath, and carried on.

Further on, the tunnel opened out into a cave. Ahead of her, she could see a shaft of daylight which illuminated the cave. Thank God: and she had come far enough that she was undoubtedly beyond the monastery walls, maybe even part way down the slope.

But, just as she padded softly on her bare feet towards the light, she heard a scratching sound ahead of her. Selina recoiled in horror. Shuffling towards her was a terrible apparition: four, maybe five feet long, black fur covering a huge, barrel shaped body, four claw-tipped paws making the scratching noise - which established that this was no illusion - and whiskers twitching as baleful eyes fixed themselves on her.

Some instinct made Selina whirl around, to see two more such creatures approaching from the other direction. There was no doubt that, whatever these creatures were, they were meat eaters. Well, they would taste Excalibur before they tasted her. Gripping her sword tightly, she prepared for battle.

CHAPTER SIX

Peter stared with horror as four flying pads, each containing two monks, made their way down the slope. He could feel their arrogant confidence: this, for them, would be an amusing slaughter.

He turned and looked down the slope to where the Glanville army had gathered at the foot. They would never reach the side of the Tigers in time even if they wanted to. His group were on their own. He turned back to his men. Swords were drawn, but the mood was grim. Each man here expected to die in the next few minutes.

One person, however, needed to be evacuated.

"Princess," said Peter soberly. "You'll have to run, but you've got time to get back to your father's troops before the monks are on us." He looked the beautiful young woman in the eye, unable to read her expression. "I'm sorry we involved you in all this. Go, quickly."

She looked long and hard at him for a moment, then: "no," she said, quietly but firmly.

"What?"

"I'm not leaving you."

Peter stared at her for a moment, lost for words and then one of the other men caught his sleeve and pointed. Peter looked around, to see that the monks were in fact not approaching them at all. The flying sleds were moving down the slope towards the Glanville army at the bottom, ignoring the small band of Tigers altogether.

"What the Hell?" one of the men asked.

Hell was right. Peter watched in horrible fascination as the monks reached the Glanville troops and started dishing out death and destruction in fireballs and exploding bombs. The arrows of the Glanville archers were somehow not finding their targets and the few men who could scramble up the slope to engage them in hand-to-hand combat were being cut down mercilessly.

The men looked down uneasily. "Maybe we should help them," one said hesitantly.

Peter shook his head. "We wouldn't make much difference and remember what we came to do. We've got our diversion and now we can try to get into the fort and rescue Selina."

"Poor, pitiful fools."

They spun round. Another monk stood on one of the silent flying things, looking down at them as if they were ants. Somehow he was not like the others, his robes more gilded and ornate.

"Clearly you and the pathetic creatures below have aided the girl in her escape," the monk said, his voice reverberating around them. "I am the Master of Kimshah. I left those below to my acolytes whilst I saw to you and reclaimed my slave, but I see that she is not here." His gaze swept around them and stopped at Yasmin. An evil smile crossed his withered features. "Another beautiful female: perhaps she will suffice as a substitute. I tire of chasing disobedient slaves."

Peter stepped in front of Yasmin, sword drawn. "Leave her alone!" he exclaimed.

The Master looked amused and tossed something down from his sled. The Tigers all moved back, well briefed by Peter and Vince on their previous encounter. The ball hit the ground and exploded and they were all hurled backwards. The Master moved forwards and picked up Yasmin's limp body gently and tossed it onto the sled.

Peter struggled to his feet. Around him, his comrades lay stunned; he himself was barely able to move. "Let her go," he gasped.

The Master contemplated him with amusement. "She is your woman, perhaps? Well, then, I shall not part you." He reached for his staff and touched Peter with it. Already close to collapse, the temporary leader of the Tigers could not evade it. As he slumped to the floor, the Master lifted him with astonishing ease onto the sled as if he weighed no more than a fly and flew back towards the monastery.

The remaining Tigers struggled slowly to their feet. Now bereft of all three of their leaders and still groggy from their brief confrontation, nobody had any idea what to do. For a minute they looked blankly at each other, and then Henry looked beyond them with delight and hope dawning on his face. "Selina!"

Vince was running out of options.

He had led the Torton expedition the long way around the mountain, hoping for a back route for an assault on the monastery, assuming the commanders would sanction it. However, he had found there was no way up from the rear, and his companions were losing patience. They now moved more quickly around towards the front of the mountain, where he guessed the smaller Glanville army would be. If he was going to engineer anything, he was going to have to be quick.

And then, as they turned a corner, they saw the one-sided battle between the monks, with their backs to them, and the Glanville troops.

The Torton commander, one General Symons, stood and watched for a moment, astonished by the pyrotechnics issuing from the monks and wondering what was going on. Then, at the rear of the Glanville troops he saw the royal wagon and beside it, on horseback, Torton's ambassador, Morton Anderson. Symons disliked Anderson, a career diplomat, which was to say a soft, cowardly pansy without honour. However, it clearly marked the one side as the Glanville army. Could the wizards facing them be these Tigers? Symons was by no means stupid, but he was a man of action. He gave the order: "charge!"

~

The Tigers stared at the welcome vision before them.

Selina was stark naked, clutching her sword from which thick red blood dripped. They had all seen her nude before, but never as battered as this. Wicked welts ran horizontally across her firm, spherical breasts and beneath the wispy covering of near-blonde pubic hair her sex lips were swollen and bruised. All her front was red, dotted with tiny lumps from the stinging nettles and the tail ends of whip marks could be seen on both thighs where the leather had curled around her hips. Her back was a shocking lattice of cruel weals and welts that covered the skin. There were fresh scratches on her forearms and legs.

And yet it was Selina, eyes blazing, golden mane blowing in the wind, looking as if she had just fought her way out of Hell itself and prepared to go straight back there if need be. Never had she looked so inspiring, so much like a legend even to those who knew her well.

"What's happening?" she asked tersely.

Henry spoke. "One of the monks just attacked us. He captured Peter and the princess."

Selina's eyes widened and even her determined shoulders seemed to slump just a little. "Oh, Hell," she muttered, then she pushed the disappointment down. "What princess? And where's Vince?"

"Right here, gorgeous."

She whirled. Even as she had come down one winding path to the men she had spied from above, Vince had sneaked away from the melee below and made his way unseen up another path. He had come on them by chance, although he had an idea they might be around here.

But none of that mattered at that moment. Vince had eyes only for his breathtakingly beautiful woman and she saw nothing but him. They moved together and fell into one another's arms. Only as Selina winced when Vince hugged her tight and as his fingers felt the ridges of the many welts on her bare back, did he pull back, noticing now also the wicked marks on her front.

"Jesus, Pussycat, what did they do to you?"

"It doesn't matter now you're here," she replied and the sentiment was too genuine to sound corny.

"I don't like breaking this up, people, but we've got urgent things to do," said Terry. "Down below, the monks are wiping out the Glanville army. We could be next."

Vince separated from Selina reluctantly. "It should be a more even contest now," he said mildly and they all looked down. He was right. The large Torton force had attacked the monks swiftly in the rear and from slightly above, taking them completely by surprise. The monks had lost their sleds and were surrounded. General Symons had quickly realised that he needed to use that

surprise to get to close quarters with the monks as fast as possible and his strategy was working. With no escape route, no way to re-establish the space they needed to be most effective and massively outnumbered, the monks were finished, but there was nothing to do except fight to the last.

Vince was briefed on the loss of Peter and Yasmin. He turned to Selina. "You got out of there: can you get us in?"

"I think I can get back in," she said, "but I can only get one other person in with me at most. In any case, if there's any way of beating the chief monk, two people have as good a chance as twenty. Force won't do it."

Vince nodded and took over command. With Selina now restored to his side, he was back to his old self. "All right. The rest of you, get the horses and be ready for a quick getaway if we get out. If we're not back in three hours, go without us. Somebody get this brazen strumpet something to wear and let's go."

"Just shoes," said Selina. "These rocks are cutting my feet to ribbons." The thought of clothes rubbing against her tortured body was too much to bear. Every movement hurt enough as it was.

Within two minutes she and Vince were moving back up the winding path, swords in hand. Following her closely, he was able to see closely the uncountable marks of lash and cane on her bare body.

"Who did all this to you?" he asked thickly.

"He calls himself the Master," she replied calmly. "Forget it for now, Vince, we've got more important things to consider. Who is this Princess Yasmin?" Vince told her that part of the story and she scowled. "Did you have to involve an innocent woman?"

He shrugged. "It seemed a good idea at the time," he said. "Anyway, she's not so innocent: she's a spoilt rich brat, though Peter might not agree."

"Well, it certainly stirred up a hornets' nest. There were an awful lot of troops down there."

Vince realised that she didn't know that the bulk of the forces fighting the monks below did not come from Glanville. He decided to say nothing: their plight was bad enough as it was without giving her anything further to worry about and he knew that the one thing in life she truly feared was to be delivered into the hands of the king of Torton. "I guess the princess is a popular girl," he replied vaguely.

They reached a rock face covered with vegetation, some distance below the monastery walls. Selina located a strong branch and pulled. A flap of bush peeled back, to reveal the mouth of the tunnel through which she had fled.

"Clever," murmured Vince as they entered.

"You haven't seen the half of it," she replied grimly as they went in. Vince surveyed the three dead animals, whatever they were: he had never seen their like before. Each would weigh as much as two men.

"Your work?" he asked. Selina nodded without speaking. "We've got enough meat here for a pretty big barbecue, if you like fried giant rat," he went on, trying to relieve her grim demeanour.

Selina couldn't help but lighten up. "I'll invite your Glanville friends, shall I?" she asked wickedly.

"Better not, they'd probably leave the rats and put you and me on the spit instead."

"Whose fault is that, darling?"

"Well, after you went off to play with your friends in robes, we were a bit short of female company."

"I'll bet; and somehow I can't picture this princess as a buck-toothed old hag."

"Perhaps not ... but I'd rather have you."

His tone was light, but the words were sincere. They stopped for a moment and looked at one another. Vince drank in her naked beauty: her bare form never failed to take his breath away, but never more so than now, when he had thought for so long that he might never see her again. As for Selina, she never felt more womanly than when Vince was admiring her in the nude. She ached for him, but there was no time right now. The moment faded and they resumed their journey.

They progressed into the tunnel. Fortunately the weird trick with the back of Selina's palm still worked when they reached the airless part. As they climbed the stairs, Vince asked, "by the way, do we make this up as we go along, or do you have a plan?"

