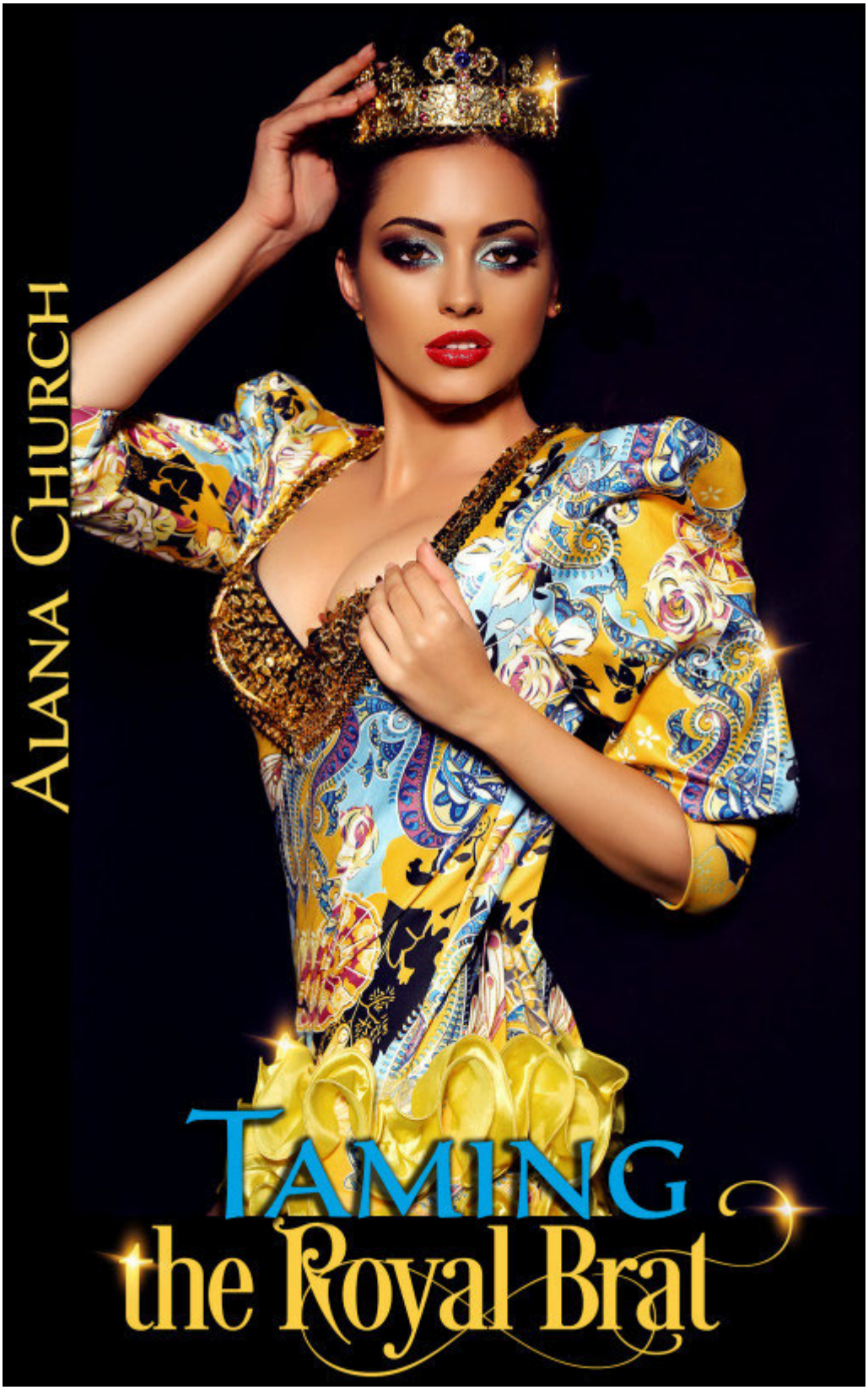
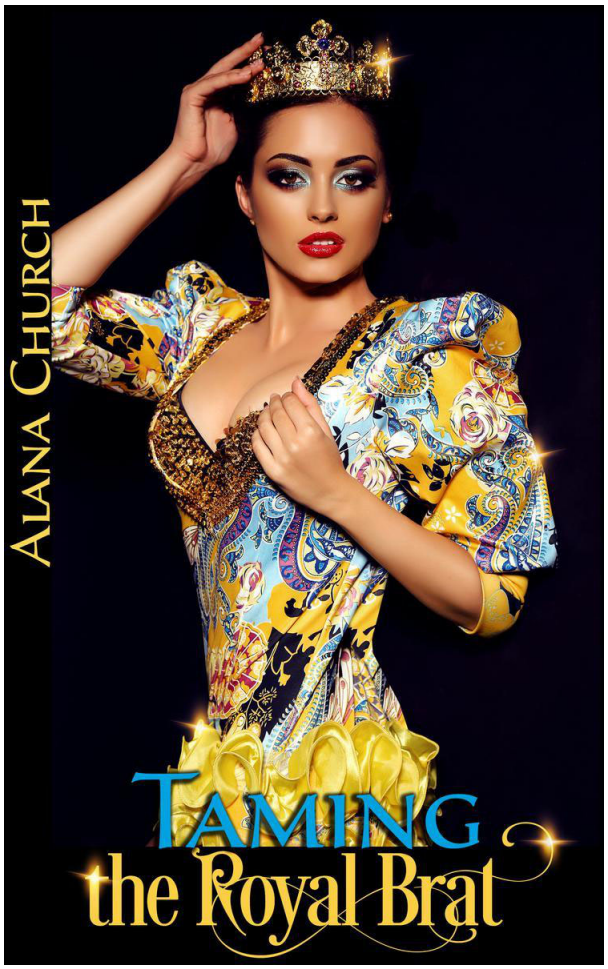

Alana Church
Taming
the Royal Brat


Alana Church
Taming
the Royal Brat


Alana Church
Taming
the Royal Brat

Taming the Royal Brat



By Alana Church

Artwork by Moira Nelligar

Copyright 2018 Alana Church

== || < > || ==

~~ All characters in this book are over 18. ~~

== || < > || ==

The grand audience hall of Delania was stifling.

Standing beside her father, Eleanora Tentrees shifted, trying to subtly guide some air up her heavy skirts. The warmth of the late spring day, the unaccustomed court clothes, and the sheer mass of nobles and courtiers in the throne room combined to make her incredibly uncomfortable. Her dark brown hair, done up in an elaborate coif by the shaking hands of her maidservant earlier in the morning, clung to her temples, and she could feel a slow trickle of sweat seeping down her back.

She grasped her father's arm, rising up on tiptoe, in an effort to see over the heads in front of them. They had been standing in the reception line for well over an hour, waiting for the queen to call her father and herself forward.

"Patience, Nora." Her father's deep voice made her sink back down on her feet. "It will happen when it happens."

It had better happen soon, then, she thought snappishly. I have to pee. I don't think Queen Laurelin would think much of me if I had to leave the room to find a chamber pot.

"Yes, Papa," she murmured obediently.

A few paces ahead of them, the figures in front of the throne bowed and backed away. A herald beside the throne struck the marble floor with the butt

of his spear, and intoned, “Sir Warner Tentrees, and his daughter, the Lady Eleanora!”

Her knees shook as she walked the proscribed twelve steps forward. Her father was a large, comforting presence at her side. They stopped, waited for the count of six, then her father bowed deeply, while Nora bent her knees in a curtsy, her eyes downcast. She was acutely aware that her one court dress, hastily cut down from one of the few which remained in her mother’s wardrobe, was years out of fashion, and that she was a dull figure indeed compared to the glittering ladies of the court.

“Rise, Sir Warner. Lady Eleanora.”

She stood, her spine rigid, unwilling to let her fear of shaming her father show, and saw the queen for the first time.

In the throne room, she shone like a flame. Hair like embers on a winter morning curled down in riotous profusion, and her skin was white as cream. Eyes of a brilliant emerald, deep-set and intelligent, examined them curiously. Her nose was strong, her mouth sensual, and her body ripe and lush, clad in a dress which was the same green as those incredible eyes. A thin band of gold circled her brows, in which a single blue sapphire gleamed.

“Sir Warner.” There was true warmth in her voice, and her lips curled in a fond smile. “It is a long way from the Battle of Fisher’s Crossing.”

“Yes, your majesty.” He turned slightly, drawing the queen’s attention to Nora. “May I present to you my oldest daughter, Eleanora.”

Nora curtsied again. “Your majesty.”

The queen gestured impatiently. “Get up, child. I know my titles.” She cast a keen look at her father. “And where is your lady wife? From the stories you told me, I was truly looking forward to meeting her.”

“She wished to be here, your majesty. Truly. But I fear she is in a…delicate condition…right now.”

“What? Again? Seven gods have mercy, Warner! It’s not up to you to repopulate the entire kingdom by yourself!”

A titter ran through the throne room, and she giggled as her father flushed in proud embarrassment. Her parents had graced her with five brothers and sisters, and a sixth was on the way. Her mother seemed to be a constant state of pregnancy, but managed the household and her children with a serene competence and good cheer which made her oldest daughter envy her. Nora could only wish that she was as lucky in her choice of a lifemate as her parents had been.

“Well,” the queen was saying, with a cheerfully malicious smile. “I can’t blame you for wanting to make up for lost time after the war ended. I kept you away from her most cruelly.

“I suppose it is only fitting that I try to make some amends.” Reaching to one side, she held up a heavy gold chain. An embossed seal hung from one end.

“With the trial, conviction, and execution for treason of many of my former husband’s allies, too many of the high lordships of Delania are empty.” The queen stood and raised her voice, and it rang thoughout the throne room. “For service to the nation, for heroism on the battlefield, and for keeping faith with me when so many others did not, I hereby bestow the Barony of Buckhallow on Warner Tentrees, to be his and his heirs’, as long as he and his bloodline shall last.”

Nora gasped. For a moment she thought that her bluff, hearty father would faint dead away.

The queen winked. “This is where you kneel, and say ‘Thank you, your majesty,’” she whispered in a carrying voice.

Shaking, Sir Warner knelt. Nora followed. The marble was cold and hard beneath her knees. From the corner of her eyes she could see the chain of office settle on her father’s broad chest as the queen laid it over his shoulders.

“Rise, Baron of Buckhallow.” A slim white hand appeared, and her father took it as he rose to her feet. A moment later, it hung before her eyes. Nora grasped the warm fingers, finding them surprisingly strong.

Standing, she saw the queen looking at her sharply, as if truly seeing her for the first time. The green eyes seemed to be looking into her very soul, and it was a quite uncomfortable feeling.

Turning to the herald, the queen made a small gesture. The man nodded, struck the floor again with his spear, and said loudly, “My lords and ladies, this day’s business it at an end. The queen will hear your petitions tomorrow, commencing at the third hour after dawn.”

A muted sigh swept through the room, as those who had hoped to speak with the queen gave voice to murmurs of disappointment, but there were no audible protests.

“Will you and your daughter accompany me back to my chambers, baron? I have a proposal which you might find interesting.”

*****

“I didn’t want this, Laurelin,”

“If you had,” she responded tartly as they entered the private rooms she shared with Prince-Consort Roland, “I wouldn’t have given it to you. The kingdom is full of people who want power, but have no right to it. As my fool of a husband proved all too well.”

Laurelin removed the gold circlet from her head, placing it carefully on a table, and rubbed at her brows. Even as thin as it was, the gold was heavy.

Almost as heavy as the weight of duty and sorrow.

“Still, your majesty,” the tall, bearish man said stubbornly. “I’m just a knight. Yes, my great-grandfather held a barony, but that was three generations back and in the female line. I’m just a farmer, when all is said and done.”

She cocked her head. “A farmer who risked his life, rode three horses half to death, and covered a hundred leagues in four days so he could warn me that Baron Kyren had turned his coat and sided with Prince-Consort Welston?” She shook her head. “You underestimate yourself, Werner. As usual. They sing songs about you. Did you know that? And the way your men held back Duke Mandora’s charge on the second day of the battle, after Earl Sandholt fell and you took command? I’d be a fool if I didn’t take advantage of such a man. And I’m trying very hard not to be a fool these days.”

She heard the bitterness in her voice, and hated it. “What say you, child?” she asked, spinning suddenly to face Werner’s daughter, who was standing unobtrusively a few paces away. “What do you think about your father’s sudden elevation in rank?”

She was pleased to see that the girl did not flinch. Her chin rose stubbornly. “I think he will do as well as any and better than most, majesty.”

“As do I.” She shook her head. “Have done, Werner,” she said tiredly. “We lost a quarter of the nobility in the kingdom in this stupid, stupid war. Either dead on the battlefield, captured and murdered by Welston, executed for treason, or merely exiled with their lands and titles stripped. You’re not the only man or woman who is going to be learning as they go. Just in the last two months, I’ve had to pass out eleven baronies, three earldoms, and a duchy to people who were completely unprepared for the task. Trust me. You were one of the easiest choices. And one of the best.”

Werner nodded, but for a blessing, he didn’t argue. “And where is the new prince-consort?” he asked. “I hoped to see him.”

“And he hoped to see you. He sends his regards, and hopes that you and your daughter will dine with us this evening. But he was called away. Duty never rests, and there was some dispute between the city guard, one of the trade-guilds, and the temple of Alianna.”

“Oh?”

“Yes.” Her lips quirked, remembering her husband’s astonishment. “Apparently, there was a question about whether some of the women who were contracted for an evening of pleasure were with the temple or the trade-guild, or were working independently, and who was owed payment. Roland got tired of having them sending him complaints, so he went into the city to straighten it out. I hope he bangs their fool heads together,” she muttered darkly.

“Oh,” Warner said, blushing into his beard. “That trade-guild.”

“What trade-guild, Papa?” the girl asked curiously.

“Never you mind,” he replied quickly, and Laurelin remembered that he was a man unused to the sort of pleasures that could be purchased in the royal city. And that his daughter was even more of an innocent.

Luckily, they were interrupted by a soft cry from an adjoining room. Eleanora’s head jerked up. “Is that…”

Laurelin smiled with unalloyed pleasure. “Yes. Do you wish to meet them?”

“Yes! May I?”

“Of course.” She stood and led them through a pair of doors at one end of the room. A large room, warm and decorated in pastel colors, soothed their eyes. Sunshine flowed in from windows set in the southern wall, which overlooked the castle gardens.

A woman of middle years stood quickly as she entered, and she nodded distractedly. “How are they today?”

“Very good, your majesty,” the wet-nurse replied. “They both fed well, and had a long nap. I think they are about to wake up.”

Eleanora was already looking over the side of one crib. “Oh. She’s adorable!”

Laurelin was absurdly pleased. “Well, I certainly think so. But all mothers do, I suppose.” She trailed a finger over one chubby cheek. “This is Princess Linessa.

“And that,” she continued as a cranky cry rose from the other side of the room, “is his majesty Prince Ashkelon, before whom we all shudder and tremble, Dark Lord of all he surveys.”

“No, he’s not.” Nora skipped over and hauled the protesting baby out of his crib. “You’re just a cute little sweetie, aren’t you?” she said, kissing his cheek. “Yes, you are!” She bounced her son in her arms, and was soon rewarded with a gurgling chuckle.

“She’s good with children, isn’t she.” The words, spoken quietly to Warner, were not a question.

“Seven Gods, yes,” he agreed fervently. “Gwendolyn says she didn’t know how she would have coped without her, while I was away.” He smiled proudly as she lifted the laughing baby high into the air, under the eyes of the bemused guards.

Laurelin smiled too, but sadly.

She’s your pride and joy. And I’m going to take her away from you.

*****

“So what do you think of the queen, now that you’ve met her?” her father asked, later that evening, as they prepared for dinner.

“I think that she’s the queen, and is a little bit above my likes and dislikes, Papa,” she responded. She had been petrified to learn that she and her father were going to dine privately with the queen and her family. It was taking all her self-control to not fall into a puddle of frazzled nerves on the floor.

