

*Meditations
of a Slave*

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To Mom and Dad

Thank you for always loving, encouraging, and affirming me.

Part I

1.

I am a slave. My parents were slaves, and their parents. The debt is an old one, and I don't see any way of paying it back.

My master is rich, there's no doubt of that, but we who serve him rarely see any of his wealth. A few do, but I'd prefer not to talk about them. I do, however, take care of much of his buying in the marketplace. It gets me out of his sight, but it's little better. I have to get the best bargains possible—and that means using anything I can, legal or not. If I don't, my master invariably finds out, and I've faced the beating stone enough in the past to avoid it regularly now.

I used to enjoy the spice of the occasional theft, but now I resort most often to heavy-handed threatening. I'm not a wrestler, but I've got enough muscle to scare the usual hawker. So I keep it mostly legal, especially since I was up before the judge once when I was more foolish. My master didn't raise a finger to help me, and I bore a heavy whipping. Not the forty less one kind, either. But he expects the same use of his money, so I do what I can.

To say the least, there's a hierarchy in his house. Those unmentionables are at the top, then there are his pet favorites—you can usually tell them by their smiles. Some are actually innocent: every so often he picks a girl just into her womanhood, and she doesn't know his tastes. Most, though, you can tell. It's as if oil drips from their mouths as they give you this knowing look and sneer. They are the experts at what they do, and all they care about is the money that comes into their hands and the prestige he gives them. Until they make a mistake, or grow out of their looks, or get ousted by someone better. Then they're forced to the realization that they're still slaves, and they start from the bottom again.

I'm somewhere in the middle. I hold my own, and that's all I care about. I don't bother talking to anyone anymore—not about things that matter. It's too easy for someone to double cross you. I don't really want to move up, because I'd rather see as little of my master as possible. I'm close enough being over part of his purse.

He's not the sort of man you talk to. He's over you, and you know it, and he makes sure you know it. He'll talk to his favorites, but if they had eyes they'd see he was jeering at them all the time. The only times he talks to me are to give me orders or

to punish me. Fortunately, that last hasn't happened in a while. And that's the way I want to keep it.

I'm not sure why the ring on my finger is of blackened metal. It hardly matters, though. The favorites have gold rings and it means the same thing.

2.

I was in the marketplace today. The usual. The shops line the streets, the wares set out in wicker baskets, on tables, and hanging from poles. I had been sent by my master to get cloth for a new tunic and had already bought velvet, a rich deep blue, and was looking at the silk. Turning the bolts of cloth and ignoring the weaseling voice of the proprietor.

There was a rustle of linen beside me and I turned to see Laesha. She's a seamstress, and I always see her at the cloth stalls and with the ribbon, thread, and trimmings. I have talked to her occasionally. She's not quite plump, but isn't slender, and bears herself with a kind of caution that makes her seem soft.

"What are you buying for?" she asked. She ran a hand over the cloth I had just put aside.

"My lord. And you?" She hardly ever approached me, so her starting a conversation was surprising.

"Myself, today." She turned her eyes on me for a moment, then dropped them away just as quickly, looking at the silks. Her eyes were grey.

But I was surprised. "Yourself? How could you get the money?" I looked at her critically before I could catch myself, and she turned crimson.

"My master gave it to me. But not for what you thought!" She was deeply embarrassed, and hurt.

"I'm sorry," I said. "You know my master."

She paled now. "I knew him." She regained her composure. "My master gave it to me to buy what I wanted with it. I want to make myself a new skirt." She glanced at me shyly.

"Well, get a good bargain." I began picking at the silks again myself, but was more interested in watching her. She must have been to the stall before, because she was studying three bolts of cloth that had been set to one side, and the shopkeeper was coaxing her to select one.

She finally chose a demure pattern of pastels and grey, and I watched as the coins changed hands. "You can get a better price than that," I objected. The shopkeeper glared at me.

She turned her eyes on me. "It's a fair price. I know a fair price."

"You could still get better."

She shook her head. "I'm not interested in your kind of 'better.' But—but you should be." The color rose in her cheeks.

"Me! I haven't bought anything yet!"

She held her purchase against herself, and her lip seemed to tremble. "You should ask to be put for sale. See if you can't do better than your master. Your master is just like your bargains!"

I grew angry and clenched my fists. The shopkeeper, who had started to laugh, now began to retreat and to eye his wares with despair.

"As if your master is any different!"