Selina nodded, although she looked far from confident. "Even without the other monks around, we're no match for the Master," she said. "But there's just one possible, very slim chance. If not ..."

Her voice trailed away, but he knew what she meant.

If not, they would go down fighting together.

Captain Thompson surveyed the carnage, sickened. They had won, the monks lay dead or dying now, but they had taken some killing and the cost was high: the Glanville army had been decimated and the larger army who had suddenly appeared and swung the battle in their favour had also taken grievous losses. Hague and McAllister, naturally, had stayed out of danger. What were those poetry lines he had heard?

"Forward!" he cried from the rear,

And the front rank died;

The generals sat and the lines on the map

Moved from side to side."

And all this for some slip of a girl who was only important because her grandfather had been strong enough to carve a crown for himself in the wake of the great conflict, whilst countless other girls were sold naked into slavery every day. Worse, they were no nearer to recovering her. The other army were, as far as he could make out, on an even more pointless mission, some sort of vendetta. So what now?

One monk still survived, although he would not live for much longer, given his terrible injuries. The Torton troops were busy "interrogating" him. Thompson watched the torture with faint disgust. Finally, what was left of the man in blood-spattered robes was enticed to speak, or rather gasp. At the end of the brief exchange the monk slumped back and within minutes his soul had departed this earth.

Uncaring, the interrogating officer turned back to General Symons, who stood with King James and his two generals, the two sides now having introduced themselves via Morton Anderson. "There's no doubt about it, sir," the interrogator reported to Symons. "The escaped slave Selina is in that monastery."

"Then we shall have to enter it and capture her," Symons replied, doing his best not to show how staggered he had been that the small number of monks had been able to wreak such havoc.

King James nodded. He had himself witnessed Yasmin being carried off to the same fortress. But he was badly frightened: entering the monastery was likely to be akin to an invasion of Hell itself.

Consciousness returned to Peter.

He was standing and was quickly aware that he had no choice in the matter. His wrists were chained to a beam above his head.

As his vision cleared, the delightful features of Princess Yasmin swam into view before him. Her arms were chained in a similar fashion to his own, her toes barely touching the stone floor, looking at him with caring concern in her eyes. He looked around and saw that they were in a large, stone-walled room. He looked back at the Princess, disappointed to see her expression had hardened. The hazel brown of her eyes now looked like polished mahogany.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"What does it look like?" she snapped back.

"Where are we?"

"In the monastery." Her eyes flashed fire. "Nobody ever leaves here. I was a princess and would have become a queen. Instead I'm going to be the sex slave of some aged monk for the rest of my life."

"My friends will rescue us." Peter tried to sound more confident than he really was. He hadn't exactly made a wonderful job of rescuing Selina. He wondered where she was. Hadn't the monk who attacked them said something about her escaping?

Yasmin snorted her derision. "Like you were rescuing Goldenhair? Neither your friends nor my father's army can stand against the monks. If my father orders his men to attack, they'll likely mutiny rather than go to certain death. In any case, you saw the monks going down to attack them. They're probably all dead by now."

Peter could not deny that this was possible. "The monks will get you over my dead body," he vowed. He was only too conscious of his obvious helplessness, but he had never meant any statement more.

"Well, at least I'll have some entertainment before they start making use of me," she said harshly, but then she saw how much that reply hurt him, that she had cruelly mocked his heartfelt sentiment and she relented. "Peter, I'm sorry, I didn't really mean that. Look, we both know you can't protect me, they'll only hurt you terribly if you try. Give it up. We'll both just have to make the best of it." It was the first time she had ever used his name. Her arrogance and self assurance had gone: left behind was a frightened girl, no longer protected by her father's hordes, and the captive of devils who had haunted her land since before she was born. Still, there was more to her change of heart than this: he had not forgotten her split-second decision to stay by his side as the monks bore down on them.

"I still say we're not done for yet," he said. "My friends won't abandon us."

"If they attack here, they're dead. Nobody can beat the monks and the monastery is impregnable. They've often bought slaves from our markets; none have ever been seen again. I don't imagine I'll be the last."

She might well be right, Peter knew: the monks had won every confrontation so far hands down. "I'm sorry, Princess," he said quietly. "We should never have got you involved in all this."

"You were only trying to help your friend," she said gently, then fell silent for a moment. Then: "I wonder what it will be like?"

"What, slavery?"

"Well, that, yes, but also ... I've never done it, you see." She sounded uncharacteristically shy, and Peter suddenly understood.

"You mean you're a virgin?"

She coloured slightly for a moment, then recovered. "If I'd stayed in Glanville, I would have ended up marrying some rich noble." She looked wistful. "Maybe handsome, if I was very lucky. Anyway, princess or not, they wouldn't want soiled goods."

"I suppose not." He wasn't sure what else to say to try to keep her spirits up. She caught his gaze, realised what he was thinking and managed the ghost of a small smile.

"Don't worry, Peter, I'll survive. We both will. At least ..." - she finally brought herself to admit it - "at least we have each other."

"How touching!"

The commanding voice made them both jump. The Master stood in the doorway: somehow he had opened the heavy oak door without either of them hearing it. He regarded them like a man who has bought some new pets, then sauntered over to the hanging Yasmin, who watched him fearfully, her brave words and banter now gone.

"Pretty thing, isn't she?" he said to Peter. "But beautiful female slaves shouldn't be clothed." His hands moved to the back of Yasmin and grasped the tunic she wore at the neckline. With a single tug, despite the toughness of the garments, he ripped them all the way down to her legs. A couple more tears here and there and she tottered, naked except for her shoes.

Peter could not help but stare at her perfect figure: the neat, firm breasts topped by dark, sensual nipples contrasting with her untanned skin, the slim waist, and the thick but neatly trimmed bush of curly dark hair covering her pubes. Her well-nourished figure was full and ripe, curvaceous

and exciting in the extreme. The sight stirred him, but even so he was angry at her molestation. She squirmed and tried ineffectually to hide herself. "You bastard!" Peter grated.

The Master was amused. "Oh, come," he sneered, "you wanted to see her like this all along. Look at the effect the sight is having on you!" He moved over to Peter's side, grasped the waistband of his captive's trousers and pulled. Trousers and pants fell away to reveal Peter's aroused member.

"You see? And you'll get even more excited if we put the two of you a little closer together." He pulled a lever and Peter began to move towards Yasmin. Looking up, the Tiger saw that the metal cuffs on his wrists were connected to a rail and were now moving along that rail, closer to Yasmin's manacles. It did not stop until they were touching each other, their faces only inches apart, her firm young breasts pushing the front of his top, her warm body brushing tantalisingly against his as they both swayed helplessly. Peter could almost feel the heat of her blushing cheeks. "Now you can continue your conversation more convivially," the Master smirked, and left them.

Peter had to admit that the scent of her was intoxicating, her lovely face so near to his overwhelming him, the beautiful bare body bumping into his from time to time as their toes slipped their tenuous hold on the stone floor, were all driving him mad with frustration. He looked into her eyes and her remaining barriers came down at last, and he saw the undisguised love for him which matched his own fierce passion for her. Their faces approached one another, tentatively at first, but then their lips met in a long, silent kiss which released the love they both felt, and which was now in the open.

Vince was also mesmerised, by the lovely young woman who was leading him up the long spiral stairway. Selina moved more freely when she was nude. Her gait was pantherish and the multitudinous red weals which covered her body looked almost like a panther's stripes. They also demonstrated her immense courage and determination: they were undoubtedly extremely painful, every movement of her smooth, taut skin no doubt aggravated them and increased the pain, yet she moved heedless of them nevertheless, her iron will pushing the agony to the back of her mind. Vince badly wanted to find the man who had done this to her - and kill him. As she moved ahead of him on the stairs, he looked up at the superb buttocks, ravaged by the whip but still breathtakingly wonderful, with the most intimate areas between her legs occasionally coming into view as her thighs parted, showing even there the marks of her former captor's crop and cane. Was there any part of her body these bastards had not tortured? And yet she was walking back into Hell, risking recapture and more such torment, for the sake of their friend and comrade, Peter, and a woman she had never even met. That was Selina. Vince felt his sap rising, and tried to force himself to concentrate on the task in hand.

After she had led him through the incredible illusion of the stone wall at the top of the staircase, they stood before the large chapel door that the copper-blond beauty remembered from before. Taking a deep breath, Selina pushed it open and stepped inside, Vince following her.

The monk who had helped her was still there. He showed no surprise at seeing Selina, only slight irritation. As before, her nudity had no effect on him.

"I have told you before that this room is not for such as you."

"I know and I'm sorry," Selina said gently, "but you helped me before and I need your help again."

"That is no concern of mine."

"Please! The Master has taken one of my friends and an innocent girl. We can't fight him alone. You could help us."

"I will not do so. Do not ask further."

"Then you're letting both of us go to our deaths," put in Vince. "Or, in Selina's case, even worse: back into the Master's slavery. You can see how he treated her before." He did not need to point out the many welts covering her body.

“That is no concern of mine,” the monk repeated. “Leave this place. Now.”

He did not raise his voice, but Selina could not miss the finality in it. “All right,” she said dejectedly. He had been their only real hope: without him, their chances were close to zero. “Thank you for your help before,” she added; “I’m sorry we intruded.” But he had turned away and was ignoring them.

They left the room, and moved on.

Peter and Yasmin’s lengthy kiss finally came to an end and there was an unsure silence. Peter finally broke it. “I love you,” he said simply.

“I love you too,” she replied, and their lips met again.

When they parted once more, she looked at him slightly coquettishly and said, “well, will I do?”

“What do you mean?”

“My body: is it good enough for a slave?”

He grinned. “You look fantastic,” he said earnestly.

She beamed, delighted by the compliment. “You realise that no man has ever seen me undressed before?”

It dawned on him that she needed to keep this light. “What a terrible waste,” he commented.

She beamed again. “I’ve never seen one of those in the flesh either, although I know what they’re for,” she said, rubbing her hip against his erect penis. Peter murmured his ecstasy at the feel of her silken flesh against his throbbing cock.

“Too bad I can’t use it in this position,” he murmured.

She looked him squarely and soberly in the eyes. “Peter, are you sure you can’t? I want you to take my virginity, not him.” Her eyes flashed momentarily towards the closed and locked door. “Can’t you take me, the way we’re tied?”

“Yes, I think I can,” he replied, his tone also serious now. “Are you sure that’s what you want?”