Even after the war, when her father had returned home, she had been half-inclined to believe that his stories about the queen and the prince-consort had been the mere tall tales of a soldier. It seemed impossible to believe that he was on a first-name basis with the two most important people in the entire kingdom. But the queen's casual friendship, her easy dismissal of rank, told the truth. Theirs was the kind of bond which could only be forged in the most terrible, desperate times.

"I liked her," she added, after a moment. "She doesn't talk down to me and treat me like a child, like Aunt Estrella or Aunt Danice do."

Her father smiled into his beard. "My sisters aren't used to thinking about you as a grown woman, yet," he teased.

"Hah." She slid her feet into her court slippers, soft things made of satin, and squinted at him suspiciously. "Are you ready to go?"

"Yes, dear," he said humbly, and she sniffed.

"You're as bad as Petrella," she said, glaring at him in mock-disgust, naming her youngest sister, who was four years old. "And have even less excuse."

"Bear!"

The tall man in the expensive clothing crossed the distance between them as soon as Nora and her father entered the royal couple's private apartments, admitted by a pair of watchful if unobtrusive guards.

"Oh, your pardon," he said as he drew near. He bowed with mock-gravity, though his eyes were dancing. "Baron Buckhallow. Congratulations on your elevation to the peerage. The realm is richer as a result."

"Stop it," her father growled. "Before I cave in your skull and knock out what little wits you have." His cheerful expression belied his words, however, and he clasped the man's forearm in greeting.

“And this must be your daughter, since she is far too small, and far too not-pregnant to be your lady wife.” The man bowed his head. “Lady Eleanora. I hope I find you well?”

“Yes.” She looked up, panicked.

“Nora.” Her father rescued her. “May I make you known to Queen Laurelin’s husband, Prince-Consort Roland.”

“Oh!” She gasped in dismay and curtsied. “Your highness.”

The man waved his hand. He was handsome, with an impressive nose, a cleft chin, and black, waving hair. His clothes were rich but not ostentatious, and the dagger at his hip was plain, without the jewel-studded hilts she had seen worn by many of the petty nobility. “Please, Lady Eleanora. In these rooms, I am only Roland. There are far too few people I trust absolutely. Your father is one of them.” He inclined his head gravely. “I hope that you will soon be another.”

“So do I,” she stammered. “And please. Call me Nora.”

“It would be my pleasure, my lady.” His eyes twinkled, and she couldn’t tell whether he was teasing her or not.

“Ah. And here are the last two members of our dinner party,” he said cheerfully, as the queen entered, two other figures trailing behind her. One was dressed as a servant, with a pale, colorless face and limp, lifeless hair that might have been blond, had it not been ruthlessly pinned back under a starched white cap. The second was a child, perhaps seven years old, clad in a dark rose gown that did not suit her coloring at all. Her skin was much darker than that of the queen, and she had black hair which fell in ringlets past her shoulders. Her eyes were a dark blue, almost violet, and her face was finely carved, an elf-maid in miniature.

All in all, Nora thought, no one would deny the child was a beauty, were it not for the sullen expression of ill-temper that sat on her face like a toad on a log.

“Kitiara,” the queen said. “This is Warner, the new baron of Buckhallow, and his daughter, Lady Eleanora.”

The child scowled up at Nora. “Well?” she said imperiously. Her voice was high and clear, but held a grating edge that made her press her lips together in irritation.

“Well, what?”

“Aren’t you going to kneel?”

She rounded her eyes. “Whyever should I?”

Kitiara stamped her foot. “You have to kneel to me! And call me ‘Your Highness!’ I’m a princess!”

A flicker of movement caught her eye. The pale woman, who Nora supposed must be some kind of nurse to the young princess, was smirking nastily.

Why does she want the princess to behave badly? Why is she so pleased?

“Oh, I don’t think so,” Nora replied airily. Years of dealing with troublesome brothers and sisters had honed her wits, and she wasn’t going to bow and scrape to a girl barely half her age, no matter how high-born “You can’t possibly be a princess. A princess would never talk so rudely. A princess is warm and kind and friendly, and treats the lowest scullery maid as if she is a member of the royal court. She certainly doesn’t shriek like a fishwife who just had one of her pies stolen. You are obviously a nasty little girl who has sneaked into the palace and stolen the real princess’ clothes. Hopefully someone will throw you out soon.”

The girl stood, gaping. Her mouth opened and closed like a fish, and Nora was pleased to see that the nurse had all expression wiped off her face. But her eyes, when Nora looked at her, were glittering with mute fury.

“Well!” Prince-Consort Roland sounded like he was strangling on something, and his handsome face was red. “I think it is time we found our table. If my nose is correct, I think the cooks have outdone themselves.” Offering his arm to his wife, he led her out of the room and into another,

where a large round table was arrayed in snowy white linen, with a profusion of plates, bowls, cups, and cutlery. The royal couple sat together, with her father at the right hand of the queen and herself to the left of the prince-consort. Princess Kitiara sat between her father and herself.

Almost immediately, the girl began to complain. Her cushion was too soft. She didn't want milk, but watered wine. When wine was refused her, she pouted until she was given a glass of fruit juice. She didn't like the wonderful, rich soup that was served for the first course, and flung her spoon into the bowl, spattering the tablecloth and her father's arm with hot liquid. Throughout the entire meal, she kept up a running litany of snide comments to her father and Nora, which would have been insulting had they not been so sadly tiresome.

Nora could not understand the attitude of the queen and the prince-consort. For the entirety of the meal, they spoke with her father of minor things. Of his horse-breeding program and the prospects for a good harvest, and what he thought of various members of the minor nobility who he knew well. Other than a few gentle admonishments, they pretended the child wasn't even there, leaving Nora to fend for herself. By the end of the meal, she was heartily sick of Kitiara, and wanted nothing more than to find her room, crawl into bed with a pair of good candles and a good book, and forget that the little monster existed.

If this is the girl who is going to be queen someday, may the seven gods help this kingdom!

The meal concluded, with a berry tart covered in thick cream that almost melted in her mouth. Even Kitiara couldn't find fault with such a treat, and ate greedily, spattering her cheeks with berry juice. Across the table, Nora thought she could see the queen vent a faint, pained sigh.

"Thank you, Kitiara," she said, when all were finished with her meal. Wetting a napkin in a bowl of scented water, she wiped her daughter's cheeks clean, then kissed her on the forehead. "The baron, his daughter and your…step-father have things they wish to discuss with me. Good night, and may the seven gods guard your sleep."

“I don’t want to go to bed!” An elegant little foot stamped on the floor, and the girl crossed her arms. “I’m staying!”

“My.” Nora’s voice cut across the tirade. “It looks like the princess must be very sleepy. She’s so tired she doesn’t know who the queen is.

“The queen said, ‘good night,’ Princess.”

The girl took a deep breath, as if she were about to launch into a full-fledged tantrum, but subsided with ill grace. “Good night, Mother,” she said. Her voice, when she turned to Roland, was poisonously sweet. “Good night, Father.”

The older man merely sighed, as if this was one more skirmish in a long, running war. “Good night, Kitiara.”

Ignoring her father and herself, the little girl spun and stalked away. Nora watched with narrowed eyes as the nurse hurried to her side and accompanied her from the chambers.

*****

Laurelin watched the girl as she made herself comfortable on a couch in the sitting room. She gave a breath of relief as Roland sank down at her side on their favorite doublechair, easing into the comfort of his presence.

“Well,” she said, keeping her voice deliberately light. “What do you think of my daughter, Lady Eleanora?”

“I think she is the most vile, spoiled, wretched, ill-tempered brat I have ever seen, and that if she ever gains the throne, you’ll have a civil war inside of three years,” Nora said flatly.

A few feet away, Warner choked, then collapsed into a coughing fit. Roland laughed outright.

For her part, she only shook her head with a sad smile. “I fear you are right,” she admitted. “It’s hellish to come home from a war, only to find that the war has followed you home.

“I should never have married Welston. When my father died in the last battle against the Marcadian Mercenaries, I rose to the throne. And every eligible noble in this kingdom and those that bordered ours flocked to court, hoping to win both my hand and a crown, like flies around a rotting corpse.

“It was Welston who took the prize. He played on my youth and my vanity. With his handsome face and his sweet words and his liar’s tongue, he had me convinced he loved me, and I convinced myself that I loved him. And the council saw only the advantages an alliance with the great trading cities of the Kingdom of Chernavog could bring. Blinded by their greed, they all but shoved me into the marriage circle with Welston.

“Of course, I didn’t need much convincing,” she said bitterly. “The man, damn his dead eyes, had a convincing tongue. In more than one way.

“But as soon as Kitiara was born, he turned away from me, dallying with the other ladies of the court. That, I could have borne, as long as the kingdom was safe.

“But soon he began to grasp for power. He did not want to be prince and consort. Oh, no. He was not content to rule at my side. He wanted the power for himself. Or, at least, the privileges he thought that power would bring. No matter how many times I told him that I could not set aside the law for any man, not even himself, he would not allow himself to understand. He came from a tradition where the monarch’s word was law. He saw my refusal to make him king and co-ruler as a betrayal.

“So when Kitiara had passed the age when childhood diseases were a danger, he struck. I don’t know how he gathered so many nobles to his faction. And I suspect that even now we have not rooted them all out.

“He meant me to die. So sad,” she said, her voice acidic. “A terrible tragedy, the queen being struck by a stray arrow in a hunting accident. But I would have been safely out of his way. And then he could have had himself

declared regent until Kitiara was old enough to rule. Or maybe he meant for Kit herself to die conveniently, some time in the future, and he would wed one of his slatterns and take the throne for himself. There were enough dogs hoping for a bone from his table to make that wish come true."

"How did you escape?" Nora was leaning forward, her dark eyes wide as she drank in the tale.

"Didn't your father tell you?"

"Well, yes." She shifted eagerly, caught up in the romance of it all, for once appearing her true age. "But you were there, highness! Father didn't join your army until months later!"

"Ah." She smiled at the towering, bear-like man, hovering over his daughter. "Well, it's a simple-enough story, though it seemed anything but simple at the time."

"My brother made one mistake," Roland said. "Actually, he made several. Among which was trying to take a throne which he did not deserve and could not hold. But the worst was confiding his plans to a man who was not trustworthy. Or, at least, his trust was given to me, and not to him.

"My brother and I were never close. And when my older brother, King Hyssel, sent him here on his embassy after Her Majesty's father died, we made sure that we had an informant in his entourage. Neither Hyssel or myself were under any delusions about Welston's character. Or lack of it," he added, as Laurelin snorted. "But we never dreamed he could possibly win her hand. We were actually happy to get him out of our hair, where his drinking and whoring would not be an embarrassment to the crown.

"So for years Elcarth played a double game. In public, he was an obsequious, flattering toady, just another of the prince-consort's hangers-on. In private, he kept Hyssel and I aware of what Welston had planned. And when his messenger came pounding up to Herlargir late one night, with news that my brother was planning to murder his queen and seize the throne, there was only one thing I could do."

"What?"

Roland looked at her, with all the love in the world shining from his eyes. She took his hand in hers, squeezing it, and made plans for later that evening. “Roland was not just a prince of Chernavog. He was a commander in his brother the king’s army. He came with a squad of picked men, all loyal to him. He ambushed the ambushers and saved my life. Instead of a tragic death, I lived. And he brought me proof. Orders, written in my beloved husband’s own hand, which amounted to my death-warrant.

“When I escaped, Welston raised his flag against me. It was civil war.” Her voice fell, remembering those terrible, frantic days, when the only two things she could count on were the amazing man at her side and the constant, sickening fear. “I held the royal capital. Welston had fled before I could arrest him. But he took too many of the nobility with him, and much of the east country rose against me. Seven gods alone know how he had suborned so many of them.

“It went back and forth for months, both of us maneuvering for position. I pray every day that I never see such a time again. I never knew who was loyal and who was a traitor. Every day seemed to bring word of another vassal who had joined Welston’s side. And it didn’t help,” she added, “that Welston was telling anyone who would listen how I had murdered Kitiara, how I had taken Roland as my lover, and that the poisoned seeds of our unholy union were growing in my womb.”

“To be fair to my brother,” Roland said with a smile, “some of that was actually true. I mean, we were lovers,” he grinned, ignoring Nora’s startled gasp. “And you were pregnant. And I can’t blame your subjects for being shocked when they learned we were sleeping together. After what happened between you and my brother, I never expected you to take another member of my family to your bed. You northerners are far too repressed. You need to adopt some of our ways. Love is meant to be shared, not chained like a prisoner.”

“You hush,” she ordered, giving his shoulder a playful shove. “And close your mouth. You’ll catch flies,” she said to the girl. “If you spend any time at court, you’ll hear the same about me. Or worse. I took him to my bed willingly. And I have never regretted a moment of it. But it didn’t help my cause at all with the more…conservative members of the nobility and the

priesthood. The queen taking her husband's brother as her lover! They must have thought the world was coming to an end!

"Anyway, in the spring I marched out, with what army I had left. I wanted to end it, one way or another. I couldn't bear the thought of us marching around all summer, burning crops, destroying the kingdom I loved. At the very least, I knew I had an excellent military advisor," she said, smiling at Roland.

"We held the high ground; Welston had the larger forces. We had gone through all the diplomatic niceties, where I offered him his useless life if he would surrender, and he had given me the choice between a convent and the headsman's axe if I was taken captive, when this huge man came pounding up through the rear of our lines, riding a horse almost as big as he was, and knocked down half a dozen of my guards, shouting all the while that he just had to talk to me."

"Papa?"

Warner shrugged. "I did what I had to do. If Baron Kyren had been allowed to stay where he was, he could have ripped the heart out of Her Majesty's army."

"You know," Laurelin said, narrowing her eyes. "You never told me how you found out that he was intending to betray me."

"No," he said, meeting her gaze calmly. "I didn't."

She held his eyes, waiting for him to go on.

"This…person," he relented at last. "The one who told me. There would be consequences, if it were known where the information came from. Not everyone had reason to love your father, majesty. Or you. There is still quite a bit of ill-feeling about some of the decisions he made. And many parts of the kingdom were neglected during the first years of your reign."

"I know," she sighed. "My father, may the gods be good to him, was not a perfect man. And he was poorly advised at the best of times. I am trying to do better.

“So why didn’t you betray me?” she asked, ignoring the girl’s outraged gasp.

“I swore an oath,” he answered simply. “Poor country knight I might have been, and titleless, but I was no traitor. When your majesty was crowned, I swore to hold your honor as my own. I could no more go back on that than I could slit my own throat.”

“And that, my friend,” Roland said, for once completely serious, “is why you’re a baron tonight.”

“To make a long story sort, Lady Eleanora, your father kept one of my one-time allies from changing sides in the middle of the battle. After I had the bastard thrown in chains, Sir Warner joined the ranks himself as a common soldier. And when the leader of his force fell, it was a simple knight who raised my standard and broke the enemy’s charge.

“We won. My traitor of a husband died on the field. The kingdom was saved. I wed Roland, gave birth to the twins a few months later, and prepared to live happily ever after.

“Until I slowly began to realize that my heir combined the worst traits of both her father and myself. Over the last several months, my daughter, who was sweet and fair-spoken, albeit with an impulsive, headstrong nature, has transformed into a foul-tempered monster, obsessed with rank and privilege and scornful of her inferiors. And a princess, Lady Eleanora, has nothing but inferiors. The courtiers are already making jokes about the Royal Brat. Another year or two, and she may be beyond saving.”

“And what happens,” Roland said, leaning forward intently, “when the council is divided, when some of them seek to use Kitiara for their own ends, and some seek to pass the succession along to Linessa or Ashkelon? We have already weathered one civil war. And that was against a foreign usurper. What will it be like if it is sister against sister? Sister against brother? The entire land will weep.”

“That is why,” Laurelin said, hating the words, even as they emerged from her mouth, “we are here to ask a very large favor of you, Eleanora.”

“What?” The girl looked from them to her father and back again. “A favor? Me? Why?”

“We have thought and thought. And Roland and I have come to the conclusion that it is time to renew a very old tradition.

“We wish for you to be the Heir’s Companion.”