“He is! My Master loves his servants—real love, and real care. Not like your master who orders you to steal and then doesn’t care what happens to you! I’ve even gone into my master’s garden! A beautiful garden, and he talked there with me! So why don’t you try?” She was backing up, frightened now, and aware that people had stopped to stare at us.

Several of them looked very unfriendly. I knew one of them, and made a curt gesture so that he walked abruptly on.

“I’ll think about it, Laesha,” I growled. I turned my back and could hear her footsteps fleeing. I flicked the cloth with my finger. “I’ll come back for one of these.” I stalked out wanting to wreak mayhem, but the cost wouldn’t be worth it. I’d visit another merchant and make a quick buy; I didn’t need any more hassle.

3.

I did a foolish thing. I spoke to my master of being sold.

I had no intention of doing so. I had every intention of letting Laesha's words rot like so many other words. But my master spoke first.

"This isn't all you bought today in the market," he snapped. I wouldn't have seen him at all, but there had been a message for me to report. That alone had chilled me.

"I don't buy what she said," I shot back. I should have known better.

My master's eyes narrowed. "A little less respectful than usual, aren't you? I can encourage you to regain that respect if you want."

"Forgive me, my master." I swallowed hard.

"Twenty lashes should be proper encouragement."

"No, my master! That is, it isn't necessary."

"Then what is? Do you want," and his voice took on infinite scorn, "to be put for sale?"

I let caution fly to the wind. "Yes." I glared at him, even though I couldn't penetrate behind his eyes. "I want to be put for sale. What the hell."

He threw back his head and laughed. "As if anyone would buy a rough-necked foul-mouthed thief like you! Oh, you've done your job for me quite well, quite well!" He leveled his eyes at me abruptly. "You are quite aware, I assume, of my punishment if you don't get bought?"

That made my throat go hard again. There were torments in the courtyard and torments in the dungeon, and I definitely preferred those in the courtyard if I had to choose. But I had the feeling that I'd get the worst if I refused at this point, regardless. "I'm aware. Do it anyway. Put me for sale."

"Sealed." He gave a wolf's smile. "You can always ask to be put up again after tomorrow, but I doubt you'd want to risk it." He dismissed me negligently, and I left. I had signed my own death warrant sometime in that room, and I didn't even know when or where.

4.

Today, true to his word, my master put me for sale. True to his unspoken word, he put me up in the dingiest part of town. It was a place of thieves, prostitutes, and beggars. The selling stand was nearly rotted through, and its proprietor showed black teeth when my master flipped him a gold coin for the use of his table.

"So we wait," said my master. He settled down, and I was forced to stand on the table, subject to the jeers of the passersby.

My body can take pressure, but after seven hours my calves were cramping and my head spinning. The sun baked the dust on the street, and my master gave me a warning look every time I shifted to ease any of my pains. I waited.

In my mind, I made a will, should I not survive my punishment. It consisted far more of words to people than of things, but oddly enough I had only a moment's sorrow for Laesha. No harshness, even though it had been her who had brought me to this place. I knew my master would wait for the moment of sunset, then bring me back. He appeared to take a perverse pleasure in the waiting.

It was late afternoon, and a man on foot came down the street. My master rose, his face ugly.

The gentleman, for his clothes were rich though not showy, looked at me with crystal clear eyes. He smiled, and my master met it with an uncompromising glare.

"He shall come with me." The words were a quiet promise, and he almost chuckled at my unbelieving stare.

My master spat. "I'll charge you a high price for him. He's a liar, a thief, and a braggart. I'm sure your people have been harassed by him before."

The man's face grew hard. "It is not for you to throw charges at him. I offer to take him, not judge him."

"Then give him your offer."

I didn't understand. My master would make it hard for me to be sold, but why was I at all concerned in the haggling? Then the gentleman turned to me.

"I don't need to buy you," he said, in gentle explanation. "Your slavery is not the way you understand it to be. Your family for generations has chosen not to be part of my household, and therein your slavery enters. You had to be part of someone's household, and truly, there are only two, though one of them has many faces." He sighed. "But slavery has its rules, and you were bound by your decision. A slave can leave a house only through his death, but by those same rules, a free life can ransom a bound one. I gave that life. Because I held claim upon you and all your family from the beginning, my free life is able to give release to all in slavery to this one," he gestured to my master, and the motion somehow indicated judgement. He paused. "I had the only free life to give. Even this one himself is under me, but he has left my house."

"I . . ." I was bewildered, and my face showed it. My bravado crumbled before the strangeness of this explanation. I had expected at best a better master. This was clearly the master Laesha belonged to.