She smiled at him. “More than anything else in the world and not just because of him,” she replied.

Words ended. He began to kiss her all over, as far as their bonds allowed. He lingered on her fine neck, managed to reach and nibble her delicate ears, then bent his head down and began to lick and kiss the upper swells of her firm young breasts. With her standing on tiptoe and he bent as far as he could, his tongue could just about reach her nipples, which were growing stiffer by the moment. They were wonderful little things, with small aureoles and a pert cheekiness. She moaned softly as his tongue played on them.

He rubbed his rigid member up and down the insides of her thighs. If they had both been unchained he could have done so much more, and yet because of their limitations the little things he could do seemed to have so much greater effect. They were both already fully aroused and impatient to move on. He guided his prick as best he could to her love entrance, but it was difficult in their position and co-ordinating moves was not easy. At length, she lifted her lovely legs off the floor and wrapped them around his thighs, locking the two of them together and making it easier for him. It must have hurt her, putting the extra weight on her chained arms like that, but she did not seem to care. Gently he pushed his way in and began to thrust until he came to the virginal membrane. She ground her hips in time to him, still wrapped around him like a snake, groaning her encouragement to him. He began to thrust harder, banging against her sealed entrance.

And then there was her little cry of pain as the barrier was breached and he was inside her, and they both revolved in pure pleasure, entwined together, both sets of feet now off the floor and she was matching his urgent thrusts with her own, her gasps and his mixing as they banged together, finally writhing together in a crescendo of a glorious climax after a lengthy, pulsating but still frantic coupling.

Gradually, eventually, they subsided. She lowered her feet to the floor, grateful to relieve the pressure on her arms which had been totally forgotten during the heights of their heat. They remained touching, their cheeks nuzzled together.

"No handsome nobleman is going to want the soiled goods now," he whispered in her ear.

"I don't care," she murmured. "Even if we do get out of here, I only want you. And whatever he does to me now, he can't take this away."

"Oh, but I enjoyed your show so much, I wouldn't want to," came the sneering voice from the doorway. Once again he had entered without either of them knowing.

Peter glared at him. "You saw it all?" he asked, embarrassed not for himself but for Yasmin.

"Oh yes, even when I was not present," he said casually. "The arrogant, aristocratic princess, rutting like some common slut in heat with a common bandit."

Yasmin's face flushed crimson, but after the first shock of what he must have seen she returned his gaze steadfastly. "I don't give a damn," she said fiercely. "I love Peter and I'm proud of what I just did. And whatever you do to me, you can't have my cherry now, can you?"

"He's not going to have you at all," said a clear female voice in the doorway, a voice that made Peter's heart sing.

All three of them turned to the door. Selina stood there, stark naked. Peter had never been gladder to see her. She stood defiantly, heedless of the fierce welts and countless bruises all over her body, poised and ready to attack, sword held threateningly in front of her, weight on her toes, her long trademark mane of curly copper-blond hair flowing over the backs of her taut shoulders. Peter could not help but admire the full frontal beauty of her supple form, the firm breasts, the taut stomach, the pubic hair rather thinner than Yasmin's but somehow infused with just as much pure life and energy as every other inch of her perfect body. And yet, the thought of Yasmin continued to intrude, her slightly differently shaped but just as lovely feminine form, lacking Selina's lithe athleticism but with a sublime, irresistible erotica all of her own, and for the first time in ages he did not feel the familiar pang of sorrow that Selina had chosen Vince, not him, as her mate.

The Master broke the tableau. "So, you've come back to don my chains once more," he leered, "once I relieve you of that pig-sticker you're waving about. First, though, let us dispose of your companion."

How he had seen Vince, who had sneaked around behind him whilst Selina distracted his attention, was a total mystery: he had surely never once had Vince in his line of vision. Nor could any of them say what he did: he just made the slightest gesture, and the leader of the Tigers slumped to the floor, his sword unused.

"Vince!" Selina's cry of anguish went right through Peter and Yasmin. She must have realised immediately that their slim hopes of fighting the Master had gone, but her sole concern was for her lover.

"Oh, don't worry, I only put him to sleep," said the Master casually. "I suspect that I will have much fun with the four of you, once I have disposed of the feeble soldiers gathering outside my castle. As for the death of my acolytes, even that does not matter: I can always get new pupils. You see, nothing can harm me. You are ephemeral, whilst I am forever."

"Then forever must come to an end," said a new voice.

The Master spun around to see the other remaining monk, who had declined to help Selina and Vince such a short time ago. How he had even got into the room baffled Selina: she was still stood in the only doorway. The two monks faced each other. The newcomer's face was screwed up in intense concentration and the Master staggered back, but then he began to recover and in whatever mysterious way they were fighting, he seemed to press his attack. The other monk began to sag.

All this happened in moments. The Master seemed to have regained the initiative and within a couple of seconds he would have won. Selina did not even have time to reach him. She had only one chance. Flipping her sword up out of her usual grip, she caught it like a javelin and hurled it with every ounce of strength she possessed at the back of the Master, who was concentrating entirely on the other monk.

The sword buried itself in the Master's back. He screamed with pain and fury, but despite it embedding itself at least six inches into an area in which several vital organs should be, he did not fall. However, as he half-turned to face Selina, he forgot his main opponent. The spiritual monk regained his poise and frowned in concentration once more, hurling, in whatever arcane way they were fighting, everything he had into one final thrust.

The Master screamed once, turned purple, and fell to the floor. He twitched once and was still.

The single surviving monk of Kimshah slumped exhausted against a wall. Selina sprang to Vince's side. Finding him, as the Master had said, only unconscious, she checked her former captor and torturer. "He's dead," she announced expressionlessly.

She moved to the winch on the wall and began to lower Peter and Yasmin's manacles. Hunting through the Master's robes, she found a key to unlock them. As she turned her back on Yasmin to free Peter, the princess saw close up the deep weals and welts that coloured Selina's back, and marvelled at the incredible fortitude of the Amazon. She also took in the absolutely stunning figure. Still lacking in confidence about her own newly exposed beauty and very conscious of that exposure, she saw how Selina moved unheeding of her own total nudity. As her bonds were released, Yasmin fought the automatic instinct to cover up her body. She would flaunt herself as much as she had to, indeed do whatever she had to, in order to win Peter, despite the presence of this blonde goddess.

But Peter made his choice clear immediately anyway. He hugged Yasmin tightly to him and they kissed passionately. Selina diplomatically saw to their saviour, who seemed unharmed.

At length, Peter and Yasmin rejoined the rest of the world. Yasmin faced Selina, but it was Selina who spoke first.

"You must be Princess Yasmin. I'm sorry they involved you in all this. I would never have allowed it."

Yasmin favoured her with a warm smile. "So you're the famous Goldenhair," she returned pleasantly. "I think I understand why the Tigers were all prepared to risk their lives for you. Don't worry about me: I haven't come out of all this empty-handed." She put her arm around Peter's waist.

Selina smiled. "Good for Peter and you," she said. Then she looked the royal beauty up and down, rating her as drop-dead gorgeous. "I see he's already got you wearing his favourite sort of outfit." She looked down at her own bare form and added wryly, "I don't know why we ever go to the trouble of dressing up for them."

"Nor do I," Peter joined in, "particularly since it always takes hours. Nude is much better."

Yasmin was trying without much success to stop herself from blushing, but she wanted to join in with the banter, to be a part of them. "He's road-tested me as well," she managed to get out, although the brief statement deepened her blushes considerably.

Selina had noticed the couple of drops of cum on the royal thighs. "No, no, no, girl," she replied in mock disapproval. "You've road-tested him. I've got to teach you how to keep these men wrapped around your little finger."

Yasmin laughed, the best real laugh she had experienced in years. These people were so much more genuine than the stuck-up royal court, where each person just tried to curry favour with her father in the hope of advancement. "I'm willing to learn," she rejoined and was gratified beyond measure when Selina laughed and put her arm around her. Yasmin returned the hug, although she was careful to only gently touch Selina, since there was hardly any space on the blonde beauty's back not covered with welts.

"You must leave here now."

The monk's voice cut into their conversation. He appeared to have fully recovered, although this was the first time he had spoken since the Master died. "There are still hazards in this place which you could not conceive. Your friend" - he nodded at Vince - "will recover soon. The other women incarcerated here will of course also be set free." He turned to Yasmin. "Princess, please convey my apologies to your father for the attack on his men. I regret the deaths deeply. You will never be troubled by Kimshah again, nor do I wish contact with the rest of the world. The

secret entrance will be sealed and I am self-supporting here. The monastery will be again what it was always meant to be: a place of contemplation and study.”

Selina faced him soberly. “I can’t thank you enough for your help. When you turned us down, I thought we were as good as dead.”

“And yet you carried on just the same. I always intended to assist you from the moment I saw you return, but I could not tell you. The Master would have seen it in your minds and been alerted.”

Despite everything, the short blonde hairs rose on the back of Selina’s neck. Like most people, she knew a little of the technological capabilities of the world before the Final War, but she had never heard of many of the wonders the monks seemed capable of. “How can you do such things?” she asked.

His face clouded. “You do not wish to know,” he said quietly.

Selina felt the need to change the subject. “It’s a custom of the Tigers, a custom I started actually, that when you save a female Tiger’s life, she offers you her body. If you want, I’d be happy to repay you that way.”

Yasmin coloured once more, then took a deep breath. “I’m not a Tiger,” she began tremulously, “but ...”

The monk interrupted her. “I thank both of you for your offers, but you must all leave - now.”

He took them to one of the flying sleds, Peter carrying the still limp form of Vince. He had replaced his trousers, then lent his top to Yasmin, whose own clothes were hopelessly shredded, so that she now wore in effect a short miniskirt. Selina remained nude, although she had regained her scabbard and sword belt, which she did not put on: it would have rubbed her welts needlessly. The sled lifted them over the monastery walls, then descended towards the warily advancing troops; for each of them except the sleeping Vince, the experience was one they would long remember. A short distance away from them, it came to earth and they alighted. As soon as they got off, it began to rise back towards its owner. They began to move towards the army: there was no way to evade them and Yasmin had promised them safe passage. At that point, Vince began to stir.

Selina was quickly by his side as Peter lowered him carefully to the ground. “What happened?” he asked groggily.

“We’re safe, lover,” Selina said to him. “That first monk we saw helped us, the Master’s dead and we’re outside the monastery, with Yasmin’s father’s army coming towards us. She’s promised us safety.”