From behind his daughter, Warner uttered a muffled oath. She ignored him, and the way his face paled, and concentrated on the daughter.

Her face was wrinkled in perplexity. “The Heir’s Companion? What’s that?”

“People lie to royalty, child,” she said sadly. “They lie to curry favor. Or to avoid punishment. Or to hide their crimes. Or out of simple fear of what would happen if they contradicted me. By the seven gods, I could walk out of this palace into the heart of a howling blizzard, and if I said it was a beautiful, sunny day, half the damned court would nod their heads and tell me how wise I was.

“A queen needs someone who will always tell them the truth. Even if they don’t want to hear it. Someone they can depend on utterly. A friend who will never betray them. We want you to be that person.

“It will be the task of a lifetime. You will hold no rank beyond the respect which you may earn. You will have no authority but that which you can create by the power of your own will. You will give advice that may go unheeded. You will draw a stipend from the treasury, which will be more than sufficient for your needs. You will have rooms in the palace, near Kitiara’s.”

“You will also,” her husband went on, as Eleanora went pale, “hold a seat on the royal council when you are of age. The counsel you give may help thousands of lives, Eleanora.”

“Or wreck them,” she continued, hating the iron-hard sound of her own voice. Seven gods, she was just a child!

“Why? Why me?” the girl floundered.

“Why? Two reasons. When I took your hand in the throne room, I felt the power of your character. I am no witch,” she said, “but my mother’s line had a…a bond with the earth. It is an old, old magic. If I will it, I can see the character of those I touch.

“That is why, my lord baron,” she said, turning to Warner, “I did not have you arrested as a madman when you broke through our lines at Fisher’s Crossing. I could see you were telling the truth.”

“Pity you didn’t use it earlier,” the big man grumbled, and she smiled sardonically.

“Yes. It would have prevented many problems, if I had known what my husband truly was.

“The other reason,” she said, turning back to Eleanora, “is that you were the first person to actually to tell the truth to my face about my daughter. You saw her on what passes for her best behavior tonight. And you are right. She is a vile little monster.

“But everyone else makes excuses. Or dances around the subject. She isn’t rude or cruel, oh no. She’s ‘high-spirited’ or ‘rambunctious’ or ‘quick-tempered’ or ‘opinionated’ or, seven gods help me, ‘charming.’

“I know what she is. And I fear what she may become. History is littered with the tales of royal scions who were never curbed when they were youths, and became tyrannical monsters when they took the throne. Those tales rarely end happily.”

Eleanora swallowed, her face pale. She looked at Warner, her face pale. “Papa? Did you know about this? When you asked me to come to court?”

The huge man shook his head, looking more bearlike than ever. “No. And if I had,” he said, shooting a hard look at Laurelin and her husband, “I would have warned you first.”

She lifted a shoulder, unapologetic. “Being a ruler means using the tools one has to hand, baron. You know that. Or will. Only the seven gods above know

how many young women I have tested over the past three months. Your daughter is so far above the second choice that it is almost laughable."

There was a long silence. Eleanora seemed acutely aware of the attention, looking from Laurelin to Roland to her father, then back at her hands.

"Can I have some time to think about it?" she asked. Her voice was very small, scarcely audible over the sound of the fire crackling in the hearth.

"Certainly," she answered, glad for something to relieve the mounting tension. "I should not have acted as if I wanted an answer immediately." She smiled briefly. "But I cannot tell you to take all the time you need, unfortunately. Time and tide waits for no man. Or woman. Even if she is a queen. I would very much like to have answer from you sometime tomorrow." A look at Warner made sure he realized what seemed like a polite request was actually a royal command.

The large man nodded, understanding the unspoken implications, and she blessed, not for the first time, his quick wits. He might look like some shambling brute, but there was a keen mind behind the giant's body, which had served her well many times in the past. And she trusted that mind had been passed down to his daughter.

*****

She sank onto the couch wearily, completely wrung out, as the doors closed behind the pair.

A maidservant poked her head around the corner. "We've cleared the table, mistress. Will you or your husband require anything more this evening?"

She shook her head. "No. Please leave us." She summoned up a wan smile. "You and Tikala did splendidly this evening, Sherrill. Thank you. And you may tell the guardsmen they are dismissed for the evening as well."

The girl bobbed her head and disappeared. “Gods, what have I done?” Laurelin groaned, letting her head fall back against the cushions. “The Heir’s Companion? She’s barely more than a child herself!”

Roland stood and walked over to a small table, holding a decanter of wine. He poured two glasses, and handed one to her. She drank it off at a gulp, and passed the glass back to her husband. He filled it again. “Take time to taste it, this time,” he suggested.

“Seven gods,” she repeated. “How old is she? Thirteen?”

“Nearly fourteen, according to her father, and I think he would know,” he said with a smile. “But I think, my love, you are confusing things. True, in years she may be little more than a child. But by the baron’s own words, Eleanora helped her mother run a substantial farm, took care of her younger brothers and sisters, and probably has more practical experience about the lives which most of your subjects lead than any ten of the flittering nitwits who hope to win favor here at court. Her father was a knight and is now a baron, but she’s a country girl in her heart.

“A woman her age, with her background, has more expertise in organization and logistics than you can imagine. She knows how much food is required to feed her household for a year, how to organize planting and the harvest, how much money is needed to clothe her family, and a thousand other details.

“Would you rather have one of these high-born women, with nothing more in her pretty little head than gowns and jewels and the petty gossip at court, at your child’s side? She would learn nothing.”

“I suppose you’re right. And we need to do something about Kitiara. But it’s hard, Roland. So hard.”

Her husband, lover, and best friend shrugged. “It’s what rulers do. You don’t have to like it. Most don’t.”

“What about your brother?”

“Hyssel?” He gave a short laugh. “I think my brother enjoys watching people dance as he plays the tune. He’s my brother. I love him. Most of the

time I even admire him. But he makes it very difficult, sometimes, to actually like him."

She smiled and stood. "One brother a fox, and the other a fool. How was I lucky enough to end up with you?"

He folded her in his arms. Strong arms, which had protected her from the storm of her husband's rebellion. Arms which held her in bed, every night, sheltering her from dreams where her handmaidens were cut down by arrows fired from ambush. Dreams where screaming, shouting men poured over the lip of the dell where they had paused for a mid-day picnic, whirling in a terrifying storm of steel and blood.

Dreams where she died, an arrow in her breast, her last glimpse the agonized face of the man who now held her.

Too late. In her dreams, he was always too late.

It had been so close a thing. So very close. If Roland and his men had been even five minutes later, she would have died, and Welston would now be on the throne, a murderous regent for a motherless child.

You are alive, she told herself fiercely, pushing back the terror. You are alive, he is dead, the kingdom is yours, and no one will hurt Kitiara. Not even herself. Ever.

A movement below her husband's waist caught her eye, and she smiled, soft and slow, as she saw the way his impressive manhood was tenting his breeches. "My," she purred, dropping a hand between their bodies. "My husband is bold tonight."

"Not as bold as my lady," he replied, lifting his hands to unfasten the pearl buttons which held the neck of her gown closed. When the dress was open to her waist, he reached inside, fondling her breasts. "No smallclothes? Again? What would the good baron and his oh-so-proper daughter think, if they knew the queen was so shameless?"

"I don't know and I don't care," she groaned as his clever, knowing fingers found her nipples, already stiff. She lifted her face, mouth opening as he

dipped low for a burning kiss which set her loins on fire.

“What is your desire tonight, my lady? Shall we retire to yonder bower, and while away the hours of darkness in pleasure that would make the very gods weep with jealousy?”

She smiled, as she always did when he began to spout hideously flowery endearments like a drunken Alteran troubadour. “No.” Her breath caught. “I want it like the first time.”

The first time.

It had been perhaps a fortnight after he saved her from his brother’s assassins. Somehow, Welston has sensed his plans had gone awry, and had fled the castle less than an hour before Roland, Laurelin, her grim-faced guards, and his own hand-picked men had pounded up to the gates. Luckily, he hadn’t had the chance to snatch up Kitiara, but he did take with him the ‘damned nine,’ the four men and five women who had formed the core of his rebellion.

Functioning on little more than sheer nerve, Laurelin had lurched from crisis to crisis, somehow holding the kingdom together by willpower alone, as the treasonous forces gathered in the east. Every day brought news of a new defection, until she wondered hopelessly how much longer she could even call herself ‘queen’ without the very word sounding like a cruel joke.

In those terrible days, Roland had been a rock. His steady, calm presence at her side, combined with the almost supernatural ability of the rat-faced Lord Elcarth to root out the traitors who remained in the castle, had allowed her to hold the kingdom together when it seemed as if it were about to fall apart like termite-infested hovel. Somehow, they had cobbled together enough support, especially from the western and northern nobles, to hold the entire tottering edifice of the kingdom together. In council, the remaining peerage had looked like a bunch of nervous colts, ready to bolt. Roland had been invaluable there, standing stone-faced behind her chair, prepared to carve anyone who questioned her authority into giblets. It had been there where

she had first begun to hear whispers about the “Queen’s Companion.” The one who could be trusted above all others. The one who would never lie. The one who would allways tell her the truth, no matter how much she desired not to hear it. The title had fallen out of use over the past several decades. Now, it was coming back, whether she wished it or not.

She had never meant to take Roland as her lover. After the betrayal by her first husband, the last thing she had wanted was anyone else in her bed. And to go back to a poisoned well would have been the very height of folly. If one brother proved false, why wouldn’t another? King Hyssel might simply be supplanting one brother with another who was more tractable.

They had been in this very room, she remembered. At the end of a tiring day which had brought word of another defection. Duke Oxnard, she recalled. The fool had lived through the battle at Fisher’s Crossing, only to end up cast into her camp, tied up like a side of beef, by his suddenly apologetic men, who had hoped that by offering him up as a sacrifice she would spare their miserable lives.

But at the time, she had held no knowledge of what was to come. The word of yet another betrayal had brought her close to weeping. Somehow, she had nodded stoically to the clearly terrified messenger, who had been shaking as he imparted his ill news.

Then, her eyes had fallen on Roland, sitting, looking unutterably tired, in a chair near the fireplace. His long legs had been thrust out before him, the legs crossed at the ankle.

But his eyes. His eyes had been on her. And in those eyes she had seen an expression of inexpressible tenderness and desire, entwined like the branches of a willow tree.

Neither of them had said a word. Neither of them had to. She had stood up, silent, and so had he. Without a wasted gesture, she had reached under the hem of her gown, and had stripped off the small wisp of silk which guarded her nether regions.

She had held it, outstretched on disdainful fingers, and then had let it go, falling gently to the floor in a rustle of perfumed fabric.

He had come to her then, every inch a soldier.

But not just a soldier. A man. A man who she trusted beyond reason.

And who had given her victory beyond hope.

He came to her as he had that first time, that first night. Tall and strong and virile, an honorable man, as his brother was not. With agonizing slowness, he hiked up her skirts, exposing the long slim lines of her legs, his hands touching her gently.

Then, without warning, his hands slipped around, cupping her buttocks, and lifted her, prisoning her body against the wall, trapping her between the unforgiving wood and his own body. She held her skirts high, easing his access, while he unbuttoned the flies of his breeches, letting his cock burst out into the fire-lit air like water jetting forth from a bursting dam.

It took only a single thrust, and he was deep inside her, and he muffled her shriek of joy with his own mouth, muffling her passionate screams as he pumped his rigid cock in and out of her soaking sheath, his hands leaving her rear and finding her splendid breasts as she wrapped her legs around him.

It did not take long. But in this position, it was better that way, for if either one of them slipped, her husband could be badly injured. And Laurelin was far too fond of his manhood to risk it so. As his pumps became more and more frenzied, she could sense the tide of his seed rising within, and opened herself, eager to welcome it into his body.

“Now, my love,” she breathed, and he came to her.

“Now!”

*****

“She can’t be serious!”

Warner gave his daughter a faint smile. “She usually is, in my experience.”

Nora shook her head at him, as if he were a misbehaving child, and he hid a smile, even as his heart ached in his chest. He had expected the queen to pile more responsibilities on him, when she summoned him to court. But to ask so much from his oldest child!

Gwendolyn is going to kill me, he thought morbidly. She sent Nora along to make sure I didn’t fall into a mudhole on the way. When she finds out I’ve left her behind in this cesspit, she may gut me on the spot!

“The Heir’s Companion,” Nora said slowly, as if she were tasting the unfamiliar words. She walked over to the window, staring out at the night sky. Below them, the entire royal city was spread out like a blanket, with the palace complex nearmost, the estates and mansions of the nobility close by, and dwindling into the distance, the houses and shops of the ordinary subjects that supported them.

“It’s the task of a lifetime, my heart,” he said quietly, standing at her shoulder. “And one that, once you take it up, cannot be lightly tossed aside. You will be seen as nothing but an extension of the royal will. If you choose this, you will grow old and die in Kitiara’s service. That is,” he finished, “if someone doesn’t strangle her before she takes the throne.”

Nora grimaced. “That…brat.”

He nodded. “You have only to say the word, sweetling. And I will tell the queen no. She won’t hold it against you. She will be disappointed, certainly. But she is no tyrant. And she knows better than to try to force a task like this on an unwilling participant. It would be worse than not choosing anyone at all.”

There was a long silence. Finally Nora stirred, shaking her head. Her voice, when she spoke, was very small. “No.”

“I understand,” he said, feeling immeasurably relived. “Well, off to bed with you,” he continued, forcing cheer into his voice. “I’ll beg an audience with Her Majesty tomorrow morning and let her know your decision, and then we’ll be on our way home. At least until I have to move our mob into the late baron’s castle. Seven gods in heaven! I don’t know if your mother will kiss me or kill me when I tell her she’s a baroness!”

“No, Papa.” Her face, when she turned to face him, was pale but set firmly in a stubborn expression he knew all too well. “I meant that I’ll do it. I’ll be the Heir’s Companion.” Her small fists clenched, and he could see the way her nails bit into the skin of her palms.

“Dearest.” He stumbled over the endearment, not wanting to lose her. “You don’t have to.”

She raised her chin. “You didn’t have to risk your life when you took word to Her Majesty, did you? But you did.”

“That was different,” he muttered. “The entire fate of the kingdom was at stake.”

“And it isn’t here? What happens when Kitiara is of age, if she goes on as she has begun? Half the nobility will despise her, and the other half will use her. The entire kingdom will be ripped apart by faction. And if the queen makes Linessa or Ashkelon the heir, she will try to take the throne by force.

“Civil war, Papa. With half-sister warring against half-brother, and the rest of us grain trapped between the grindstones of duty. What will I do, what will I say, ten or fifteen or twenty years from now, when it becomes obvious that I might have prevented a disaster, but I was too afraid to take up the task?”

He shook his head. “There’s too much of your mother in you.”

She wrinkled her nose at him. “There’s too much of you in me, Papa. If you wanted to raise a coward, you did a poor job and set a terrible example. You

should have stayed home, tilled your fields, and let the kingdom go merrily to hell. Instead you risked your life and came home a hero."

He folded his arms and glared. She met him, look for look. "I mean it, Papa. I'm staying."

*****

I should have gone home with Papa, she thought wearily, a fortnight later.

If she had been under any illusions about Kitiara's character, they would have been shattered after two weeks as Heir's Companion. The child was a repellent brat, given to tantrums and screaming fits at the least provocation. Indeed, the simple announcement by her mother of Nora's new status had elicited a pouting response that lasted over three days. Apparently, Nora's background was far too common for Her Royal Highness. Snide remarks about peasants, farms, pigs, and stable muck had flowed in a steady stream from her mouth.

Pigs. She should be so lucky. If I had my way, I'd plant her head-down in the castle midden-heap, she thought savagely, striding up the stairs to the nursery two at a time.

It didn't help that the nurse, Helga, seemed to be hovering just out of sight every time she managed to steal some time alone with the princess. The child had a quick wit and a retentive memory, and when she could be cozened into forgetting her rank, she was actually quite a pleasant little girl. She was very fond of stories, especially when they contained women heroes, and Nora had been able to insert some actual history in between long, comfortable sessions where they had read together. But any time Nora thought she was making some headway, Helga would appear, announcing it was time for the princess' nap, or a meal, or a bath, or a lesson. And the next time she saw her, Kitiara would revert back to her old bad behavior again.