Vince snapped awake. “But that’s not ...”

His voice trailed off, but Selina didn’t need to hear the rest. Now they were right on top of them, with no chance to run or defend themselves, she could see the insignia on the soldiers uniforms.

The insignia of the city of Torton.

CHAPTER SEVEN

They were caught totally unprepared.

Only Selina and Vince had been armed when they left Kimshah. However, Vince being still out cold and Selina having not put on her sword belt and needing both arms to look after him, Yasmin was holding both their weapons. Before they even knew what was happening, all four of them were seized. Resistance was impossible.

Yasmin's old temper flared as they were brought into the presence of General Symons. "I am the Princess Yasmin of Glanville! Let us go immediately or my father will kill you all!"

"You're not wearing the finery of a princess," Symons observed, noting the shapely legs protruding from below the short tunic, but his attention was focused not on her but on the other captured woman. His eyes quickly noted the copper-blond hair, the superb naked figure and the tell-tale brand, the simple letter "S" burned into her outer thigh. It was even a Torton brand: the use of that particular letter and that particular spot on the body was fairly uniform, but the style of this one definitely came from Torton. There could be no doubt: this was the escaped slave Selina, who had killed King Michael's only brother. The king would be over the moon to see her again, although the feeling would surely not be mutual.

Morton Anderson hastened to join them. Yasmin, although she intensely disliked him, was under the circumstances relieved to see him. "Ambassador," she said haughtily, "kindly tell this man who I am."

"She is the Princess, General," Morton confirmed. He too admired the legs beneath the tunic far shorter than anything Yasmin had ever deigned to wear in public before, but he tried to diplomatically disguise his gaze.

Symons' look grew even more acidic: this was a complication he could do without. He signalled to the men to release her, just in time to avoid a diplomatic incident as her father and his generals joined them.

The overjoyed king of Glanville and his daughter embraced. Yasmin, however, was more concerned for the others. "Daddy, these three people saved my life," she said, choosing to omit a lot of the story. "Make the soldiers let them go!"

King James hesitated. He always gave his daughter anything she desired, but he was not in a strong position right now. The Torton army dwarfed the remnants of his own forces and he had become well aware how much they wanted this golden-haired girl, and why. On top of that, the territorial ambitions of King Michael were well known and this could be an ideal moment for them to subjugate Glanville's battered defenders. Besides, the Tigers had robbed Glanville merchants of their human stock on several occasions.

"Perhaps, gentlemen, we can compromise here," Morton Anderson said ingratiatingly. "I am afraid that the escaped slave Selina must be returned to her owner, King Michael - I am sure you agree that there are clear rights of property here - but we have no interest in the two men. As a gesture of friendship, we will turn them over to you."

Yasmin protested furiously, but her father knew he could do nothing more. Vince and Peter's protests were also ignored, although it took half a dozen men to hold them. Selina, white-faced, said nothing as she was half led, half dragged away, oblivious of the numerous male hands seizing the opportunity to feel her bare, vulnerable, battered body. The Glanville men had to hold Vince and Peter until the Torton army was almost out of sight. Symons lost no time in departing before any further complications arose, and Morton Anderson went with him, intending to do his best to claim the full credit for Selina's capture.

With the Torton men gone, King James began to reassert himself. Relieved to see them go, only now did he transfer his attention to the men they had left behind. "And who are you?" he demanded.

Yasmin moved to Peter's side before either of them could answer. "This one is the man I am going to marry, father," she announced rather formally, stunning just about everybody. "But before that, we are going to rescue Selina, even if there are only three of us."

King James had heard enough. "You're going nowhere except home, young lady," he said firmly. "As for this nonsense about marriage, we'll discuss that later."

Yasmin seemed to deflate. "Yes, daddy," she said meekly and climbed onto the horse one of the soldiers offered her. "But these men did save me: I'll tell you the full story later. Give them horses and a sword for Peter and let them go: we owe them that much."

King James was unconvinced about that, suspecting that these men, one of whom was surely the Lion, leader of the Tigers, were somehow involved in Yasmin's abduction in the first place, but it was easier to accommodate her. Besides, he would be happy to see them go too, especially with her raving about marrying the other one. He gave them two good horses, restored Vince's and Selina's swords to them and watched them gallop off without a word.

And then groaned with despair as Yasmin, like the expert horse-rider he had forgotten she was, raced off after them at breakneck speed.

"Hold up, Vince!"

Peter brought his horse level with Vince's. "No point in just charging in there: we're outnumbered about two hundred to one and that's pretty bad odds even for us."

Vince nodded. "And don't look now, but another complication is about to join us," he replied.

Peter turned to see Yasmin racing towards them. She had caught her father's men completely unprepared, but the a detachment of the Glanville army led by Thompson was just beginning to follow her.

"You didn't think I'd let you go, did you?" Yasmin yelled as she caught them up.

Frankly, Vince had hoped just that. He had nothing against Yasmin and if she and Peter wanted to get hitched in the unlikely event of them getting out of all this in one piece, then that was fine by him. Right now, it just meant that the Glanville army was after them once more. Still, what was done was done and she clearly wasn't going to take no for an answer. Well, he couldn't fault her spirit and spirit was the anvil the Tigers had been forged on.

They headed into the woods to shake their pursuers. That eventually done, the pace slackened. Peter observed, "and just when things were getting, if no easier, at least a little simpler."

Vince had to laugh. It was incredible that they were still alive, although the odds against them were getting, if anything, worse than ever. "I have difficulty remembering who is on our side at any particular time," he replied lightly. They both knew that whilst he stayed in that Devil-may-care mood, his mind was kept away from the horrors Selina might be suffering.

"Well, right now it's simple," Peter explained: "nobody."

"So what's the plan?" Yasmin asked, determined to fit in.

"Plan? What plan?" asked Peter. "I thought we were making this up as we go along."

"As usual," Vince added. Still, their first task was clear. "We need to contact the other Tigers. We're well past the rendezvous time, so they should have headed back home, but we could intercept them where they were due to meet the others. You get them and we'll meet up further along. Better take your young lady with you."

"You can forget that," the princess said sharply. "I didn't come along just to be farmed off at the first opportunity!"

"Looks like we've got a firebrand here," Peter said, amused.

Vince scowled. "Now look," he began irritably, but Peter interrupted him, still in the same light banter: "and I don't think I can safely leave her with an old lecher like you, so I think you'd better go."

Vince looked as if he was about to explode. "Now look," he repeated, but again got no further.

"No, you look," Peter said calmly but forcefully. "If I leave you on your own, you'll do something stupid like wade into their whole army single-handed. That will help Selina about as

much as giving fish an umbrella to keep off the rain. Yasmin and I will shadow them, while you go and get help.”

You could have put a kettle on Vince’s head and it would have boiled in record time, but he had not founded and led the Tigers for all this time without using his considerable intelligence. Peter was right. Vince glowered at his friend for a long moment, but then conceded the argument. Combining their sketchy knowledge of the territory ahead with Yasmin’s, they worked out where to meet. Then, without a backward glance at the other two, Vince rode off.

Peter watched him go, troubled. Like Vince, he was worried sick about what Selina was going through right now, as if she hadn’t already endured more than enough. If they could not rescue her, her fate in Torton would be indescribably terrible.

The Torton army had moved well ahead of its supply train and now met up with it. In anticipation of the capture of Selina and on the orders of King Michael, the slower-moving supply caravan had one particular horse-drawn trailer. It was a flat, raised wooden platform, with a number of metal eye-hooks worked into it and a wooden pole at one side, also with plenty of eyes for restraint devices. Leather wrist and ankle bracelets were fastened to the helpless Selina and she was tied to the pole.

Before the convoy moved off once more, she was given a dozen lashes with a long, snaking whip. Selina screamed with pain each time the interminable leather bit into her ravaged back as she hugged the pole, seeking to draw even the most minute comfort from it. She had been whipped before, many times during her slavery, but never when her body had been carrying even half as many wounds of torture as it now bore. After the whipping, a dozen fresh, long red lines snaked around her body to add to those wounds.

The soldiers watched and cheered each stroke. Torton’s royalty were no more popular than any other despots with their impoverished foot soldiers, but what red-blooded man does not thrill to the sight of a beautiful and naked young woman writhing under the whip?

They released her from the pole and chained her up on the floor of the flat wagon, her arms and legs well spread, leaving her to stare up at the hot sun and feel the rough hot planks aggravating her lacerated back. “As a common slave of Torton,” one officer told her, “your role in life should be to satisfy the men of the city. Seems you’ve been neglecting your duty recently and the King has ordered that you should make up for lost time.” He smiled with undisguised lust and delight. “Each of the hundreds of men here are just dying to taste your honey box and they will do, one by one, before we get home. I’m the first.”

The convoy was already moving off once more, but thanks to the flat wagon they could have their way with her whilst on the move. The officer began to take his clothes off. Selina watched sadly. As a slave, she had been raped far more times than she could remember, but that was a long time ago now. For nearly two years now, only Vince had been allowed to sample her intimate treasures. Even whilst a captive at Kimshah, she had managed to evade being ravished. But now, with her legs chained very wide apart and the warm breeze on her exposed genitalia reminding her depressingly just how vulnerable she was, the bad old days were about to start all over again. No longer was she Goldenhair, the legend of the feared and admired Tigers: now she was once more just Selina, a common slave.

And with the first touch of the officer’s vile hands at her sacred gateway, feeling and tickling her curly blonde pubic hairs, his very visible penis starting to swell with excitement, the wretched sensations of those days returned in full.

Peter tried to put himself in the distressingly bright Thompson’s shoes and think as the Glanville captain was thinking. Thompson had not made contact with the Torton forces. Why should he? The Torton army would have no interest in helping him find Yasmin. Possibly, given

the chance, they might even take her themselves: a royal hostage would be a very effective way of bringing Glanville under their influence. So Thompson would work alone and since he would know that the Tigers' only intention was to free Selina and that would tie Vince and company to the Torton army as it made its slow way home, he could afford to wait. Also, Thompson would not trust Symons too much: if the Glanville scout force became a nuisance, the Torton army could wipe it out without much difficulty: the captain had probably opted for a small group of men for mobility and speed, but it meant the odds were around ten to one against him in battle with the Tortonese. Peter, of course, would have been pleased if the odds against his own band could have been reduced to anything as luxurious as ten to one.

So how the Hell were they going to rescue the love of his leader's life from all this?

Selina's chains clanked as she writhed on the rough boards, almost crushed by yet another large, sweating man.

She could feel his thick cock inside her, thrusting away. Weak gasps of pain and arousal escaped her as she struggled for breath. Yes, she was aroused: after a dozen or so pricks forcing their way inside her - she had lost count, but thought it was about that many so far - that was not surprising. Besides, she knew from awful experience just a few years ago that it was best for her to let herself get warmed up, so that she lubricated herself and eased their passage into her. It didn't mean to say that she enjoyed it.

However, hate it though she might, she was doing her best to let her old slave training take over. Selina's reasons for this were simple. Back at the monastery, it had seemed highly unlikely that she would be rescued, or be able to escape. Resuming a life of slavery had seemed unavoidable. Now, however, even that was not an option: she was being taken back to Torton, she knew, to be tortured to death. She had to either escape, or die horribly. Right at this moment, there was no chance of getting away, but sooner or later a chance would come. Her nude body bore evidence of many of the whippings and other tortures she had endured during this awful adventure, and they had left her weak, incredibly sore, and drained both physically and mentally. Thinking it was all over after the Master's death, she had relaxed and let some of her exhaustion claim her. She had to do everything she could to avoid any more weakening beatings and if that meant co-operating in the multiple rape of herself, then so be it. Besides, for all her bravery, she shrunk from the thought of further chastisements inflicted on her battered but still lovely form, as there did not seem to be a single spot on her which was not acutely tender.

There was another thought in her mind, too. Twenty-first century men were cruel, selfish and ruthless and not one of the Torton soldiers so far had shown the least concern for her feelings as they had ravaged her. Nonetheless, she knew that despite being much the worse for wear right now, she remained very beautiful and few men enjoyed killing a pretty girl. She might, by doing her best to please them despite her wounded condition, plant just the faintest seeds in their minds. Should she later come up against one of them in combat, just the slightest hesitation on their part might make the difference between life and death. And Selina wanted to live, to be with Vince once more, to revel in the spirit of the Tigers and glorious adventure.

So she acted as Selina the slave once more. Once a slave, always a slave: some months after she had won her freedom, a man she had voluntarily slept with had observed to her, "you make love like a slave". He had confirmed what she had suspected: her experiences and training had left her with a deeply ingrained submissive streak, as permanent and indelible as her brand. It might be buried deep when she was Selina the warrior, but it would never leave her, and surfaced from time to time. It came to the fore now and she let it rise, encouraged it even. At all costs, she must avoid further beatings.

Still, the rapes themselves were having a debilitating effect on her. She was growing sore and stiff as prick after prick forced its way inside her. She had been able to spare her vagina a couple of them, at the cost of sucking them until they came in her mouth. Some seemed happy to accept that: to them, one of her orifices was as good as another, but others withdrew before she

could make them come and insisted on using her most intimate channel. One of them she had even been able to satisfy without either option, by wrapping her firm young breasts around his swelling cock and, with the aid of her hands, tossing him off without further ado. Some men were tit enthusiasts, she knew, the feel of her soft and welled mounds on either side of his throbbing weapon was enough to beat his rather limited self-control. His hot white semen had spurted revoltingly all over her face.

Selina grimaced at the memory and turned her attention to the very young soldier eagerly peeling off his trousers as he looked down at her prostrate, chained form. Trying to hide his inexperience beneath a brash grin, he advanced on her. She took a deep breath and turned her concentration to the all too familiar task in hand ...

Riding furiously, Vince caught the other two contingents of the Tigers just before they were about to move off. Their delight in seeing him was muted by the news that Selina had escaped from one awful doom only to get herself into an even worse mess.

Vince quickly selected half a dozen men to return with him, leaving out the returned Gary, now known to the Glanville contingent. They were about to move off when a female voice cried “wait!”

All heads turned to look at one of the recently liberated slaves, now clothed in garments bought from a local village with money taken from the trader. She wasn’t a youngster, early to mid-thirties maybe, but still handsome. She spoke quickly. “I might be able to help: I know that route to Torton very well. My father and I we used to drive cattle between the towns there before I was enslaved.”

Vince hesitated. That area was not one he knew, and local knowledge could come in handy, even if it was out of date: this woman had been a slave for years. “Well ...” he began, but he was interrupted by a lovely ginger-haired younger girl, another of the freed slaves.

“Please, master, if my mother is going, let me come too!”

“Hells bells!” Vince grumbled. “Isn’t anybody going to let me finish a sentence today?” But he saw the girl cringe and softened. “I’m not your master, girl: nobody is any more. You’re free now.”

“I’m sorry, mast - er, um, sir,” the girl said in some confusion. “I’m just so used to it.”

“Please excuse my daughter,” the older woman broke in. “She’s been a slave since birth and the training and habits aren’t easy to break. My name’s Carol, hers is Angel.”

Vince considered, then admitted, “we could use a guide. Somebody give this woman a horse.”

“Me too,” insisted Angel firmly.

“God almighty,” Vince said, “she’s not doing too badly at fighting her training!”

Angel lowered her face slightly and looked up at him through her wide baby eyes. “Master,” she added coquettishly and the whole group roared with laughter and released tension.

“All right,” Vince bellowed. “Find her a horse, someone. But nobody else!” he added firmly as others pressed.

Angel’s heart leaped. This new life was unbearably wonderful: a man, a leader and a great warrior, speaking kindly to her instead of just slapping her and commanding her to spread her legs; and she, dressed, and in more than just revealing rags, able to do what she wanted and to make a difference. Yet the woman who had helped make it all possible was in terrible trouble. Well, Angel would do everything she could, including giving her life if need be. The legendary Goldenhair just had to be set free.

Right now, Selina did not feel too legendary.

There was no shelter on the flat trailer on which she was being carried and the sun had been beating down relentlessly on her naked form; only now was its power starting to wane as the evening drew on. She was stiff and sore from more fuckings than she could count: both her vagina and by now her ass had received their share of male intruders. She hated being buggered and had fought to keep the bile down when they had penetrated her there, but she had told herself that each man accommodated there was one less to spare her vagina, leaving her that little bit less stiff and sore when her chance for freedom came, to say nothing of relieving her of a little of the now constant pain. She had taken as many of the men in her mouth as she possibly could, but unfortunately the majority of them preferred to seek their final satisfaction below her trim waistline.

Right now, though, there were no men taking advantage of her. They were too busy setting up camp for the night, just outside a walled town. Some contingents of men had been sent to the town to purchase some supplies, and a number of the officers had also gone into town to disport themselves, but she quickly saw that she should not get her hopes up: plenty of men remained and sharp look-outs were being kept. This army was evidently not a slack one.

But as soon as the tasks of making camp were completed, her brief respite came to an end. Another man climbed up onto the platform and started removing his trousers. Selina licked her dry lips and prepared herself for another invasion, and more after that: a queue for her involuntary services was starting to form once more.

The Tigers watched the flow of men going into the town. Using the binoculars, Yasmin identified Morton Anderson and explained his position as ambassador to Vince.

"He's a horrible, oily little creep," was her opinion of him.

"Not someone you invite to your birthday parties, then?"

"Ugh, no. He'd like to come, though: he always looks at me as if he's mentally undressing me."

"You think he has the hots for you?"

"I'm sure of it." Yasmin was still not used to the cruder phrases used outside the royal court, but she could guess what that one meant.

Vince filed that piece of information away, wondering if he might be able to use it. He panned the binoculars around the town's perimeter, and spotted something. "Hello," he said thoughtfully, and handed the glasses to Peter. "Take a look," he invited.

"The Glanville commander," Peter agreed. "On his own, too. Do you think he's going to try to meet the Torton general?"

"I doubt it," Vince said. "He's using a different entrance, on the far side of town conveniently out of sight of the Torton mob, and he's alone. It seems a clandestine entry. Any thoughts, Princess?"

"Yes," Yasmin replied. "There are several prominent traders and businessmen here who are friendly towards Glanville. He may have gone to ask them if they've heard anything about me."

"Any of them own bars or brothels?"

"One or two, yes."

"Well, since the troops are most likely headed for that sort of recreation, those are the people he might ask, to see if there's been any loose talk or to listen out for any. Hmm. What's this guy like?"

"Captain Thompson? I don't really know him very well," answered Yasmin, "but he seems very earnest. Intelligent, too, I think."

"Trustworthy?"

"He's a man of honour, I would say, yes."

Vince pondered for a moment, then said, "I think we might do well to pay a visit to this city ourselves." He turned to Carol. "Do you know the layout of the place?"

"Yes," she said confidently. Turning to Yasmin, she added, "if you give me the names of these places, Princess, I can get you there."

“One problem, Vince,” Peter observed: “we have to get in. All the gates are guarded and chances are the guards will want bribes. We didn’t bring any money with us, and there’s nobody around here to rob.”

“I’d already thought of that,” replied Vince soberly. “I don’t like it, but ...” He looked at Angel, who suddenly became aware of his gaze. “Are you branded, young lady?”

“Yes, master - I mean, yes, sir.”

“I don’t like to ask this of you, but most guards will let folks through in return for a quickie with a pretty slave girl.”

Angel didn’t hesitate: it was an absolute delight just to be asked, instead of ordered. “Of course, sir: no problem.”

“Stop calling me sir,” Vince rumbled, embarrassed about having to ask the girl to do something so distasteful, “and thank you. I owe you one.”

“I owe you a great deal more,” the girl replied soberly.

Yasmin was nauseated and outraged by the idea of guards demanding this sort of bribe. “Do Glanville guards accept similar enticements?” she asked.

“Yep,” replied Peter simply.

Yasmin was about to say that she would deal with them on her return home, then remembered that at this moment she no longer had a home. Instead, she said, “it’s not fair just asking this girl to do the dirty work.” She took a deep breath and said with clear reluctance, “I’m prepared to do my share.”

“Princess!” cried Angel, shocked. “It’s not a job for a high-born lady like you! Leave it to me: I’m used to it.”

“Yes, I don’t think you’d pass very easily for a slave, Princess,” smiled Vince. Still, despite himself, he was becoming more impressed with Yasmin as time went on: although he doubted that she would be able to really act as a slave, her willingness to offer herself was impressive. “Besides,” he added, “young Peter here would probably gut the first guard to touch you. Come on, let’s get going.”

Angel padded along naked behind the horses, having to hurry to keep up the pace.