She sighed, reaching the landing of the upstairs hallway where the nursery was located. She raised her hand, preparing to tap on the door and announce her presence, when her ears caught the muffled sound of weeping.

Barely daring to breathe, she set her fingertips on the door, pushing slightly. The hinges were well-oiled, and the door eased open soundlessly, letting her see and hear the conversation within.

No more than five steps away, Kitiara sat on the floor, her face streaked with tears. But these were not the angry tears of a child in the middle of a spate of bad temper. Her agonized expression told the truth of that.

“No. No!” she sobbed. “I won’t! I can’t send Lady Eleanora away! Mama won’t let me do it! And I like Nora! She’s nice! And she doesn’t yell at me. She reads me books and talks to me! I don’t want her to go!”

“Nora,” Helga sneered, “is just a jumped-up peasant girl who knows nothing about what you must do.” The thin-faced woman leaned forward, her expression a rictus of venomous hate. “Your father was a traitor,” she hissed. “He tried to kill your mother. Thousands died because of him.

“And they will say the same about you. Bad blood. You have your father’s hair, your father’s eyes. If you aren’t strong, if you don’t insist on the respect which is due your rank, they will say you have your father’s evil, lying heart as well.

“And when you are queen, they will kill you. They will cut off your pretty little head and stick it on a stake.”

“No! No!” Kitiara was hysterical, shrinking back in horror.

Helga seized her by the wrist, her bony fingers biting deep into her flesh as she shook her. The girl whimpered in pain. “You will tell the queen that Nora hurt you,” she whispered, “and if you don’t-”

“How dare you treat this child this way?!” Nora demanded, storming through the door. As Helga stood, she fetched the nurse a back-handed slap that sent her sprawling.

“You,” she said, standing over her prone form, her voice as cold as the ice floes in the northern sea, “are dismissed from Princess Kitiara’s service. I give you one hour to gather your belongings and leave the palace. If you linger one moment past that time, I will see you in chains.”

Helga shook back her limp, colorless hair, her face twisted in rage. “Your words have no meaning here, peasant girl. You have no authority over me. You have no right.”

“I am,” she said, using her rank for the first time, “Lady Eleanora Tentrees, Heir’s Companion, and I have the right any person has when they see a child in pain,” she returned. “Do you want to take this to the queen? Do you? Kitiara, sweetheart,” she said, her voice gentling. “Has Helga done this before?”

Kitiara’s glance flickered between herself and the nurse, obviously fearful of the repercussions of what she might reveal. Finally, biting her lip, she nodded and pushed up the sleeves of her silk dress. Livid bruises, blue and green, circled her arms.

“Go.” Eleanor’s voice was iron. “Go far away. Never come back. Or the inside of a prison cell will be the last thing you ever see.”

Turning for the stairs, she shouted for a guard. When he arrived, she gave orders in a firm, controlled voice, then took Kitiara by the hand and led her out of the room.

*****

“She did what?”

The queen’s voice was aghast. She looked from Nora to Kitiara, and back again, her mouth working soundlessly.

“I believe, Your Majesty,” Nora, said, her voice careful and quiet, “that the nurse Helga has been, for some time, abusing your daughter, Princess Kitiara. When I came upon them this afternoon in the nursery, Helga was… hurting her. Both with actions and with words.

“Show her, sweetling,” she said gently, kneeling at the child’s side.

The girl sniffled, then pushed up the arms of her dress. When the queen hissed in anger at the sight of the bruises, she drew back against Nora’s side fearfully, as if she were expecting a blow.

“But why?” Laurelin asked, her face twisted in pain. “Helga has been in the service of the royal family for years!”

A few paces away, Roland cleared his throat. “The woman’s husband was killed, my love. In one of the skirmishes early in the war. He was a scout with the royal army, and was caught too far forward by a pack of rebels. They…were not gentle with his body.”

“And so,” Nora said, as if she were feeling her way through the woman’s mind, “she transferred her hatred of the man who caused the war and her husband’s death to his daughter. How long has she been hurting you, Kit?”

“For a long time,” the little girl sniffled. She wiped her nose on one silk-clad arm, leaving a messy trail. Her dark blue eyes were haunted. “At first, she just yelled. She said I was too important to be playing games with my friends. That I was going to be queen someday, so I should act like a princess, and not a baby. But then she started to shake and pinch me, too.”

“The Royal Brat as royal victim.” The queen’s lips twisted, as if she had bitten into something sweet and had received an unexpected mouthful of vinegar. “But why didn’t you tell me, darling? I would have helped you! I’m your mother! I love you!”

The small face was bleak as she stared up at the queen. “You were gone. And when you came back, you told me I had a new papa. Because my old papa was dead.”

The queen went white. “A year? This has been going on for nearly a year?!

“I’ll kill her myself,” she swore, jumping to her feet. “I’ll gut her like a fish. Roland! Summon the guard! Have the filthy bitch arrested! Throw her in-’’

“Your Majesty?”

The queen whirled, so suddenly she nearly flinched. “What?”

She raised her chin, meeting her furious look calmly. Only she could feel the way Kitiara was shaking, terrified by her mother’s anger. Poor little thing. How can she understand the politics of it all? Her entire world gets turned topside-down, her father a traitor, her mother remarried, and with a new brother and sister into the bargain. It would give me the horrors, and I’m twice her age!

“I gave Helga an hour to pack and leave,” she said, holding that enraged gaze. “I told her not to come back. I would not be forsworn. And I do not think,” she said, choosing her words with care, “that an arrest and a trial would do anyone any good. If word got out that the heir had been abused this way, and that no one had noticed…”

“Wise,” the queen murmured. She sank down on her chair, her face cradled in her hands. “What have I done to earn loyalty like this?”

Blinking, she looked up. “Well, Eleanora. You have solved one problem. And created another. The royal heir is without a royal nurse.”

“I think,” Nora said slowly, “that Princess Kitiara no longer has a need for a nurse. And does not desire one either. Do you, my lady?”

The girl drew herself up with commendable dignity. “No. I don’t.” She gulped, then finished in a rush. “And if I did, I want it to be Nora!”

“Well.” The queen raised her eyebrows. Nora could see that she was trying her best not to look too pleased. “I think that settles the question. Lady Eleanora, I wish for you to make plans regarding Princess Kitiara’s training and schooling.” She walked to a small desk in a corner, leafing through a pile of parchment. “Bring them to me in the afternoon, three days hence.

“Yesterday you were the Heir’s Companion.” She smiled sardonically. “By next week, if you aren’t careful, you’ll be the heir’s governess and tutor as well.” A flicker of her eyes to her daughter, standing small and alone in the middle of the carpet, made sure she realized just how large a responsibility she had just assumed for herself.

“The reward for a job well done,” she responded, quoting one of her mother’s favorite phrases. “Another job.”

“Just so.” Laurelin smiled, then looked at her daughter. “Kitiara, I am sorry. I am so very sorry. I did not know Helga was hurting you.” She knelt down and took the girl’s hands. “Sweetling, you can always come to me. If you are sad, or scared, or lonely. I am your mother, and I will never stop loving you. Do you understand?”

Lip quivering, Kitiara nodded. “Yes.”

“Good. Now. Nora is going to be your friend, and your teacher. She is going to be with you for a very long time. So I think you two need to get to know each other.”

*****

The next several months were like hauling a load of rocks uphill. In a cart with no wheels. Using a horse with a bad leg. Which was also dead.

Somewhere inside Kitiara there was a very pleasant little girl. Headstrong and impetuous, yes. But with a quick, eager mind, an innate sense of justice, and an insatiable curiosity.

The problem was that in the past year and more, her entire world had been turned upside down. Her father was dead, and the subject of terrible rumors. Her uncle, whom she had rarely seen, was now her step-father. And her mother had been absent for a very long while, and when she returned to the palace, it was to give birth to a younger half-brother and sister, who, Nora

thought bleakly, were also her cousins, as their fathers were brothers. It would task the strength of a much older, wiser person than an eight-year-old girl to come to terms with all the changes of her life.

Some days were good. Kitiara would be cheerful and biddable, studying with the carefully chosen tutors, her agile mind learning with almost frightening ease. She and Nora would hold long conversations, and sometimes they would go riding along the bridle-paths on the palace grounds, Nora on her horse, Kitiara on her pony, with a pair of bemused guards trailing behind. On other occasions they would go to watch the recruits being trained for the army. Kit would stand on a rail of the fence, eagerly watching the archers at their drill, or the circular sandpit where heavily-padded swordsmen tried their skills against each other.

Some days…were less good. Kitiara would be cranky and sulky, insulting her tutors, refusing to study, and throwing angry fits. One day, upset with what she insisted was a lumpy mattress on her bed, she wrecked the nursery, pulling the bedclothes off her bed and leaving them in a heap in the middle of the room. For good measure, she broke several of her toys, leaving the pieces strewn across the floor

“My,” Nora said, hiding her anger. “That’s quite a mess.” She leaned back against the wall, her arms crossed. “Who do you suppose will clean it all up?”

“My servants,” Kitiara replied.

“Really? How odd. Why do you think your servants should fix what you have purposefully broken? I wager they never slept on a bed this nice, or had toys half this expensive. But you break them as if they mean nothing to you.

“If you want to sleep in a bed tonight, Your Highness,” she said calmly. “You are going to have to make it yourself.”

The heavy quilts and furs were far too heavy for a small girl’s arms to lift onto the high mattress. So Kitiara ended up sleeping in a ragged nest of blankets on the floor. She cried herself sick, missed dinner, and looked a fright.

The next day, she demanded to know who was going to mend her broken toys. When Nora shrugged uncaringly, she threw a wooden block at her head. Nora caught it with one hand, then advanced on her young charge grimly. Laying her across her knee, she swatted her rear three times with the palm of her hand, then set her back down on her feet.

“Next time,” she said flatly, holding the girl’s astonished eyes with her own. “It will be six swats. You are the daughter of Queen Laurelin Tanthalasa, not some guttersnipe out of Tanner’s Row.”

The girl looked down at her feet. “That’s what Helga used to say,” she muttered.

“Yes,” she arched an eyebrow. “And when did she say it?”

“When…when I wanted to play with the other boys and girls. Or read my stories. Or ride my pony.”

“Well. I would think those are all things that no one would fault you for doing. I like to read and to ride my horse, too. And when I was living at home I liked to play with my brothers and sisters.

“The difference between myself and Helga, princess, is that I want you to be wise, and kind, and the sort of person other people want to be around. I want you to have friends. Because a princess with friends will grow into a queen with friends. Your lady mother is very fortunate to have so many who love her. Prince-Consort Roland, and my father, and many of the other nobles, and the common people all adore her. And that means that even if she makes a mistake, they’ll forgive her. Because that’s what we do for the people we love. We forgive them.

“Helga wanted you to be mean and cruel to everyone but herself. She would have been happy if you had no friends at all. And a princess with no friends is a very lonely person indeed.

“All you have to do,” she said very quietly, “is ask.”

The small chin quivered. For a moment, all hung in the balance. Just when Nora thought that she was going to be on the receiving end of another

tantrum, Kitiara dropped her eyes.

“Lady Eleanora? Will you…help me…fix my bed?”

She smiled down at the child, as proud as any mother. “Yes.”

Together they made the bed, covering the bare mattress (which was, when all was said and done, more than a touch lumpy, Nora noted to her chagrin) with the bedclothes and warm quilts. Kitiara took on more than her fair share of the task, as if to prove her good will to Nora through sheer effort. When they were done, she gave the exhausted girl a bath, then dressed her in her nightgown and combed out her tangled black hair, so that it fell in damp ringlets down her back.

Tired out from the emotional war, she wanted nothing more than to eat her own dinner and go to bed, but Kitiara begged for a story before bedtime. So with the sky in the western windows the same violet as Kitiara’s eyes, she lit a lamp and read her a story of the mythical heroine Eikenskalda, and how she had tricked the evil troll Dumkopf out of his treasure and rescued a count from his own foolishness. The tale was a comic one, and Kitiara giggled sleepily as Nora voiced the various characters in the story; her voice low and slow as the dim-witted troll; arrogantly stupid as the glory-hungry count; and suitably exasperated as Lady Eikenskalda, who had left her father’s home to seek her fortune in the wide world, only to find herself discounted because she was a woman.

As the story ended, and Eikenskalda rejected the count’s offer of marriage and rode away on her snow-white mare Swanspeed, Kitiara sighed and slipped into sleep. Her small chest rose and fell under the heavy quilt, and her lips were slightly parted, so that Nora could see the gap of a missing tooth.

“Be well, child,” she murmured, kissing one cheek. The princess turned, her mouth curling in a tiny smile.

Snuffing the lamp, she went to bed.

*****

The next battle was over the broken toys. When they weren't magically replaced, as they had been before, Kitiara demanded to know when she was going to be getting new ones.

"It's obvious you don't value them," Nora said, planting her hands on her hips. "Until you prove to me that you can take care of your things, you won't be getting any more. It took a woodcarver a month to make this," she said, picking up an exquisitely carved wooden horse. Two of its legs were broken, and the tiny, elaborate bridle and saddle were ripped and torn. "And you broke it just because you had a lumpy mattress. Many people in this kingdom sleep on straw, not featherbeds."

The result was another tantrum, which Nora steadfastly ignored. Only when Kitiara threatened to cry herself sick again did she take action, dumping the screaming child into her bath and pouring a bucket of water over her head. As the sputtering girl glared at her, looking like a drowned rat, Nora made her voice glacially cold.

"Helga is no longer here, princess. If you want to get your way, screaming at me will not work."

After a brief battle of wills, Kitiara looked down, shamefaced. Nora helped her out of the bath and into a dry dress, then went on with the rest of the day as if the incident had not occurred.

For a solid week the toys remained scattered across the room. Neither Kitiara nor Nora would give in. Finally, one day, just when Nora was on the verge of having them all thrown out so she wouldn't have to look at the dratted things anymore, she opened the door of the nursery to see Kitiara sitting on the floor with a glue-pot at her feet, a brush in one hand, and a broken wagon beside her. Bits of paper, which she had apparently been using in her attempt to glue the wagon back together, were scattered on the floor and stuck on her arms.

Looking up at Nora, a single tear spilled down her cheek.

“I tried,” she said. “I really did.” She held up the brush as proof. “But I can’t fix it. It just stays broken.”

“Oh, baby,” She knelt down, gathering Kitiara in an embrace, heedless of the brush or the glue, or the sticky mess on her arms. In that instant, she felt her heart swell with love for the girl.

“All you had to do was ask for help. Is that so hard?”

“Helga said…” the small voice trailed off.

Nora was getting very tired of hearing, ‘Helga said,’ but she kept her mouth closed.

“Helga said that a princess ordered. She said that if I asked, people could say no. And then I wouldn’t get what I wanted.”

“Helga,” Nora replied calmly, cursing the woman to the seven hells, “was wrong.

“A princess can ask. So can a queen. Your mother did not order me to be your Companion. And she could have. I owe her my fealty.

“She asked. And I said yes. If she had ordered, I would have obeyed. But not happily. And every time you screamed or pouted or threw a tantrum, I would have been angry at you. And I would have been angry at her for making me be with you.

“But since she asked, and since I agreed willingly, I am doing my best.” She looked deep into the violet eyes. “People will always do more for you, princess, if you simply have the courage to ask. Do you understand?”

Biting her lip, Kitiara nodded.

“Well, then. Good.” She took up the glue-pot in one hand. “Do you want me to help you?”

Another nod.

“Then let’s begin.”

*****

That conversation, in many ways, was the beginning of the end of the Royal Brat. Over the next several weeks, Eleanora and Kitiara slowly worked their

way through the broken toys. When they found one they could not repair, Eleanora, to the queen's astonishment, invited artisans to the royal apartments to show the high-born princess the secrets of their crafts.