It was almost a relief to be nude once more. The teenager had found the clothes she had been wearing to be stifling and unnatural. Oh, she would adjust in time and it was wonderful to feel free, to not be on show like a piece of meat. But it was all so strange and right now, though, they needed her naked, so naked she was.

They needed her: that was such a wonderful concept. She had no desire to go with the guards, but if it helped the cause, she wouldn’t hesitate. She might not be Goldenhair, but she would make them proud of her by playing her part.

She felt a rough jerk on the crude rope collar they had put around her neck. They must be in sight of the sentries. Vince had warned her that he couldn’t go soft on her when they might be being watched, and she had assured him that was all right. She could take it.

The others all on horseback, she ran behind them, coughing a little in the dust kicked up by the steeds.

The party came to a halt outside the walls. Vince dismounted and Angel could see him talking to the two wary guards. A third sentry watched from a distance, making any thought of overpowering the guards useless. The two guards, both fat and piggy types, looked towards her a couple of times. She tried to look as alluring as possible without actually looking eager: she sucked her tummy in, kept her shoulders back so that her breasts thrust out and put an expression of pained innocence on her face.

After a short while, Vince gestured her over, the sort of imperious signal she was well used to. She approached hurriedly. She could see the guards drinking in her nubile form. Vince nodded briefly in their direction and said tersely, “entertain them, and be quick about it. We’re in a hurry to find a place for the night.”

He had barely finished speaking before the nearest guard grabbed her slim wrist with a grunt of lust and dragged her towards him. As he pressed his slobbish lips to hers, she could see the other one already loosening his trousers. The one who had hold of her pulled her down to the dusty ground and began to part her legs. As she felt him pushing between them, she waited for the other one to come in reach and then she reached out and grasped his erect dick and pulled it towards her mouth. With a grunt of enthusiasm, he let her pull him in.

She could feel the one between her legs forcing his way in, felt the thick cock inside her and beginning to thrust violently. She concentrated her mind on the other one inside her mouth. Breathing as best she could through her nose, she hastened to bring him off. The other one was already well aroused: such trysts as these were always quick, in case the men's supervisor happened along. The grunts of the two men became gasps as they neared climax.

Out of the corner of her eye, Angel saw her mother watching her, the older woman trying to keep her face impassive. It was far from the first time that her mum had been a spectator to Angel being violated, even by two men and Angel had spoken the truth when she said to the princess that she was used to such treatment: even though she was still young, she had been had so many times, pretty much ever since she had passed puberty. This time, however, although the guards didn't know it, she was doing it for a purpose.

Carol, it was true, had seen her daughter ravished more times than she could remember. She watched, reflecting how her only child had suffered so much through her own involuntary descent into slavery; but then, as she had reflected more than once before, if she hadn't been enslaved, she would not have had Angel at all. It was strange, how the darkest of events had brought with it such a joy as her beloved daughter. Perhaps there was a kindly god somewhere.

The two men climaxed fairly close together and Angel felt hot, salty cum spurt into her mouth, then moments later a second load jetting deep into her channel. One by one, the two men withdrew with satisfied sighs. Angel licked the last drops of cum from the one in her mouth, then bent to similarly lick clean the second man. Such, she knew, was expected of her as a slave; indeed, she had been trained to do it almost from her first time, so that it seemed a natural finish to the sex act. The twin usage of her had begun to arouse her involuntarily and their abrupt exit had left her rather unsatisfied; this was something else she was well used to, something that, until her recent tryst with the Tiger by the pool after her emancipation, she had taken for granted. Only now did she realise how different this was to true love-making. Never mind: they had needed her to do it and she had done it.

The Tigers had discreetly turned away during the performance, except Vince who had needed to watch to make sure Angel had not been harmed. As soon as the guards were licked clean, he grasped the rope leading from Angel's collar and pulled her rather roughly along as they hurried through the gates. As she passed by him, however, unseen by the guards as they concentrated on doing up their trousers, he slipped his hand into hers and gave it a squeeze to show his gratitude.

To Angel, who had never had somebody be grateful to her before, it was the most precious of messages, one she would have quite happily fucked half the city for. As she hurried along, it was as if her bare feet walked on the air rather than on the packed dirt.

It didn't take long to locate both the men Vince was looking for. Now came the harder part.

Morton Anderson relaxed in his chair and contemplated the serving wench dancing on a table nearby. She was dressed only in flimsy rags and the raucous calls from the men avidly watching her were pressurising her to remove even them. Reluctantly, she was slowly doing so. She looked barely sixteen, certainly she still retained a modicum of shyness and shame: evidently, she had not been a slave for long. In fact, he had the impression that she was not yet even branded. He had already seen numerous glimpses of her thighs under the tiny skirt she wore and he saw no mark. Of course, not all owners had their slaves branded in the same place, but it was fairly commonplace. Indeed, a few did not brand at all, but that was foolhardy: it encouraged escape attempts. Or the girl could have been free, but very poor and forced into this job. It was a matter of

indifference to him. He looked at the slim, girlish figure, deciding she needed another year or two to develop into something really interesting.

“Master?”

He turned to identify the nervous female voice which had addressed him. Now this was an excellent sight. The owner of the voice was naked and his experienced eye noted the deep, lifetime brand, the faint marks of a rope on her pretty neck, the hands kept carefully away from obscuring the view of her most personal areas and the dust and dirt on the bare feet, indicating that she had been barefoot before entering this den of iniquity. Of course, his gaze lingered rather longer on the ginger blonde hair framing the lovely young face, the soft but firm breasts, the almost ephemeral curls of gentle light hair which covered her Mound of Venus at the junction of her long, shapely legs. He wondered if her owner would mind him paying a visit to that inviting delta. Whether or not the girl herself would mind, of course, was quite irrelevant.

“Yes?” he queried.

“If it pleases you, master, my mistress would like to speak with you. She’s waiting at a house nearby.”

Morton was intrigued. He could not recall knowing any free women in this town, although he was familiar enough with the fleshpots and a few of the female slaves. However, his concentration was being rather distracted by this lovely young teenager. If her owner wanted something from him, the least she could do in exchange would be to loan the slave to him for a short while. Few owners objected to such things: after all, it was no skin off their noses.

“Lead on, then,” he said, draining the last of his drink and then drinking in the sight of Angel’s pert young bottom as she led him away, trying her best to ignore the occasional male hand which darted out and stroked her lovely flanks.

They left the bar and she hurried along several side streets before coming to a house largely in darkness. Morton was beginning to wonder whether it was wise to come alone, but he hadn’t wanted one of the Torton military oafs around cramping his style. At any rate, the house seemed respectable enough. She led him into a side room and left him to wait. He regretted her departure, but moments later a new and familiar face, even lovelier to his eyes, entered the room.

“Good evening, Ambassador Anderson,” said Yasmin smoothly.

She was the last person that Morton had expected to see: he had left her safely reunited with her father. However, he was not entirely without diplomatic finesse and recovered his composure almost immediately. “Good evening, Princess,” he returned with equal suavity. She had changed from the borrowed clothes she had worn on her descent from Kimshah - a pity as her extremely shapely royal legs were now covered - but her new attire looked far more functional than royal. Curiouser and curiouser.

“No doubt you are wondering what I am doing here,” she said.

“Indeed I am, madam,” he replied pompously. “I was not aware that your father maintained a house here.”

“We don’t. This house is that of a friend of Glanville, who kindly and at very short notice allowed me to use it.”

Morton nodded and then an idea occurred to him. “Does his majesty your father know you are here, your Highness?”

She shook her head, confirming his guess. “I am here to help free the woman your army holds captive: the one you call Selina.”

Morton recalled the scene just before the Torton army had left the battleground. “I regret, Princess, that is impossible,” he said gently.

She locked her eyes to his. “If you will help me, I will give you anything I can in return, or do anything for you.” Her eyes held his. “Anything,” she repeated slightly breathily, her meaning clear.

Morton felt his pulse racing, his throat dry. Even Angel’s alluring charms were forgotten now, because he had long coveted this beautiful young woman: her inaccessibility itself had fed and nurtured his desire. “Princess,” he began, “I cannot possibly ...”

She had moved closer to him, her presence and faint scent overwhelming him. Had he been fully alert, he might have seen the look of revulsion she could not entirely mask, but in his confused and excited state her disguise just about held. "You need not be seen to do anything: just smuggle to her the key to her chains and perhaps a weapon, even just a dagger."

"But I ..."

She had moved closer still. "You will not lose by her escape: General Symons will take the blame and you will still get credit for finding her in the first place. My father and I can convey to your king that you were very clever in spotting her." She moved back from him for a moment, and looked him in the eye. "Conversely, we could say that you had all the information for ages and failed to make the connection, or even that you knew who she was but didn't bother to let on, using the knowledge for your own gains. That would get you into a little trouble, would it not?"

Morton went hot and cold and nodded helplessly. Where Selina was concerned, King Michael was seldom rational and would not look for proof of such an allegation before he took action, especially if it came from a royal source. That action could easily involve separating Morton's head from his body.

Yasmin moved closer. "But I am sure it will not come to that," she purred, knowing the twin enticements had snared him now.

"It will be difficult," he said thickly.

"I am sure you will manage," she soothed him and then started moving back. "There is a knife on the table over there if you can get it to her, but the keys are a must. It also has to be by first light tomorrow, before your party moves off."

Morton nodded. He had sufficient seniority to insert himself on the long list of men waiting to fuck the unfortunate girl tonight, which he would enjoy considerably in any case. Actually the whole thing presented fewer problems than he was making out, not that the princess needed to know that. "Very well," he said with assurance.

"Good. I will then contact you to arrange to fulfil my side of the agreement." He could now detect her lack of enthusiasm.

He cleared his throat. "I think a little something on account would be reasonable."

Her reluctance was now clear. "No," she said firmly: "later."

"How can I be sure, my lady, that you will keep your promise?"

Her eyes blazed. "I am the Princess Royal of Glanville," she said formally and fiercely. "My word should be enough." She still looked worried that she might lose him, however, so with one smooth motion she whipped her tunic over her head and off, revealing the unrestrained and beautiful twin globes that he had often dreamt of but never seen. They seemed like two white doves, nestling serenely on her chest. As if in a dream, he reached out to touch them: she turned her face away, but held her body in position and flinched only slightly as his fat fingers made contact with the flawless alabaster of her skin. He squeezed slightly, feeling the soft velvety flesh yield beneath his fingers. Only after enduring long seconds of this did she pull away from him; he was far too entranced with her bared loveliness to notice how she struggled to keep from being sick with disgust.

"You will have the rest later," she said with an effort. "I swear."

And with that she was gone.

Back in the bar, soon after delivering Morton Anderson to Yasmin, Angel made similar contact with Captain Thompson, who had fortunately not arrived until after she had lured Morton Anderson away.

She had been very nervous when she had entered the bar for the first time; not, strangely enough, because she was naked going into a roomful of coarse men she did not know, but because she had never actually been inside a city bar before: her old village contained nothing like it. Within a minute of entering, however, she had relaxed, her nervousness gone, because several of the men had, as was the intention, mistaken her for a tavern wench and given her a quick grope. It

was repugnant, but at least she understood it: she might not know bars, but Angel knew men. After that, it had been fairly easy: ignore the intrusive hands as she moved between the crowded tables, get to the man Vince had pointed out to her, and bring him away with her. Morton Anderson had come without difficulty, and now it was Captain Thompson's turn.

Once again, the smell of beer breath and unwashed male bodies hit her as she entered. In a corner, a male slave wearing only shorts pedalled furiously away, his motion turning a fan which extracted some of the fumes from the place. If he slackened, a whip was hung conveniently nearby which anyone could take to him. In the cities, it was the female slaves who were in demand, whereas in the countryside a good male labourer was of much greater value: hence, traders made their profit buying pretty slave girls such as herself in the rural areas and selling them in the cities, and taking male slaves the other way.

Angel noticed, as she made her way through the crowd, that the unfortunate tavern dancer was now as naked as herself. She had a chance to study the poor girl more fully, because as she was making her way towards Thompson, a rough male hand grasped her wrist and she felt the other hand on her bottom, feeling its satiny smoothness. She could have pulled away, but Angel thought it far wiser to stay until the owner of the hands had groped his fill: if she didn't and he complained to the landlord, she might be uncovered as not being one of the tavern girls before she could complete her mission and leave. As long as he did not ask her to get him a drink - but his mug seemed full already.

To take her mind off the fingers starting to invade her rear, Angel looked again at the dancing girl. She must have been a year or so younger than Angel's seventeen summers, and bereft of her clothes wasn't really that enticing: her boyish chest lacked weight and she was too slim and scrawny, almost bony. She also looked highly miserable with her situation. Perhaps that was understandable, dancing naked on a table in front of a roomful of jeering, lust-filled men and yet Angel herself would have been far less uncomfortable at the girl's age. The girl was certainly a slave - Angel could clearly see the brand high on her upper leg which had previously been hidden by her skimpy clothes - but her discomfort led Angel to theorise that she was recently enslaved, or at least certainly not born a slave as Angel herself was. What was it her mother had once said? "Better to be born to the whips and chains than broken to them." It also clearly didn't help that the girl was not that good looking: all the comments being shouted by the men were raucous and crude, but several of them were highly insulting and one or two loudly complaining that the landlord was "scraping the barrel." If it had been Angel herself up there, she knew that there would have been plenty of lewd comments, but no complaints. It was without doubt the better way to be: if you are going to be naked and leered at, then better to be attractive with a fine body that you don't have to be ashamed of.

The bar owner had noted that the jeers were starting to outnumber the more positive, if equally rude, catcalls as the scrawny girl danced on the table and sent another girl onto a second table to take over. Attention quickly centred on her and no wonder: she was a sensational little blonde, short but very well built. Within seconds of getting onto the table, she had peeled off her tiny garments and started dancing with real abandon, flinging herself around so that her ample breasts bounced a dance of their own. Angel thought at first that this girl was not branded, as her legs and thighs looked unmarked, but when the blonde turned her back she saw a brand mark burnt deep into her generous posterior. That was certainly an unusual place for a brand: quite possibly, some owner had done it as a huge joke on the poor girl. At any rate, this slave girl seemed far less bothered than the first one had by her exposure: in fact, she almost seemed to revel in the attention. Some girls, fortunately for them, did develop a bit of a taste for it. The first girl, on the other hand, climbed down from her table with relief. She would not be allowed to don her clothes again now, though and began serving drinks nude with considerable apprehension. Slaps on her bottom and thighs and hands shooting everywhere soon showed that apprehension to be well founded.

Eventually the man groping Angel tired of his sport and she was able to make her way to Thompson's table and get his attention. She much preferred the way he looked at her to the way Anderson had. Oh, like all men he ogled her bare breasts and inviting delta and the rest of her too, she could see his mind imagining having her in his bed, but there was none of the cruelty she had

seen in Anderson's eyes; although the lust was there, it was a cleaner lust. The message for Thompson was simply that Princess Yasmin wanted to speak with him. He took the bait: after all, his mission here was exactly that.

Although he had accepted the message, Thompson had not been without caution. The moment Vince and Peter entered the room he had been led to, he had his sword drawn.

"Peace, friend," Vince said easily, although his own sword was within easy reach. "We just want to talk."

Thompson did not attack: he was outmatched and outnumbered and he knew it. Instead, he demanded, "where is the Princess?"

"She'll be along soon. Now, can we have a truce and talk like sensible men?"

Thompson regarded them, then sheathed his sword. "I'm listening," he said.

"You see," Vince said, "we have two problems with Yasmin. The first is that she seems to have taken leave of her good taste and has fallen for this drunken bum here." He nodded towards Peter, who made a face back at him.

"Maybe, but it's not much good me taking that message home to my king," retorted the captain.

"These kings," Vince said reflectively. "Torton's king wants to flay my girl friend, your king wants to kidnap his own daughter, the monastery ruler wanted Selina as his slave. Meanwhile, we poor pawns run around doing their dirty work for them. Haven't enough men died already? Wasn't this the sort of thing which started the Final War?"

Thompson recalled the slaughter at the foot of the mountain. "I wouldn't disagree," he said.

Vince continued. "My second problem is that Selina is a captive of the Torton army and being taken to a bloody awful fate back in their home city. Peter and I will do anything to stop that, including sacrificing our lives. Yasmin feels exactly the same way." He emphasised the word "exactly".

"Again I'd worked that out for myself," Thompson said patiently, "but so what? You haven't got a couple of hundred fighting men handy, and for that matter neither have I."

"We just need a little diversion first thing tomorrow morning, just after they've broken camp. A little confrontation, for example: say, your group asking them what they know about where Yasmin is."

Thompson shrugged. "It could be arranged, but why should I?"

"Because otherwise your precious princess could get killed fighting hopeless odds in a head-on battle."

"Surely she wouldn't go that far."

"Oh yes I would, Captain Thompson."

The cultured female voice cut through the air, sharpening the tension in the room as Yasmin entered. Thompson jumped to his feet and moved towards her. In instant reaction, both Vince and Peter moved into his way and Yasmin moved into cover behind them. All three men had hands on swords. After a long moment, Thompson sat down once more and the tension eased. "Suppose I do provide this diversion," he said; "that doesn't get you very far."

"If something else we were trying to arrange happens, at least we have a chance," said Vince.

"It's all set up," Yasmin interjected to Vince, but there was a tone in her voice which made Peter look sharply at her.

"And Yasmin will be out of the way, removed from the danger," Peter said firmly. She looked ready to protest, but a look from Peter silenced her. Thompson noticed this with surprise: he had never seen the rather arrogant princess behave like this before.

"After that," finished Vince, "if we get away, it's up to Yasmin what she wants to do. Your king will have to accept her decision."

"Try telling him that," said Thompson ruefully, but right now he had no choice. He didn't give much to the Tigers' chances of success, and it seemed his best bet was to wait for them to get killed, then take the princess home.

And yet, looking at these two brave desperadoes, he hoped that somehow that would not happen.

“You promised him WHAT?”

Peter was beside himself with fury. Yasmin desperately tried to calm him down. “I had no choice,” she said. “There was no other way to get him to agree. Peter, please don’t be angry with me.”

He stopped in his tracks. “My darling beloved,” he said with awesome sincerity, “I’m not angry with you. It’s a noble, selfless gesture. I’m just not prepared to allow you to go through with it.”

She hung her head. “I must,” she said quietly. “I promised.”

“No way,” he reiterated.

A touch of her old arrogance rose to the surface, and she let it speak. “I gave my word and I keep my word. What would I be worth if I broke it?” She changed tack. “And don’t get any ideas about me enjoying it. I can still feel his fingers touching me.” She shuddered, and for a moment her resolve flickered, but then it hardened. “But I promised, and that’s that. And it’s my body: even you don’t own me.”

Peter turned on Vince. “This was your idea,” he blazed. “You stop it, or else ...”

Vince looked at his friend. “Peter,” he said in a rare tone.

Peter hesitated. “What?” he snapped.

“We’ve been friends for a long time,” Vince said gently.

“We won’t be, if she has to do this,” Peter rejoined coldly.

“I have that part of it all planned. Trust me.”

Peter opened his mouth to say something, then paused. The last two words Vince had spoken contained a heartfelt plea, one he could not in all conscience turn down. He closed his mouth, and looked at Vince, who held out his hand. After a brief hesitation, Peter grasped it; but even now Vince could see the uncertainty.

CHAPTER EIGHT

As the dawn broke, the Torton army was preparing to move. There was always chaotic confusion over breaking camp, but it was rather worse today. Quite a few officers nursed heavy hangovers. Angel and Carol had both mingled naked among the serving wenches and plied them with free beer last night, paid for by Yasmin's friend, who in turn would look to her father for recompense later. Yasmin had been amused by imagining his reaction when he got the fairly substantial bill.

Right on time, Thompson appeared with his tiny force and demanded stridently if they knew what had happened to Yasmin, indeed if they were even holding her. A slanging match ensued, Thompson just keeping sufficient heat out of it to stop a fight developing.

Selina waited. Her chains were unlocked, but only a very careful look would spot it. Morton Anderson had, as promised, brought her the key. The revolting bastard had made sure he thoroughly enjoyed himself at her expense too and whilst he had been able to bring her a weapon, she had nowhere to hide it and so couldn't keep it. No matter: a few seconds with the guard, if she could take him by surprise, and she might be able to get a sword. Equally important was the knowledge she now had of what Vince would do and when; of course, even the message from him had bolstered her spirits.