"She needs to see how the common folk live, Your Majesty," she told the queen bluntly. "And the people need to see her. There isn't a man on earth who can resist a cute little girl. Especially when she is as intelligent as Kitiara is. When she forgets she is a princess and starts asking them questions, they just kind of roll over on their backs and wag their tails at her like a bunch of lovesick puppies. By the time they're done, they're threatening to take her home with them.

"And it's good for her to know that she can be admired for who she is rather than for what she is. Helga tried to make her entire sense of…of worth dependent on being a princess. But when these grizzled old toymakers praise her for her clever fingers or her sharp wits, she sees that she might be a princess. But she isn't only a princess."

The queen set her fist on her hand, looking at her with a penetrating expression. Eleanora looked back, trying to project an air of calm, trying to keep the queen from realizing how her blood heated in her presence.

Nora was no fool. Over a year ago, her mother had sat her down and had calmly explained the ways of men and women to her, although the subject had left her squirming in embarrassment. Not that she had needed much education. Growing up on a large farm had left her with little in the way of illusions about how new foals and calves came into the world. By the time she was seven, she knew that her father's war-horse, an ill-tempered stallion named Battlesnake, had to be carefully penned whenever one of the mares was in season, unless her father had decided to breed him to the mare in question.

Still, it had been months before she had confessed to Lady Gwendolyn that her eyes were not straying to any of the men or boys she was acquainted with. The sons of the other farmers left her completely unmoved.

The women, however…

Her mother had been unsurprised, having seen more deeply into her heart than she would have guessed. Gently, she had assured her that such desires were completely natural. And that while marriage might not be possible, accommodations could always be made. More than one woman of Lady Gwendolyn's acquaintance had chosen an unconventional path.

And of course, there was always the Temple of Linessa. The holy prostitutes, who swore themselves to the Goddess of Desire, turned away none, neither man nor woman.

She sighed, hoping that her infatuation would not be noticed. Even if the queen had urges which matched her own, she was far too wise to invite the scandal which would result if she bedded the Heir's Companion. Wagging tongues would declare that her elevation to such a high position was not based on merit, but rather on the pleasure she brought her majesty in the bedchamber.

Still, a girl could look. And Laurelin, with her flaming red hair, her lush body, and her wicked, sensual mouth, was a woman worth looking at indeed. For a fleeting instant, Eleanora indulged herself in a fantasy, where the queen casually stripped her of her plain woolen gown and bent to kiss her breasts.

She started, realizing the queen had asked her a question. "What, Your Majesty?"

The queen made an impatient sound. "You are the woman who is turning my oldest child into a civilized human again, rather than a potential tyrant, Eleanora. You can call me Laurelin, when we are in private."

She nodded, blood heating her face, hoping the queen had not noticed the way she had been mentally undressing her.

"I asked you if you thought Kitiara might be ready to attend some court functions." She raised her hand as Nora caught her breath. "Not all of them. Or even most. And not for very long. But autumn is passing and we are nearing Midwinter, and the holiday season brings all the important nobles to court. Some of them are here for nothing more than the cheer and revelry.

But others are bringing eligible sons and daughters, hoping to make a good match for them." She raised her brows at Nora. "Some of them are equally eager to make a match for themselves." A small smile curved her lips. "You might want to ask the royal couturier to make you some new dresses, Lady Eleanora. You will find that more than one man is hoping that Linessa's Arrow will strike you in the heart."

Was the queen mad? "I'm only fourteen!" she protested.

The older woman shrugged, and Nora fought to keep the way the motion of her body distracted her hidden. "You're too young to be wedded or bedded, assuredly. But not too young to play the game of courtship. There are many steps between here and the marriage bed, Eleanora. And some of them are quite pleasant."

"You're embarrassing her," Prince-Consort Roland drawled from a chair in the corner, where he had been idly reading a book. He looked up as Nora stammered. "But it's true. Every high-born lout in the kingdom will be at court in a few weeks. It's best you be prepared, my lady. Even if you have no interest in them at all, they will be interested in you."

"Me? Why me?"

"Because, while you have no power of your own, you are in very close proximity to power." His look was sympathetic. "Think about it. If one of the high lords was to succeed in marrying one of his sons to you, he could go back to his duchy or barony confident that he would always have someone very close to the queen's ear."

She shook her head. "That's…grotesque."

"Welcome to politics," the queen muttered. "But we were talking about Kitiara."

"I think," Nora said, thinking carefully, "that she could do it. If they were short ceremonies that didn't require too much holding still." She smiled ruefully. "She has so much energy she wears me out! I don't think she's ready for an entire session of the privy council just yet."

“Damn,” the queen said, her expression deadpan. “And here I was, praying that she would take my place.”

*****

Midwinter came and went. To the queen’s relief, and to Nora’s pride, Kitiara flawlessly sailed through the ceremonies Nora and the queen had chosen for her. She especially enjoyed the Festival of the Seven Gods, where she, her mother, Nora, and the prince-consort rode in a carriage to the temples, bestowing gifts and seeking the blessings of the priests and priestesses for the year to come. Clad in a white velvet dress with tiny icicles of glass sewn into the cuffs of the sleeves and the hem, she looked like a snow-maiden come to life. Excited by the novelty of the ceremony, she chattered cheerfully with the priests and priestesses, who were charmed by her. Even the gray old priests of Zekial, god of wisdom, smiled to see her, and by the time the various nobles departed the royal city and rode back to their estates, Nora thought they were well on their way to slaying the Royal Brat.

“I don’t know how you’ve done it,” the queen sighed, late one night. Winter was ending, and a cold spring rain was beating against the glass of the windows. Laurelin was wearing a worn robe, much patched, and had her feet up on a hassock. On the other side of the fire, Nora sipped a cup of tea. She had gotten into the habit of spending an hour or two with the royal couple each evening, discussing Kitiara’s progress at her studies, or sometimes playing with the twins, who were now walking on their own, and sowing panic among the servants with their ability to escape from any room, no matter how closely watched.

“To be honest, Laurelin, most of the work was done by Kitiara,” Nora replied. “I could have lectured her until I was blue in the face, but if she didn’t want to change, she wouldn’t have changed.” She thought a moment. “My mother used to tell me stories about her youngest brother. The family disgrace. Everyone tried to get him to be a better person. And he would

swear that this time, he would change. But he never did." She chewed her lip. "Mama said that when he died, it was almost a relief. Because then he couldn't shame the family any more.

"But Kitiara…." She smiled. "We're lucky that Helga only had control over her for such a short time. Another year or two, and she truly would have been a monster. But there is an amazing person inside of her, just waiting for the chance to come out. She's incredibly bright for her age. And maybe this is me just seeing what isn't there yet, but I think she has a sense of justice that will help her when she takes on more responsibilities."

"Gods above, I hope so," the queen swore fervently. "It's wrong of me, but when I look at her, I can't help looking for signs that her father is in there, just waiting for the chance to jump out at me. That hair and those eyes! It gives me chills, sometimes."

"He had the siring of her. But you and the prince-consort will have the raising of her. It's not blood that's most important. It's love."

"I hope you're right." The queen took a deep sip from her glass of mulled wine, and sighed appreciatively. "And what about you?" she asked, fixing the younger woman with a keen eye. "Did none of the young men who flocked to court win your eye and your heart?"

Nora flushed. "I think you and the prince-consort were right," she said at last, picking at the fringe of a cushion. "Their eyes were all on Kitiara. Even if she wasn't there. It's as if they were looking through me. They didn't want me. They wanted the influence they thought I would hold over her." She laughed bitterly. "As if anyone would be able to make Kit do what she didn't want to do!"

The queen raised her brows in sympathy. "Give it time, young one. You have years to find a man." She took another sip of wine, her eyes watching her carefully over the rim of her goblet. "Or a woman."

Eleanora turned white. "How…how did you know?" she stammered at last.

“Oh, it wasn’t difficult,” Laurelin answered. “I’ve seen enough men look at me with desire to recognize it. I’m just sorry,” she said quietly, “that I cannot return it.”

Her face flamed. “I’m not…I’m sorry…I didn’t mean to…”

“Hush. I’m flattered. Alianna, goddess of desire, blesses us, each in her own way. I am sure she will find a suitable woman for you.

“And if you ever find that your…needs…need sating, always remember that the temple is only a short distance away. And that her priestesses worship desire in all of its forms. There are many who would be more than happy to share a night of pleasure with you, young one.”

“No they wouldn’t,” she muttered, staring down at her clenched hands. “I’m not like you. I have fourteen years, and I have no more curves than a plank of wood. Who would want to bed a flat-chested, narrow-hipped, brown-haired, brown-eyed, horse-faced bag of bones like-’’

“Stop it.”

Nora shut up.

“Not like me?” The queen laughed, and her head jerked up. “Eleanora, trust me. I was exactly like you at fourteen. Oh, I had the hair. And how I hated it. High-born ladies didn’t have red hair. Red hair was for the barbarians from the northern provinces. I wanted to be blond. Or black-haired. Or even brown. And I was tall and gawky, all elbows and knees. And so dratted clumsy I couldn’t walk from one side of a room to another without tripping over something.

“Give yourself time, sweet Nora. To all things there is a season. And your time will come.

“Now! Let’s talk of something more pleasant. Didn’t you mention that your family would be coming to court in the spring? I cannot wait to meet your lady mother and all of those brothers and sisters of yours.”

*****

The years rolled slowly past, and Kitiara grew from a girl to a young woman, straight and tall and proud. And at the same time, the turning seasons told the truth of the queen's words, for Nora gained the curves she desired, and she had all the attention from men she could have possibly asked for, had her interests bent in that direction.

They did not, however, and she gained a reputation for coldness, with more than one jilted would-be swain muttering to his friends that the Heir's Companion might as well be the Heir's Statue, because she had no more warmth or feeling than a piece of marble.

Kitiara knew the real reason why Nora had never chosen a lifemate, however, and it pained her. Nora had told her the truth, when she had asked one day, when she was about thirteen, and Nora nearing twenty. The older woman had smiled sadly and had shrugged.

"It's women for me, Kit," she had said, staring out the window at a chill spring afternoon. Rain dripped down from the eaves, and the distant city was wrapped in a clammy fog. "Or it would be, if it wouldn't shock half the kingdom to its bones."

Kitiara frowned. Why should it matter if Nora wanted to lie with women, rather than men? "But surely," she protested, "you could find a lover among the women here at court? Remember what Patriarch Reynard said at the council last week? 'There is no one true path to wisdom?' Not even the stodgiest old sticks here at court would dare to interfere with the Heir's Companion's choice of lifemate!"

"If I did," Nora said, her voice tired, "half the kingdom would take it as another sign of the moral depravity of the royal family. They still get jumpy when they think too much about your parents' marriage. And the other half

would think that I had my sights set on you, and that I would seek to draw you into my bed.

“No, Kitten. I do not dare to take a lover openly.”

“Then do it secretly!” she declared, bouncing up from her seat. “I’ll help! Tell me. Who do you wish to have in your bed? Lady Dathaca? The Baroness of Keele? It is no secret that they do not like men.”

“There are no secrets at court, Kitten.” She shrugged, her dark brown hair flowing like a river down her back. Her brown eyes were resigned. “And if I took one of the ladies of the court as a lover, it would open you up to gossip and scandal. No,” she repeated, raising her hand as Kitiara tried to protest. “It’s all right.”

Her mouth curled in a wry smile, though there was pain behind it. “Every so often I visit the temple of Alianna. The ladies there are very… accommodating. And very skilled. In their arms, I can forget, for a while.

“It’s not love. Not as the minstrels sing. But it will do.”

Then, late in the spring of Kitiara’s eighteenth year, came an unexpected invitation.

“A royal progress?” she asked, looking from her mother to Roland and back again.

“Say, rather, a royal visit. Your uncle, King Hyssel, wishes to bind our kingdoms closer together.”

“Can’t be much closer than they already are,” Nora said, from her seat a few paces away. “His brother is the prince-consort, after all.”

Her mother smiled. “True. But King Hyssel desires a more…visible acknowledgement of our alliance.”

Nora sat up straight. “He can’t be thinking of a marital alliance, can he?” Her voice was horrified. “Kitiara and his sons are cousins!”

Roland waved a hand in negation. “No, no. Of course not. Even if you northerners are more than a little…prudish…shall we say, where matters of love are concerned, my brother has no desire for our two kingdoms to become one. His own people would never stand for it. They have their pride. And Chernavog, when all is said and done, is much larger than Delania. A union of the two thrones would only benefit one side.

“Besides,” he shrugged. “He has two nieces and a nephew in line to inherit the throne of Delania. What more could he want, when it comes to influence?”

“Then what does he want?” Kitiara asked, her voice growing faintly annoyed. Would they stop dancing around the subject and simply tell her?

“A state visit. King Hyssel, Queen Silvara, and your cousins have all visited us. Multiple times. It’s more than past time that the throne of Delania returned the favor.”

“We have,” Nora said, with a tone of some asperity, “been recovering from a civil war.”

“A war that is more than a decade gone. No. We have to stop being so insular, Eleanora. And I can’t go. I have too much to take care of here, with the new tax measure coming up in council.” She sighed, lines of weariness appearing in her face, and Kit was suddenly concerned. Her mother looked tired. Too tired. Not yet forty, silver threads had begun to appear in the shining mass of her hair, though her body still held the appeal of a woman in the full flower of her years. “Half the eastern barons are screaming bloody murder, claiming that they’re having to pay for troops they’ll never see.” She paused. “Which is true. But if that idiot Tulare marches across the border and takes our western provinces, the eastern baronies won’t have anyone to sell their grain to.”

Kit bounced eagerly on her chair, then recalled her dignity. “So you want me to go?”

“Yes. You and your Companion.” She raised an eyebrow at Nora’s startled gasp. “Don’t look so shocked, Eleanora. The Heir must be seen. She can’t stay in the palace her entire life. It’s time she lets some of the surrounding kingdoms know exactly what sort of ruler she may be, when her time comes.

“Besides, it will be good for you as well. You’ve been here so long that you’ve practically put down roots. When was the last time you even left here to visit your family? Three years? Four?”

The younger woman raised her chin. “My place is with the Heir.”

The queen sighed. “There’s such a thing as taking duty too far, Eleanora. When I asked you to be Kitiara’s Companion, I didn’t mean for you to give us your entire life, keeping nothing for yourself. Look at you! Twenty years and five, beautiful and intelligent, and you are unbonded and alone.

“You need to get away. Maybe then you’ll spread your wings a bit. You’ve done good work here, Nora,” she said more gently. “But Kit is no longer the Royal Brat.” Kitiara smiled at the reminder of her past. “One day, seven gods willing, she’ll be ruling queen in her own right. And then she’ll need an advisor and confidante who knows more of the world then these walls. How can you advise her about the other kingdoms when this is the only one you know?”

She nodded firmly. “It’s settled. You’ll leave within the week. “

*****

A month later, they sailed into the harbor at Helargir, capital of the Kingdom of Chernavog, flags snapping in a brisk north breeze.

Kitiara stood at the railing as Delania’s Hope lowered her sails, coasting slowly towards the docks. Under the expert eye of Captain Seltan, the

sailors unshipped their oars and guided the ship into its berth.

She smiled happily. Getting out of the palace had been like a bracing breath of fresh sea air. Not needing to watch her every move, her every word, had been an indescribable relief. She hadn't realized, until that day when she and Nora and an attentive contingent of servants and guards had ridden out of the palace, how incredibly stifled she had felt there.

"Merciful Millagra, it's hot," Nora said, emerging from the cabin they had shared on the slow southbound trip down the coast, shading her eyes as she looked at the white walls of Chernavog's mightiest city. It gleamed in the sun like something out of a story, red tile roofs rising in tier after tier, until on the tallest hill, overlooking the huge, landlocked harbor that was the source of much of the kingdom's wealth, the palace where her uncle and aunt ruled stood, proud and unassailable. All around, ships lay at rest, with busy porters and stevedores working to load or unload the vessels, fueling the fires of trade which was Chernavog's lifeblood.