Elsewhere, one of the Tigers guarded Yasmin, Angel and Carol as they left the city by the "rear" entrance. Angel was still in seventh heaven, recalling the thanks she had got from Vince and Peter for doing what up until a couple of days ago would have been demanded from her without question or gratitude. Carol was also happy to have been able to help. Only Yasmin was depressed, partly because of what she had promised Morton Anderson and fully intended to deliver no matter how repugnant and sickening an experience it would be, but mostly because of anxiety about Peter. It would be long hours before she would know if he lived or died. At least they had been able to snatch one night of intense passion last night, following their rather bizarre and frenzied first coupling ...

The moment came. Dressed as scavengers and peasant sellers from the city, the Tigers had moved into the camp seemingly searching for leftovers or trying to sell trinkets. Suddenly, they drew concealed weapons and struck. Half a dozen Torton men died without warning. Vince had moved close to the horses, sliced through their reins and started a stampede, adding to the confusion.

As Selina's guard turned to see what was happening, she slipped her chains off and struck, the edge of her hand connecting satisfyingly with the back of his neck and rendering him unconscious. He had barely fallen to the floor when she had his sword and was cutting a swathe to right and left amongst the startled guards around her.

Vince and the Tigers thundered towards her on the few horses they had not scattered. Vince hardly slowed down as he scooped her up into his arms. There was no time for a reunion: Selina scrambled behind him to leave him free to control the panicking animal. He did, however, have time to pass her faithful Excalibur to her. She grasped it, joyous at the feel of the sword in her hand and the powerful beast between her bare thighs. The borrowed sword she hurled at a soldier standing in their way.

"The cavalry's here!" Vince had time to shout back to her.

"Nice to see all of you again," added Peter from the side of them. Selina felt her spirits lift: she turned and put her tongue out at Peter in response to his friendly jibe about her nudity. It seemed ages since she had been clothed, but as long as she had her sword and Vince by her side, she didn't care.

They hurtled through the startled ranks of the Torton soldiers, who were too surprised to try to stop them. Those that did not scramble out of the way were trampled under the horses' hooves, except for one other who suffered a different fate. As they passed a startled Morton Anderson, Vince deftly drew a throwing knife and hurled it. The knife buried itself in the ambassador's chest: he looked down at it in numb surprise as blood began to seep out, then fell dead to the floor.

Despite everything else happening around them, Selina was shocked. So for a moment was Peter, then he realised why Vince had done it. "Was there no other way?" he asked.

"No," replied Vince over the melee. "And remember he was prepared to betray his King, Yasmin's father and probably us as well if he got the chance. He had it coming."

They burst free of the camp and raced towards the city. Belatedly, a couple of dozen Torton men on horseback began to give chase. Near the city gates, the Tigers split into two groups: Vince, with Selina still also on his horse, and Peter headed for the gates, whilst the others peeled off towards the waiting hills.

"How many of them are following us?" Vince asked, concentrating on controlling his horse.

"All of them," Peter said philosophically.

"Have you got a plan?" Selina asked her lover.

Vince indicated the gate they were nearing, currently closed except for a small opening big enough for a person but not a horse. "We bribed a few guards with Yasmin's father's money," he said. "Those gates should open any moment now, then close as soon as we're inside. We go through to the other side of the city, out the far gates and away. Meanwhile, we've drawn the pack away from the others."

"Now would be a good time for those guards to do it," Peter observed. They were hurtling towards the gates, which showed no sign of opening. Vince shouted, but still there was no sign of movement. They pulled their horses up as they reached the wall. With no other option, their pursuers now cutting off escape routes to either side around the city wall, they dismounted and hurried through the narrow pedestrian opening. On the other side, there was nobody around.

"I think we've been double-crossed," said Peter grimly as they ran down the only corridor available to them.

"Anderson!" Vince spat the name out. "He introduced us to those guards! I should have seen that one coming. He'd pocket the bribe money, then go to Yasmin and tell her we were killed during the escape. He'd have Selina and also his debt from Yasmin and probably a pay-off from her father too. The bastard!"

"Seems that knife you put in his chest was a fair deed after all," Peter observed evenly as they raced round a corner; then all three of them pulled up short.

Ahead was another gate, padlocked and secure. The walls around them were high and unscalable, and there were no other exits. Behind them, they could hear the Torton men making their way slowly and cautiously down the corridor.

Vince cursed. He looked around frantically for a way out. There was none. The trap was perfect.

Selina turned to face the corridor, waiting for the troops to come around the bend. "They won't take me alive," she said simply, holding her sword ready.

"And you're the only one they have any interest in taking alive," Peter observed as he drew his own sword. "Well, I can't think of two better people to die with."

"Nor me," Vince said simply, unsheathing his blade. For a moment the three of them waited, hopelessly outnumbered, for their doom to come around the corner.

And then, quite simply, they were somewhere else.

Vince, Peter and Selina, dazed and feeling sick, looked around, and saw in bewilderment that they were back at the mountainside pool where this whole adventure had started.

Selina staggered over to the deserted pool and splashed the cool water on her face. It made her feel a little less dizzy, but her stomach felt wrenched inside out. The other two joined her. After a few long moments, Vince asked, "does anybody have a clue what happened?" Two heads shook in unison, both then wishing they had not as the movement caused fresh nausea.

"I am responsible."

They turned to see the sole surviving monk of Kimshah.

“How did you ...” Peter began, but his head was spinning too much to even form the question fully.

The monk ignored him anyway. “I saw from afar that you were in difficulty. As your problems arose directly from the situation following my former colleagues’ actions, I deemed it my final responsibility to intervene and repair the remaining damage caused by The Master. I have now rectified the situation and shall never interfere in the affairs of humanity again. The soldiers did not see the manner of your departure and you will oblige me by not discussing it with others.”

“But how can you do these things?” Selina asked, her head slowly clearing. “Is it science, or sorcery?”

The monk smiled very slightly, the first emotion he had shown. “The difference between the two is not as clear cut as you might imagine,” he said. “You have asked such questions before and my answer now is as then: you do not wish to know. Never come to Kimshah again; if you do, you will not gain access to the citadel. I shall never aid you again: my obligation is at an end. You will soon recover from the effects of the transportation.” He walked away.

“Thank you,” Selina said softly to the receding back.

“Good luck,” Vince added.

The monk paused for a moment and turned towards them. “I wish you well,” he said, and slipped away into the trees. Moments later, they heard the roar of a sky-sled and saw him flying away on it.

They watched him go, each wrapped up in their own thoughts. Vince finally broke the spell. “Well,” he said, “we’ve got a long trek to the rendezvous. We’d better get started.”

“And I have a beautiful, pure princess to rejoin,” sighed Peter.

“Pure,” reflected Selina, “unlike poor Vince, who’s stuck with this trollop who has just serviced half the Torton army.” She felt the need to confess that, even though it had been forced on her.

Vince looked his beautiful, naked woman up and down. “Well, they had good taste,” he said lightly. “Still, I suppose that means you won’t be wanting the attentions of my John Thomas for a while.”

Selina smiled, feeling the trauma of her torture and multiple rape evaporating in the warm sun. She nuzzled up to her lover. “Don’t bet on it, buster,” she murmured.

EPILOGUE

Carol emerged from the doorway just in time to see her daughter returning hand in hand with yet another man from the nearby bushes.

It didn't take much guessing to figure out what Angel had been up to; indeed, the ginger-haired teenager made no secret of it. By Carol's reckoning, her daughter had now screwed just about every male Tiger except for those in serious monogamous relationships and some were on their second helpings. Carol was delighted that, after so much sexual abuse, Angel was having such fun. In fact, she was happy to help her girl out when needed. Sometimes they double dated and dates here rarely ended platonically. There were also a few men keen to have both mother and daughter on the same night: it seemed to have become quite a fetish since Carol and Angel had arrived. Nothing wrong with that, in Carol's opinion: on the contrary, they worked well as a team. Angel would go first and her coupling would be a frantic race towards ejaculation, frenzied and forceful. Then Carol would take over, her more leisurely pace and experienced skills building the man back up through a long period of mutually enjoyable foreplay until he was ready to come again. They had forged quite a reputation as a double act and Carol didn't mind, although she did it mainly for Angel. Not that she herself was celibate, but she had established a couple of regular men, preferring to be more stable in her choice of partner than her daughter.

Angel walked past with a cheery wave to her mum. The girl was stark naked and this too was pretty much the norm: in fact she seemed to wear clothes less often than when she was a slave, simply draping a loincloth around her when she felt like it, but most of the time glorying in the display of her nubile young body. This was something Carol did not indulge in, but then she was not a teenager any more and, although still in fine shape, a more dignified wardrobe suited her better.

Life was good here, Carol reflected. The people were genuine, the leaders worthy of respect. They had returned from their adventure with Selina battered and exhausted, but she had not taken long to recover, and she and Vince were soon off on raids once more. There were always liberated slaves coming in; most soon gratefully departed, but a few stayed, she and Angel included. Helen was nerving herself to go home, although she was unsure about the reception she would get in her puritanical settlement: she had been snatched years ago as an innocent virgin and would now return as a branded sexual sophisticate with, as she put it, "a lot of miles on the clock."

There had been plenty of turbulence over Yasmin. Her father had been furious over Captain Thompson's failure to return with her and the poor man had been quite unreasonably thrown into the Glanville cells to rot. Yasmin had been outraged by the treatment of the noble captain and had vowed to make Peter drag her naked through the gutters of every major town in the area carrying a sign saying "Glanville royal totty available for use". Her father had at first reacted to this with near apoplexy, but her determination caused him to reflect and in due course Thompson was pardoned and promoted. The king also realised that if he carried on like this, he would lose Yasmin for good. He grudgingly accepted Peter and the wedding was fast approaching.

King Michael was even more furious when he found that Selina had escaped his clutches again, but Symons had returned with an army decimated by the Kimshah battle and there was no way for some time that Torton would be able to spare enough men for another expedition. Nevertheless, Vince continued to consider moving to newer pastures.

And Vince and Selina continued to be the perfect couple, more in love with each other than ever.

Carol's reverie was interrupted by her daughter coming over to her. There was a tiny splash of cum on the teenager's lips: Angel had never shaken the trained habit of licking a man clean after sex.

"Fancy a double date tonight?" the irrepressible girl asked.

Carol sighed. "Oh darling, not again! I've got nothing to wear."

Angel shrugged. "Neither have I. Skin will do; unless," she cooed light-heartedly, "you can't handle the competition."

Carol sighed. “Well, somebody has to keep showing you how to do it properly,” she said.
“So who are we screwing tonight?”

THE END