With a faint bump, the ship came alongside one of the piers. On shore, a glittering array drew up to attention. "Ready?" Nora asked her, her voice scarcely audible.

She nodded firmly. "As I'll ever be," she said, keeping her own voice low. As the gangplank was run out to the pier, she raised her chin, drawing on dozens of public appearances to keep her spine straight and her hands from shaking. Nora was a comforting presence, only a few paces behind, as she walked down the slightly bouncy plank and stepped on foreign soil for the first time.

A tall young man, dressed richly, stepped forward from the waiting dignitaries. He had a fillet of silver bound across his brows, where a single diamond glittered in the hot sun. "Cousin Kitiara," he said, bowing low. "In the name of my royal parents, King Hyssel and Queen Silvara, I bid you welcome to Helargir, and to the Kingdom of Chernavog."

She curtsied deeply. "I give you greetings, cousin, and thank you for your kind greeting. In turn, I carry the greetings of my parents, Queen Laurelin

Tanthalasa and Prince-Consort Roland, as well as my brother, Prince Ashkelon, and my sister, Princess Linessa."

The man straightened, and a waved hand gave her permission to rise. "And how are the rotten little brats, Kit?"

"Much improved, Rory, since Father threatened to stuff Ash into a wine cask and drive in the bung. He's almost civilized now."

"And how's Linessa?"

"Same as ever. A perfect little princess. Much better behaved than I was. She's starting to talk about having a calling as a priestess. That is making Mother very nervous."

Rorimac, prince and heir to the Kingdom of Chernavog, laughed and stepped to the side, allowing the rest of the ship's company to descend from the gangplank. "I should think so. Nessa is bad enough without putting her in the middle of one of the temples. Can you imagine what she might do?"

"The mind shudders," Kit replied lightly. She liked Rory a great deal, though she was very careful to never quite trust him. Their kingdoms might be allies. But today's ally could very well be tomorrow's enemy, as her mother, Roland, and Nora had done their best to drill into her head. "May I make you known to my Companion, Lady Eleanora?"

He bowed his head slightly. "Lady," he said, his voice carefully neutral. Kit hid a smile, knowing the reason for his caution. Rory had cornered Nora in a seldom-used hallway back home one night during the Midwinter Festival, when he was a few years younger and much drunker. His slurred compliments had made little impression on Nora, but he had been quite tenacious, and it had taken a drawn dagger and a threat to geld him on the spot to make him back down.

"And where are your royal parents?" Nora asked, a slight edge to her voice. Kit let the remark slide. Indeed, such a welcome, with the king and queen absent, could be a veiled insult, if their highnesses wanted it to be seen as

such. And the question was much better coming from Nora than from herself.

“They send their regrets,” Rory replied, bowing them into a gilded carriage drawn by four matching bays, richly caparisoned. Behind them, other carriages waited to haul their servants, guards, and luggage up to the palace. “One of our patrol ships came into port this morning with a quite unexpected cargo.”

“Yes?” she asked, when it became obvious Rory wouldn’t continue without prompting. Seven gods! He was nearly thirty, and still acted like a boy!

He smiled grimly. “A crew of pirates, taken in the very act of trying to board one of our merchanters, by Othan’s Spear! Father and Mother are trying to decide what to do with the survivors. Mother wants to make an example, while Father is inclined to be merciful.”

“An example?” Nora asked curiously. “You will put some to death?”

“We will put them all to death, Lady Eleanora.” Rory’s voice was flat. “Trade is our lifeblood, as much as your croplands are yours. There is no mercy, no appeal. Every brigand on the sea knows exactly what will happen if he or she is taken by one of our patrols, and there is evidence they have been preying on our ships. What would you do if you found some group of vermin fouling your wells or salting your fields or killing your newborn calves?”

“So where is the mercy?” Nora cocked her head curiously. She did not seem appalled by Rory’s casual bloodthirst.

“Ah,” he stroked his mustache. “There is always the manner of death. Father wants it to be quick. A simple beheading for the ringleaders, the rope for the crew. Mother is inclined to be more…dramatic. Death by exposure and starvation, perhaps done in iron cages, hanging from gibbets facing the harbor. We always seem to have fewer ships lost at sea after one of her little demonstrations.”

“Ah. I see.” Nora settled back in the cushions as the coach rattled up the cobblestone streets.

Kit swallowed, her stomach queasy. She had never seen Rory so…cold before.

This is what you may have to face. The thought was an unpleasant one. Could she determine the manner of a man’s death? “Do you really think it works?” she asked quietly. “Does knowing the consequences actually keep men, desperate men, from raiding your ships?”

Rory smiled grimly. “A good question, cousin.” One shoulder lifted. “Who can tell? Even the priests and priestesses in the temples do not pretend to know what lies inside a man’s heart. But I will tell you one thing. I’ve never seen a pirate captured twice. That portion of it is very effective.”

The rest of the ride up the hill passed in silence, each of them alone with their own thoughts. Eventually the carriage passed through the gates of the palace and stopped in a courtyard. Behind them, the other carriages halted.

Prince Rorimac leaped lightly down, turning to help them out. With a distracted nod, Kitiara gave orders for their guards, excepting the ones who were to be on duty, to be housed with the members of the palace guard. The servants began to unload the carriages.

He led them through the corridors of the palace, a huge structure which could have swallowed her own home with enough room left over for dessert. “Ah, here we are,” he said, throwing open a pair of doors. “Your suite, my lady princess.” His tone was formal, and with a bow, he indicated they should precede him inside.

Kitiara stepped across the threshold and gasped in happy surprise. Windows stretched from floor to ceiling, framing a delightful view of the ocean. Like a ruffled quilt, the sun-speckled waves receded into the distance, while seabirds spun and soared in the sky overhead.

“I hope this will suit.” Prince Rorimac’s voice was, for once, completely without its customary foolery. “A sitting room,” his hand indicated the

room they were in. “A dining room also, should you desire to entertain while you are in residence. Also, bedrooms for yourself and your Companion, and…” she lost track of his litany of the suite’s charms, taken in by that incredible view. Her home had nothing like it. Her rooms looked out over the castle gardens, very pleasant to be sure, but still…

“Princess?”

With a start, she realized that Rorimac was looking at her with some concern.

“Thank you, cousin,” she said formally. “I am sure these will do very well. You can tell your father and mother that we are very pleased with the accommodations. Now,” she said, gently steering him towards the doors, “Nora and I would like to refresh ourselves before we are presented to the king and queen. Do you know when that might occur?”

Rory shook his black-haired head. “Probably not until the morrow. Father said he wanted you to rest. He knows how fatiguing a sea voyage can be.”

She hid a sigh of relief, and smiled her gratitude. “Then tell your parents we wait upon their pleasure.”

“Thank the seven gods,” she said, as the door closed behind the prince. She plucked irritably at the fabric of her gown. “I feel like I’m slowly roasting alive.” A few steps away, Nora sank limply into a chair. “This place is like a gods-bedamned furnace. How do people live like this?”

Nora smiled wanly, though her face was slicked with perspiration. “I remember Queen Silvara asking the same question of your lady mother, when they visited for the Midwinter festival a few years back. She spent half her time sitting next to a roaring fire, and dressed in the thickest clothing she could find. She was sure she was going to freeze to death.” She glanced at a pair of maidservants standing in a corner. “Is it possible to bathe?”

“Surely, my lady,” one answered. She was lovely, with the dark skin all the natives seemed to share. “There is a bathing chamber not far from here. Many of the ladies of the court use it at this time in the afternoon, to refresh themselves for the evening to come.”

Nora blinked, and Kit bit back a laugh. “I’m sorry? The ladies of the court bathe together?”

“Oh yes,” the second said, her voice full of enthusiasm. She was small and petite. Not even sixteen, Kitiara thought, though her round face and sparkling eyes made her appear even younger. “We do the same, though our chambers are not so luxurious. It is very nice. We sit at our ease, and talk together, and drink chilled juice. Would my ladies like to try it?” Her voice was transparently eager.

“Well,” Kit said, with a challenging glance at Nora. “Why not?”

“You are a bad influence,” Nora said to the princess as they stood in the antechamber of the bathing rooms. Around them, other women slowly undressed, and the air was thick steam and the smell of scented soap.

“Nonsense,” Kitiara said, tossing her black curls. “Mother sent me here to learn about other lands, didn’t she? How am I to learn if I hide in my rooms all day long? Besides,” she continued, “I was hot and grubby and starting to smell. I want a bath and a glass of wine and my dinner.”

“But,” she fumbled for words. “Together?”

“If I recall,” the young woman said, her eyes gleaming, “one of the first conversations we had ended up with you dumping me in the bathtub and pouring a bucket of water over my head.”

“But…” Words were no use, but she saw Kitiara’s eyes widen as she finally realized the source of her discomfort.

“Oh! Seven gods, Nora, I’m sorry.” She lowered her voice, eyes flicking from side to side. “Do you want to leave? I don’t want you to feel… uncomfotable.”

She closed her eyes, fighting against the sudden spasm of desire, brought on as sleek, lovely bodies slowly came into view. “I’m perfectly fine,” she said, her voice rough. “I’m not a man, thank the gods.”

“If you were,” Kit said wickedly, “you’d have a hard time hiding how you felt! Poor things, with their…organs…out where anyone can see them!”

She shook her head scoldingly, then began to undo the laces of her bodice. Kitiara had been right about one thing. The long ocean voyage, with bathing done in tepid salt-water, if it was done at all, had left them both more than a little…fragrant. And the heat of the day had done nothing to make them any less offensive to a delicate nose. She sighed with relief as her gown pooled around her feet, then stepped out of her shoes and her linen underdrawers.

“Leave them here, my lady,” a bathing attendant said, ignoring her nudity. She nodded at a large woven basket. “They will be cleaned and returned to your rooms.”

Suppressing the urge to cover her breasts and groin with her hands, Eleanora turned to Kitiara, who grinned at her cheerfully. “Ready?”

“I suppose,” she muttered, following the younger woman out the door.

A huge room met her astonished gaze. If she had any doubts about the wealth of Chernavog, they were dispersed immediately. Poor Delania, just recovering from war and internal strife, could never support something so needlessly luxurious. Bright sunlight arrowed down from windows set high in the walls, and around the edges of the enclosure, maidservants walked on silent feet, bearing trays filled with cups, or bore large stacks of towels or vials of unguents.

As her eyes grew accustomed to the light, she saw that what had appeared at first glance to be one huge bathing area was, in reality, several separate

pools. From some, steam rose. Others seemed much cooler. Women lounged at their ease, their hair unbound, their arms spread along the edges, smiling and chatting with each other.

“Father told me about this,” Kitiara said from her position at her side. She nodded at one pool, from which steam rose. “The calidarium. The water is heated from beneath.” Another nod indicated a pool into which several younger girls were jumping with excited shrieks. “The frigidarium. Father says that at this time of the year, Uncle Hyssel has ice brought down from the mountains to keep the water cold.”

She swallowed. “I don’t care to boil like a lobster, or to catch my death of cold.”

“Ah. The tepidarium, then? Nice and warm, but not too hot?”

“That sounds…pleasant.”

They made their way gingerly around the fringes of the room, until they found a pool that was unused. Nora sank into the water with a sigh of relief, grateful that the water hid her body from prying eyes. Kitiara placed herself opposite her, sitting on one of the convenient stone seats under the surface of the water, polished smooths by generations of women, her bright gaze looking around the room curiously.

“Well, I can see where father gets his looks,” she said. “Look at them all. Its like the gods made one and then copied them over and over.”

Indeed, the room was filled with tan-skinned, black-haired women. Brown hair was a relative rarity, and red-heads and blondes practically nonexistent. “They could all be your sisters,” Nora agreed, reaching for a wooden container filled with sweet-smelling soap. “Or aunts. Or mothers.”

“How does it feel, being the exotic one?” Kitiara replied. She waggled her eyebrows teasingly. “Maybe here you can taste the fruit of Alianna’s vine a little more freely. I am sure there are plenty of high-born ladies eager to see if that skin of yours is as soft as it looks. So pale! How do northern women keep their lovers warm at night?” she simpered, pulling an outrageous face.

“Brat,” Nora scolded, but she could not help but smile at her teasing. She spread the soft soap over her skin, sighing as she bathed. The feeling of being clean was wonderful. She rinsed, then ducked her head, scrubbing at her scalp. As she rose from the water, shaking her head and throwing her hair back over her shoulders, she noticed Kitiara watching her, a strange expression on her face. “What?”

“Nothing.” The younger woman blinked and looked away. “How clever,” she said, examining the surface of the pool. “Look. The dirty water is carried away, and clean water comes to take its place! Do you think if I asked very nicely, Uncle Hyssel may give us the loan of a few of his craftsmen? I wouldn’t mind having something like this at home.”

She began to reply, thinking that such a project might very well bankrupt the royal treasury, when a lissome young woman bent low, bearing a pair of metal goblets on a tray. “Chilled wine, mistress?” she asked, her voice low and sweet.

“Thank you,” Kitiara replied, taking one, and handing the second to Nora. It proved to be full of a clear white wine, cold enough to make her gasp.

She took a long sip, glancing around the room, full of women. They ranged in age from old grand-dames, gray and wrinkled, to girls who seemed to be barely out of childhood, laughing and splashing like a group of young seals.

And some were close to her own age, their bodies firm and curved and lovely.

She swallowed, trying to keep the desire she was feeling from showing on her face. A look across the pool saw Kitiara, watching her with sympathy.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly. “It never gets easier, does it?”

“No. It doesn’t.” Her voice was flat. Tearing her gaze away from the temptations that surrounded her, she concentrated on the princess.

But even that was not as easy as it had been even a few years ago. Kitiara had matured into a stunning young woman. A few finger widths taller than

Nora, her dark skin was clean and unblemished, her violet eyes clear and bright. And her body, while lacking the lush ripeness of her mother's, was slim and lithe. As Kit wrung out the sodden mass off her black hair, allowing it to fall in a wet cable across her chest, Nora's eyes were drawn to the swells of her breasts, sitting just below the surface. The water lapped around the tops, tiny wavelets leaving sun-speckled diamonds on her skin.

"Nora? Can I ask you a question?" Kitiara grimaced nervously, then finished in a rush "Did you. And my mother. Ever? You know?"

She gaped at Kit, then laughed. "Seven gods, no! Though I would have, if I'd the chance. And the queen knew it, too. She had me figured out before my fifteenth birthday. I would have jumped into her bed if she had so much as crooked a finger at me. The first time I saw her I thought she was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen."

Kit blinked rapidly, then drained her goblet of wine. She stood up, so suddenly a wave surged across the pool. "I thought so. I'm tired of this. Why don't we go back to our rooms and eat?"

Since their clothes were still being laundered, they put on cotton robes which covered them from shoulder to ankle and hurried back through the corridors to their rooms, giggling like a pair of children committing a prank. However, neither of them was prepared for what waited for them when they returned to their suite.

"What," Nora said slowly, "is this?"

Two women stood side-by-side. A matching pair of men stood a few steps away. One of the women took a step forward. A long, tan length of thigh emerged from the slit in her robe, which was scandalously short and thin. Her large, firm breasts strained at the fabric, and the belt was so loosely knotted that it threatened to fall open at every movement.

"We are here for your pleasure, Highness," she said to Kitiara. "And yours, my lady," she continued, nodding politely to Eleanora.

“What? All of you?” Kitiara looked like someone had hit her over the head with a hammer.

“Certainly, Highness.” One of the two men in the room bowed, graceful as a dancer. He was clad only in a short pair of billowy trousers, so thin she could almost see through them. His chest was well-muscled and gleaming with oil, and his face was exquisitely sculpted. Even Nora felt a sudden twist in her heart at his beauty. “King Hyssel contracted us for your pleasure. As long as you are our guest.

“Tell us. Who would you prefer? Myself? My friend here? One of the ladies? Or both? Or perhaps all of us together? We are well-trained,” he assured her earnestly, his blue eyes deep as the ocean. “You will not find us lacking in skill. We can give you such pleasure as you have only dreamed of.”

“Are you from Alianna’s temple? Or are you a member of the guild? Or are you pleasure-slaves?” A dangerous note entered Nora’s voice.

“We are none of these, gracious lady.” As gracefully as a willow, the second woman bowed, then stepped close, drawing a finger down her arm. Her eyes were wide and guileless. Nora had to close her eyes against a sudden rush of desire as she caught her scent, a combination of citrus and musk. “The king keeps us in his employ for the…entertainment…of his guests. It is a task we take up with pride.”

“And pleasure,” one of the men added. “At least when his guests are as lovely as you and the princess. Please,” he said, and to Nora’s shock, she could see that the man was visibly aroused. “Let us serve you.”

“Thank you.” To Nora’s ear, she could not tell what the strangled tone in Kitiara’s voice meant. Was she holding back laughter? Embarrassment? Or fury? “But I do not believe that I require your skills this evening. I am tired. All that I wish for is a meal and an early night.”

The second man spread his arms, showing his hands. “I am skilled in the arts of massage, Highness. And Elwen…well, all women love her mouth. Perhaps…”

“No.” Her voice was firm. “I thank you. And perhaps another night I will partake of His Highness’ generosity. But for now I bid you good night.”

Slowly, reluctantly, they left the suite. “If you should wake in the night and desire company,” the first man said, pausing at the entrance of their rooms. “You have only to ask. Simply tell the guard at your door. They have been made aware of the king’s gift.”

Not trusting herself to speak, Kitiara simply nodded.

“King’s gift,” Nora swore, when the doors had finally closed behind them. “King’s arrogance is more like it! He must think we’re fools, to stick our hands in such an obvious trap!”

Fuming, she asked the maidservants to bring them a meal. It appeared in moments, as if it had been waiting for her word. When the smiling girl set it on a low table in front of them, Nora dismissed the servants for the night and shut the doors firmly behind them. Sighing, she sat down on the couch opposite her charge.

“It was a trap?” Kitiara asked, taking up a piece of cheese. Cold breads and thinly sliced meats and fruits completed the tray, and she began to eat hungrily.

“Of course it was! Well,” she admitted reluctantly. “Not just a trap. I am sure the king was merely displaying courtesy. Or what passes for it in this den of vice and decadence. But all of the old fox’s gifts have two edges. He would have been very pleased to insinuate a spy into your bedchamber so easily. Who knows what information he might have cozened out of you in pleasant pillow-talk?”

She stood and paced the room, feeling hot and out of sorts in her heavy robe. Should she feel good that Kitiara had avoided the trap? Or angry that it was so obvious? Did the king really think they were such enormous fools?

“Here.” Kit stood in front of her, holding up a pair of gauze-like garments. “Take off that damned thing and put this on before you start to sweat again.”

“What,” she asked, staring, “is that?”

“It’s a lounging robe. It’s what they wear here in the summer. Father got one for Mother at Midwinter a few years ago. How he laughed when she blushed! Come on, Nora,” she said impatiently, unbelting her own robe and letting it fall to the floor. With a few quick movements, she had put on the new garment, and sighed happily at how much cooler she felt. “There’s no one here but us.”

“I will wear no such thing. It’s completely indecent.”

“What? And sit there and sweat? It will be hours until the sea breeze cools off the city.” She caught and held Nora’s eyes, letting a touch of command enter her voice.

“Put. It. On.”

“Brat.” With a shake of her head, Nora undid the belt of her robe, folding it carefully and lying it over one arm of the sofa. Face flaming, she put on the new piece of clothing.

Truth be told, it was very comfortable. Much more so than the hot, heavy cotton robe. The neck was deeply cut, and the hem reached no further than the tops of her thighs. She would never have dared to wear something so short at home in the palace, where anyone might walk into her rooms and see her. But here, with the warm air in the room cooling the fire in her nether regions, set aflame by the sight of so many beautiful women in the bathing chamber, it seemed completely practical.

“Here.” Kitiara poured her a goblet of wine and passed it across the table, and then loaded a plate with bread, cheese, and meat and did the same. “We have one night to ourselves at least, before we have to be royalty again.” She sighed. “I do get tired of being the princess.”

“Better a princess than the Royal Brat,” Nora smiled. “I can’t even imagine how she would have reacted to such a gift.”

Kitiara snorted. “Oh, I can! She would have taken it as no more than was her due. And being the greedy little bitch that she was, she would have taken all four of them to her bed, and left none for you.”

Her legs shifted under the gauze-like material of the robe, making it ride higher on her thighs. Nora swallowed. For months, she had been fighting a battle against herself, not daring to acknowledge how attractive the younger woman was becoming. “Tell me,” Kitiara continued, her lips curving in a grin. “Which one would have you taken to bed? The tall one? You could have climbed her like a tree.”

“They were all lovely,” Nora replied. She held up a hand and wiggled her fingers. “Which one of these is more attractive?”

“What?” Kitiara leaned back, her lips curling in a disbelieving smile. “The men, too?”

She shrugged, her face heating. “Yes.”

Kit shook her head. “Unbelievable. I would have sworn that you have never found a man attractive in your entire life, Nora.”

“And how should I have found a man attractive?” she flared, upset at her gentle mockery. “I was thirteen when I came to court, Kit. Thirteen! Should I have chosen a husband from among the pimply, stupid louts whose fathers farmed the lands around Buckhallow? They only had one thing on their minds. This,” she said, pointing at the spot between her legs. She was ashamed to feel her eyes pricking with tears.

“And when I came to court, when your mother chose me as Companion, I traded one set of fools for another. They didn’t want me. They didn’t want the brown-haired farmer’s girl who was in way over her head. No. They wanted the Heir’s Companion. All they saw was the power I could bring them. How if I married them, they could use me to influence you and the queen.”

Kitiara raised her brows, but did not respond to her unusual spate of ill-temper. “So you could bed a man, do you think?” Her voice was softly pensive.

“I could,” she sighed, suddenly tired. “I will never stop wanting women. But I could do it. With a man. I even wonder what it would be like, sometimes. The last time I was at the temple, I almost asked for one. But it would have to be the right man. Someone who was completely unconcerned with rank, and privilege, and power. Someone who was lovely, not just in his body, but in his soul. Someone I was sure was not trying to use me, or you, or your mother the queen.”

A tear ran down her cheek, and she sniffled. “Rotten brat,” she said, her lips trembling in a weak smile. “How do I always end up telling you everything?”

“Because you love me,” Kitiara said cheerfully, finishing her wine. She got up and walked to the sideboard, pouring another measure into her cup.

“Arrogant, too.” Nora drained her own goblet. The wine was stronger than what she was used to, rich and red, and she was beginning to feel pleasantly muzzy around the edges of her mind. “I obviously didn’t paddle you often enough when you were a child.”

“Maybe you should start doing it again.” To her utter astonishment, Kitiara bent over the arm of the couch that faced hers. The position put her rear only a foot or so away from her face. “Would you like to paddle me?” she asked, her voice suddenly low and sultry. “Paddle me, sweet Eleanora, and turn my little bottom nice and rosy pink?”

With one hand, she flipped up the hem of her robe, letting it rest on her back. The motion exposed the sweet tan globes of her bottom. And below, soft and delicate, the faintest hints of her nether lips, tender as the petals of a snowflower.

“Stop it.” Her voice was harsh with pain, and to her mortification, she felt herself growing wet, the faint tingling in her breasts growing more and more pronounced. “Don’t…don’t do this. Don’t, Kit. I can’t stand it.”

“No? Maybe you should…punish me. That’s what I deserve, for teasing you.” Kit swayed back and forth, and leaned lower, spreading her legs. Her voice deepened. “I’ve been very naughty, Eleanora.” The sound of her name on her lips made her shiver. As she watched, Kit removed one hand from the arm of the sofa and placed it between her legs, gently stroking.

“I want it,” she whispered. “And I know you want me. I’ve seen it in your face. Felt it whenever we touch.” Her eyes were wet and pleading as she looked over her shoulder. “You’ve given your entire life to the kingdom, Nora. Can you not let me do this one thing for you?”

She laughed, sharp and jagged. “By spanking you?”

“To start.” Her hips began to rock, slow and steady, and Nora suddenly knew that she was pressing her mound against the arm of the couch. “Alianna and all her lovers! Please, Nora! I need it!”

As if she were in a dream, she got to her feet. Her steps were unsteady as she slowly made her way around the low table. Standing at Kitiara’s side, she let her hand settle at the nape of her neck, Slowly, she drew it down the length of her back, watching as it curved, exactly as a cat might arch into a petting hand. Her blood burned as she felt the satin-smooth skin, the heat of her flesh. From her neck, down the spine, feeling the tiny dimples of her backbone, down to the cleft of her buttocks, spread sweetly, trustingly, for her.

She drew her hand back sharply and struck the princess across her rear, the smack of her palm striking her echoing throughout the room. Her other hand knotted in the unbound length of her sable hair, pulling her head high.

“Wretched slattern,” she hissed, bending low so she could whisper into her ear. “Is this how a princess behaves? Spreading your legs, shameless as any two-penny whore who would sell herself for a beaker of brandy?”

Kitiara struggled, pulling back against her hand, then hissed as Nora’s hand tightened in her hair. “You’re not going anywhere.” Her other hand slapped her rear a second time, then a third, then found a rhythm, spanking her

bottom. She took just enough time after every stroke to allow Kit to think that she had stopped, then swatted her again.

And oh, didn't it feel good to have her under her, completely helpless within the power of her hands? Her center burned with arousal as Kit twisted and struggled, her voice broken and pleading, making helpless promises, swearing to be good.

"Yes," she promised. "You will be good. Good to me." She pulled her head up, twisting her neck around, then consummated the desire of a hundred sleepless nights, kissing the princess, forcing her lips open with her tongue, then plundering inside, taking her mouth by force.

Kitiara's reaction stunned her. In a tiny corner of her mind, she knew that the princess, trained in self-defense under the captain of the queen's own guard, could have thrown her off any time she chose and then pummeled her to a bloody pulp. Instead, she submitted, returning her kiss with a blazing passion that left them both gasping. Before she knew it, Kitiara had grasped her wrist in her hand, moving her hand down, down, down, placing it at her core.

She burned. Her nether lips blazed with heat, hot and swollen and dripping with moisture, and at her first tentative touch, Kit mewled, keening needfully as she probed at the dew-slick petals.

"Please," the princess panted, spreading her legs even wider. Her back was slick with sweat, gleaming in the low light of the candles. "Take me. Your fingers. Inside me. Take me hard."

This was all too much. Too fast. She wanted to stop, to think, to try to make sense of it all. But somehow she knew that to do so would destroy the fragile balance between them. You couldn't explain desire, or how it might suddenly flare up. Could one describe a sunset to a woman who was blind?

Instead, she curled her fingers together, making them rigid, then thrust them into the Heir, pushing them deep, as deep as she could go, the inner sheath opening before her.

“Oh, Gods. So good. Don’t stop, Nora.” Her velvet walls clutched at her. “Please, don’t stop.”

Over and over she thrust into her, her fingers, then her entire hand, becoming coated with her essence. Soft squelching noises arose from where her fingers entered her, and the musk of her arousal surrounded them like a cloud. Slowly the princess sank, sagging down as if her legs didn’t have enough strength to support her body, until she was lying prone on the couch, one leg lifted lewdly onto the back, the other drooping to the floor. Nora fell to her knees on the floor, kneeling above the beautiful girl, watching as her breasts wobbled in the candlelight as her gleaming fingers pierced her over and over again.

Kit’s eyes were closed, her mouth curled in a rapturous smile. “So good,” she whispered, her hands rising to slowly knead her breasts. “Kiss them, sweet Nora,” she pleaded.

Nora, bent low, taking one dark nipple into her mouth. The taut flesh seemed to swell in her mouth, and suddenly inspired, she bit down lightly, scraping the sensitive flesh with her teeth.

Kitiara’s hips bucked beneath her, raising her above the couch. Her head thrashed from side to side, and a low, keening scream emerged from her lips.

Terrified that she had gone too far, Nora lifted her head, only to find an arm clamped around her neck, forcing her back down. “Again!” Kitiara demanded, and she bit down, nipping the high-standing nipple over and over, then flicking it with her tongue, bathing it in her saliva.

“Sweet goddess above, Alianna of the stars, bless your servant.” Kitiara’s voice was trembling, her eyes fixed on something only she could see. Her hands crept down to the top of her folds, her fingers urgently rubbing. Her hips pumped up, meeting Nora’s strokes. Her head arched back, the cords in her throat standing out in stark relief.

“Yes!” she screamed, and Nora’s hand was flooded with wetness, the muscles of her core clenching around her fingers as her climax broke over

her. On and on it went, her body shaking with the force of her release, tears trickling form the corners of her eyes until Nora kissed them away.

Suddenly they focused, looking at her with frightening intensity. Then, with the speed of a striking snake, she pulled her down to her, kissing her passionately, her arms crushing their two bodies together.

“Please, Eleanora,” she panted, when their bruised lips parted. “Let me please you.” Completely ignoring her disheveled state, she stood, sliding her hands under the sides of Nora’s robe. “Mother and Father made sure I was taught very well. And quite thoroughly.” She smiled, happy as a cat with an unguarded bowl of cream, as her fingers glided up Nora’s rib cage to her breasts. “It would be a terrible thing for me to go to my marriage bed ignorant.”

Irresistibly, her hands guided her down to the couch, but Nora pulled away. “No.” She shook her head. “Not here.

“The bedroom. Take me to the bedroom, my lady.”

If Nora hadn’t known better, she would have suspected the wine had been spiked with an aphrodisiac.

But she did know better. Not only would that be a personal affront to the gods, to take away their free will, but Prince-Consort Roland had told her himself that his people scorned such foolish tricks.

“We are masters of the arts of love.” His confident voice echoed in her mind. “None of us need to stoop so low. Of course,” he had continued, slanting a teasing look at his wife, “Some of your people do have a small bit of native talent, which we do our best to nurture.”

Queen Laurelin, Eleanora remembered with a smile, had thrown a crocheted pillow at her husband following that remark.

So she spun, trying to preserve her dignity, though that was difficult to do when the only thing she was wearing was a sheer garment that would have had her brought up on charges as an unregistered prostitute had she been foolish enough to wear it in public back home.

“Why?” she demanded instead. “Why me?”

Kitiara smiled at her, her tumbling fall of black hair and the tan skin of her candlelit body accentuating the glory of her innocent nudity. “Because you love me,” she replied simply.

“Well,” she floundered, completely at a loss for words. “Of course I do. But why should that make me special? I know you prefer men to women. Seven gods in heaven! You’ve never made any secret of that before, when you were discussing your conquests! And you’ve never given any indication you might share my…my desires! Why now?”

Kitiara shook her head, as she might do with a small child who did not understand what she had just said. “Didn’t you hear me? I know you love me.” She took Nora’s hand and placed it between her breasts. “Truly know.

“Did Mother ever give you her lecture about how people will lie to royalty?”

She nodded. “Yes.” One side of her mouth lifted at the memory. “It was right after I first met you, during a meal in your parents’ chambers.

“I thought you were the most spoiled, disgusting little monster alive. And the queen asked me to be your Companion. She said that people lied to royalty. And a queen needed, truly needed, someone they could depend on to tell them the truth. Your mother had Roland.”

“And now I have you.” Kitiara raised up to kiss her lips. Nora’s hands slid down, and she grasped her rear, feeling her nails prick into her flesh. The princess shivered and moaned into her mouth.

“My mother made a terrible mistake with her first marriage,” she said when they parted. “And it nearly cost her her life and her throne. I will not do the

same. I will never," she said fiercely, "Take anyone to my bed, man or woman, who does not care for me, who does not hold my honor as high as his own.

"You do. I know it. My mother has it. And her mother before her. The power to sense truth when we touch. I can feel you love for me, Eleanora."

"But why did you wait?" she wailed, dreadfully confused and overcome by emotion.

"Who was it who told me there were no secrets in court?" she replied, pushing her slowly backward, until her legs hit the side of the bed. She sat down, then lay down as Kit's hand pressed her firmly flat. "You did. Here," she said, "no one knows us. So know one will be able to note any change in our behavior.

"I love you, Eleanora. I want you to be happy. I couldn't confide in you back home. I didn't dare. It would have hurt you too much, to tell you how I felt, but to be unable to act on it. Would I show a starving man a loaf of bread, then hold it out of his reach?

"But here I can act." She kissed her way down her body, her hot wet mouth gliding across her skin. Nora shivered as her tongue traced patterns of desire on her breasts, and when she tasted her nipples for the first time, she arched her back, shuddering.

"You see me. You see me. Kitiara Tanthalasa. Not the Princess. Not the Heir. Not the daughter of a traitor. Me. Myself. Both the good and the bad. Both Kit and the Brat. The bright candle and the dark shadow. None of the rest of them do. None of them see me," she said bleakly. "They see my mother's power or my father's treachery. Or they see the crown I will wear someday. But none of them see me.

"Not like you. The first time I laid eyes on you, I knew you were different, Eleanora." Her voice caressed her name. "I was a rotten little shit and I treated you like horse dung. But you didn't lie to my mother to try to win her favor. You told the truth. That I was a little monster."

Her hands slid over her thighs, and Nora found herself helplessly opening to her. “Oh, you smell wonderful,” Kitiara said, breathing in deeply. “You were everything I wanted to be. Calm. Poised. Beautiful.”

“Beautiful?” She laughed, half believing Kit was mocking her. “Me? Compared to you, I’m a plow-horse. You are lovely, Kitiara. Half the women in the kingdom would kill to have your hair and eyes and skin.”

“Really?” She blew a warm puff of air at her middle, and Nora felt herself melting. “I was the one who had to look at my face in the mirror every day. And for years, all I saw was a traitor’s child looking back at me. I would have traded bodies with you in an instant.

“But you taught me that I was my own person. Not the daughter of Welston the traitor.” She kissed the inside of her leg, then moved closer, her soft lips and licking tongue coming closer and closer still, her hands reaching up to cup her breasts. “I was Kitiara.

“Now be quiet. And let me love you.”

Oh, Nora thought through the roaring in her mind. So this is what ‘making love,’ feels like.

For a moment, she nearly wept, as Kitiara softly licked at her womanhood, her fingers and tongue alike paying homage to the heart of her femininity. Over the years, she had fallen into a routine. Once every month or two, when the promptings of her body grew too urgent to ignore, she would discreetly take a carriage to the high temple of Alianna, and there she would contract one of the sacred prostitutes for a night of pleasure. Never the same one twice, of course. And she was very careful not to let them know who she truly was.

As a result, those encounters were always vaguely unsatisfying. Though the women were, of course, uniformly lovely, and they never failed to bring her to release, often multiple times, there was never the sort of deep connection she had sensed in truly lifemated couples, such as her parents, or with the

queen and Prince-Consort Roland, or even with rat-faced Lord Elcarth and his lady, Spymistress Tenille

As Kitiara's tongue dove deep inside her, Nora knew, truly knew, that there was nothing in the world more important to her, at that instant, than her own pleasure.

The thought was as thrilling as it was terrifying, and even as she spread her legs wide, even as she moved slowly, languidly on the bed, seeking by gentle touch to show Kit the way to bring her the most joy, even as she covered the Heir's hands with her own, pushing them more firmly onto her heaving breasts, there was the certainty that this would all have to be paid for later.

But for now, only the moment mattered.

Kitiara murmured, low in her throat, and as Nora looked down the length of their bodies, joined like some strange, two-backed animal, she could not help but feel a sudden surge of pride that the amazing young woman between her legs was hers. Her hands left her breasts, and she knew instinctively what she intended next.

"No, sweetling." She gently intercepted one hand before it could try to enter her. "That's not what I want. Here," she said, laying her fingers on her mound. The other was place back on her breast, encouraging her to massage the firm flesh. "Press down. Rub it. Both of them. Yes, that's it. Oh, you make me feel so good. Now. Move your mouth higher. Higher. Yes. There." As Kitiara found her pearl, her breath began to come fast and shallow. "Not so hard. Yes. That's it. Faster. With the tongue. Please. Oh, sweet Alianna, thou hast blessed your handmaiden. Hear your servant's prayer. Please. Please. Please. Pleeassse," she sobbed, as her climax, stronger and slower and mightier than any she had ever experienced, rolled through her like a wave, obliterating her conscious thought.

When she came back to herself, she found herself curled on her side, blinking into Kit's concerned face. "Nora? Are you well?"

“Well?” she repeated stupidly. Her brains felt like someone had lopped off the top of her skull and stirred them with a stick. “Well doesn’t…exactly… cover it.”

“But I made you feel good? Right?”

Good? The idea was so ridiculous that Nora giggled, then gave vent to something that sounded like an insane cackle. Laughing, she grabbed Kit by the waist and rolled over and over in the preposterously large bed.

“Yes, sweetling,” she whispered, dotting her face with kisses. “You made me feel good. Better than anyone ever has.”

“Oh.” Kit relaxed. “Well, that’s all right, then. You made me worried.” Smiling, she lay down beside Nora, her head pillowed on her shoulder, her hand laid over her belly. Her fingers slowly combed through the closely-trimmed patch of hair on her pubis; not trying to arouse – simply seeking to convince herself that what they had just shared was real.

“I didn’t hurt you, did I?” One of Nora’s hands drifted down her back to settle over her rear. The cheek still felt hot, and the tiniest bit raw.

“Just a little.” She turned her head to kiss her Companion’s cheek. “And I wanted you to.”

“So where did this sudden urge to be…to be…” Nora stumbled, trying to find the right word.

“Dominated?” she suggested.

“Yes. Where did that come from?”

“Who can say?” She hugged Nora close. “Mother told me that something might manifest, when I became a woman and wed, or began to take lovers. They still tell stories about her grandmother, you know. Some claim she was a witch. Others say she had a sickness in the blood, which was passed down to her descendants.” One shoulder rose in a tiny shrug.

“But no one denies our line is…odd…when it comes to the ways of love. Great-grandmere Vittalia scandalized the entire court with her ways, before her husband put her aside. Her son, my grandfather, took so many lovers that he ignored crucial matters until our friendly neighbors to the west hired an army of mercenaries to do their dirty work.”

“And Queen Laurelin?” she prompted curiously.

“Mother? Do you really want to know?”

“If you think she wouldn’t mind you telling me.”

“Ah, Mother.” One cheek dimpled. “Apparently she has this…aversion…to wearing her smallclothes. She says it excites her to hold court or to sit at a council meeting with only her gown for covering.

“And she says she loves to tease the prince-consort. They both know, but no one else does. She says it makes him very…forceful…when they are finally alone.”

“And for you…”

“Pain. Not a lot. Just a little. Enough to add some danger.” She got up, splendid in her nudity, and left the room. When she returned, she had the tray of food and a pair of re-filled wine cups.

“We are going to have so much fun together,” she promised, lifting a berry to Nora’s lips. When she bit down, juice spilled over her chin, and she licked it off, her tongue lapping at her skin like a cat. “Away from everyone else. Here where no one knows us. I can be me. And you can be you.

“And when we get back, we will be different people.”

Nora swallowed, for the first time taking in the enormity of what they had just done. “Kit. Sweetling. I don’t want you…” She clutched her hands together to hide their shaking. “You have the rest of your life to think about. Don’t ruin it for my sake.”

Kit blinked at her in confusion. “Ruin it? How could loving you ruin my life?”

“You’re the Heir! You must take a husband. Sire a child. Children. Take the throne when your time comes.

“Will you throw it all away for me? Renounce your claim in favor of Ashkelon? Or rule for years with no Heir to come after you?”

“Hush.” Kitiara patted her on the hand as if she were a child just awakened from a bad dream. “You’re jumping at shadows.

“I have no intention of any of the things you suggest. I love having you in my bed, Eleanora. Nothing will change that. But if you think I don’t want a good stiff cock between my legs once in a while, or,” a wicked smile as she stood and walked to a large cabinet standing against the far wall, “more often than that, you’re losing your wits.

“I intend to have it all, Nora. You. And a husband who will love me for myself, not my power and crown.

“Ah.” She threw the doors open. “As I thought. My uncle the king made provision for us. Come on over, Nora. You can choose.”

“Choose what?” She propped herself up on one elbow

Kit looked over her shoulder, her skin gleaming in the lamplight. “Father called them ‘his little helpers.’ He and Mother and I had a long talk before we left. I think he was trying to prepare me for what I might be exposed to, here. And after what my uncle just offered us…”

She trailed off and, curious, Nora left the bed and walked over to the cabinet, wrapping her arms around Kitiara’s slim waist and resting her chin on her shoulder as she peered within.

Gleaming metal, polished wood, supple leather and more met her gaze. The cabinet was filled with all sorts of esoteric material, the purposes of most of which was completely beyond her. “What…”

“Aids to love, Father called them.” Kit picked up a wooden handle which trailed soft deerskin thongs. She snapped it down, making the thongs whistle through the air. “You could use these on my back. If I was not satisfying you properly, my love. Or this.” A paddle with a long flat blade suddenly appeared in her hand. “Much easier to use than your hand.”

Nora blushed, remembering the scene in the sitting room. She picked up a carven wooden phallus, its surface polished and gleaming with oil, so well-made it seemed to almost pulse in her hand. She fingered it curiously, wondering how it would feel inside her. And if she dared to try it.

She looked up to see Kit eying her. “It might help you, dearest,” she said softly. “It’s nothing to be frightened of, if you find the right man. In fact,” she breathed, putting her hand over hers, and pushing them down until the tip brushed her belly. “You might enjoy it.”

“You know nothing of what I want,” she snapped. “Do you think I am pleased so easily?”

She stared hard at the princess, until she dropped her eyes. “Forgive me,” she whispered. “I spoke out of turn.”

She shook her head, strands of hair flying about her cheeks. “I think you need to do more than that. Turn around.” When Kit complied, she reached into the bureau, grabbing a pair of silver objects. With a dexterity she had not known she possessed, she set the padded silver clamps, connected by a thin gold chain, onto Kit’s nipples.

“Oh!” The younger woman shuddered, her eyes glazing, as Nora hooked a finger around the chain and guided her back to the bed. The motion lifted her breasts, making them even more lovely, and Nora felt her center grow hot and molten, liquid pooling inside her.

“Now,” she said, keeping her voice stern and matter-of-fact, much as she had when a much younger Kitiara was threatening to throw a tantrum. “If you do a good job on me with this…thing…I’ll take the clamps off. But if you do a bad job,” she continued, suppressing a smile, as Kit whimpered in dismay. “I’ll never put them on again.”

She lay back on the bed, easing her legs open, trying to ignore the way her heart pounded. “Make me feel it,” she commanded the Heir to the Kingdom. “Make me feel the way it would. With a man.”

Kit knelt on the bed. “As you wish,” she said, with a nod so deep it was nearly a bow. “But do remember, my dearest love, that no toy, no matter how skilled, can possibly compete with the hands – or cock – of a skilled lover.”

“Less talking,” Nora said, using the chain to pull her down until their lips were almost touching. “And more pleasing.”

Kitiara was thrilled.

She had been worried that, after the first frantic passion of their desire had worn off, Eleanora might retreat. Might back away into the protective shell she had built around herself, like the marsh-birds with their tiny nests of clay and reeds.

But instead, she had been eager to explore, and with the silver clamps fastened to her nipples, every motion pulling and dragging at her breasts until she thought they would burst with pleasure, she kissed her new-minted lover, trying to convince her with lips and tongue how very much she cared for her.

“A good lover,” she said softly, when their lips parted, “will never force you, whether you lie with a woman or a man. A good man will make sure you are wet and ready for him.” She ran a finger teasingly up her thigh until it reached Alianna’s Flower. The petals were hot and wet and slick, and she kissed her again. “But you’re already ready for me, aren’t you, sweet Eleanora?” She dropped the tip of the phallus down until it was wedged against her cleft.

“Imagine this,” she said, her breath whispering against the older woman’s ear. “Imagine a man, strong and handsome and loving, braced above you, his strong arms holding you safe and tender.

“And he wants you so much, gentle Nora. His shaft is hot and hard and throbbing, the blood pumping through him. Little by little he eases inside you. Not hurting. Not rough. But slow and gentle, for your pleasure is his reward. He kisses your breasts,” she said, doing the same. Through slitted eyes, she could see that Nora had closed her own, and that her face was slack with pleasure. “And touches your beautiful pink nipples with his tongue.

“And you watch his face change when he is inside you. Oh, Eleanora,” she sighed. “I hope you see it one day. That you find your man, and are brave enough to make him your lover. The sight of his face as he enters you for the first time will be graven on your heart forever.”

Her finger curled around the ring at the bottom of the pleasure-toy, and slowly pulled it out of Nora’s crease. She made a soft, protesting sound, and Kit’s lips curled in a smile. The older woman might prefer women, but she would wager her jewels that if she found the right man, someone who didn’t see Nora as either a stepping stone to greater power or as a powerful woman to be feared, she would find as much joy as any woman with a man.

Perhaps more.

But who could it be? Her quick mind considered and discarded a dozen candidates, even as she pleasured her companion until her breath was coming quick and fast, and her pale pink nipples standing hard and high on her chest. Her hands caught the back of her head, forcing her down to her breasts, while her hips began to raise and lower, meeting each pump of her hand with one of their own. She fought back an urge to laugh at the way that, even in bed with an astonishing woman who was just beginning to embrace the reality of her own desirability, she couldn’t help but consider the politics of her Companion’s lifemating.

While you’re at it, why not find a lifemate for yourself, she thought. Better yet, find one for each of you. Or one man for you both! Wouldn’t that set the fox among those clucking hens at court!

She forced back a laugh. Such a thing would shock even her father, who prided himself on his kingdom’s erotic arts, and who had subtly hinted,

more than once, that Delania was a kingdom full of misguided, repressed prudes.

She shook her head, banishing the thought. Why should she pine for something which would never happen when she had a double handful of sweet bounty in her grasp? She moved over Nora, spreading her legs so she could grind her mound down on the hard muscle of her thigh, blessing all the while the long hours of riding which kept her lover's body slim and well-toned, unlike many of the ladies at court, who quickly became fat, doughy blobs.

"How does it feel, my Companion?" she whispered into Eleanora's ear. "Good?" She bit down on one lobe, then licked the delicate, shell-like whorl.

"Yes. It does!" Her voice seemed amazed, and Kit stifled a laugh at the wonder. "I never thought…oh gods," she moaned, as Kit sank the phallus deep inside her. One hand crept down to the junction of her thighs, and by the jerking motion of her arm, Kitiara knew exactly what she was doing.

"Now, do something for me," she begged. "Please, Nora. Pull my nipples. Hard." She gestured to the chain, hanging loose and limp from her chest."

Eleanora looked up at her, doubt in her eye, but in response to her need, she raised a hand and grasped the chain, tugging on it. She bit her lip, trying to hold back her ecstatic cries, as the clamps pulled her passion-stiffened buds away from her chest, stretching them, filling her with delicious pain. Jolts of pleasure lanced down from her chest to her innermost core, and she could feel the wave of her climax building like a thunderstorm on a summer's day.

"Now," she urged her, speeding her strokes, her hand blurring as she filled Nora with the toy, over and over, until the older woman was wide-eyed and gasping, her face full of shock.

"Allianna!" she screamed, her inner sheath clamping down so hard that Kitiara couldn't move the toy. Her thigh rose up, and Kit ground down, one, two, three times, twisting at the end of each stroke, so her woman's bud got

the uttermost pleasure, and then her own climax struck, as sudden and as needful as spring after a long, cold winter, and she muffled her shouts of joy in the warm soft flesh of her lover's breasts, suckling on her nipples until they were both shuddering in rapture.

*****

Several hours later…

"We have got to take some of these things back home."

"Don't worry." A swift, loving kiss. "We will. My uncle is a very generous man."

The End

The adventures of Eleanora and Kitiara will continue, in "Courting the Royal Brat."