He nodded and continued. "To be part of my house, you need only accept the ransom I have already paid for you; for all of you."

"But – " my master cut in, and his face was black with anger, " –he has not told you of the hot iron that shall sear your flesh, how his commands must hold sway in every area of your life, so that even your thoughts must be in keeping with his pleasure. Did I demand that? No, you could hate and think and take your pleasure how you liked. He does not give you simple tasks – no! He demands an absolute obedience!"

The gentleman bore the accusations without taking his gaze from my face. "Freedom, my son, must be found in the context of obedience. Love creates an obedience that transcends duty and becomes a way of life, freeing to you and in fellowship with me." He stopped.

I remembered now. This master had submitted to the life of a slave, and to my own master's maltreatment. And execution. But he was here now, and I faintly understood that it had to do with . . . the King. A person, if he could be called by such a lowly term, about whom I had heard very little. Except that he had all power. Suddenly I had the feeling that there were many things in my life, and in this city, of which I knew only the barest hints.

"So make your decision," my master rasped. "Sunset is drawing close."

The gentleman held up a hand to silence him.

I knew then that true power was dealt with quietly. So many things about this man were shown quietly, yet they vibrated through the air like music. He was trustworthy. He was honest. He truly did care.

"I will come with you," I said haltingly, afraid that I was using the wrong words.

But he smiled broadly. "Then come down. I will take you to your home."

And he lifted a hand for me to grasp as I jumped down. He actually offered it to me. And apparently he knew better than I that I needed it, for my knotted muscles protested the jolt and it was only his steadying grip that kept me from falling.

I straightened, and looked at my former master.

"May you find your new life easy," he said sardonically, and gave a mocking bow.

But my Master shook his head in reproach. "You let your bitterness destroy you." He turned to me. "Come. We will go home."

5.

So I went home. Home. We went through the city, and my Master wove a careful path that avoided busy sections. It seemed that he knew I was still stunned from leaving my former master, and that I was feeling too vulnerable to meet people.

I gave a thought that we weren't going back to my old room at all. My Master obviously didn't intend that I take anything with me. I ran over a list of what was there. It was sparse enough. The only thing that was at all mine in a way I cared about was my knife. It had been made for me by a blacksmith who was as close to a friend as I'd had, but that was over three years ago.

My Master paused. The sun was just setting, and in the red-gold light the white of his tunic took on a brilliant cast. He had a mantle of deep grey slung over one arm, fringed with gold embroidery, and around his neck hung a heavy necklace with a medallion that slipped just beneath his shirt. "Do you want to ask something?" he inquired. His way of speaking was so different; I couldn't detect any will to ridicule or antagonize me. But I didn't want to take the chance.

"No, Master."

He smiled. "You can ask me. And I can guess. I stopped at your room before I came to find you."

I stared at him.

His voice chided me, but only with humor rippling under it. "I knew your friend the blacksmith for a long time before he entered my house. I recognized his handiwork in your knife." He reached to his belt, where I hadn't even realized hung a familiar sheath and hilt. He unhooked it and handed it to me, hilt first.

I reached and took hold of it, but his grasp was still on it. I hesitated. "But understand," he said, "there is blood on it. I do not want you to use it that way again." He relinquished it, and I held it in my hand. "Forgive me, Master," I said in a low voice. It was the phrase I always used, but his words and clear tone made me lift my head up, startled.

"I do forgive you. I will always forgive you. But mean the words you say, they are strong words." He held my eyes a moment, then continued on.

I followed, and was soon walking beside him again even though I was uncomfortable in doing so. I felt there was something rude or arrogant in it, but he said nothing and appeared to expect it.

We reached the gate of the city, and I was surprised. It hadn't occurred to me that my Master's home would be outside the city walls, even if Laesha had mentioned a garden. But we went out and I saw a large manor perhaps a mile away, surrounded by many lesser buildings. It didn't take long to reach, but by the time we did so it was well into dusk and I couldn't see clearly. He led me to one of several long, low houses, and inside. Then he brought me to a room and opened the door. Within, I was startled to see a firm bed, table, two chairs, a wardrobe, and a rug on the floor. The wardrobe was partly open, and I was certain that there were clothes hanging in it.

He pulled out a chair and motioned me to sit in the other. "It's bare now," he murmured, "but you'll be able to put in it what you like."

That made me truly surprised. "Master, you don't even know what kind of slave I'll be." I wanted to be honest with him.

"I think you'll be fine." He rested a forearm on the table. "Can you think of anything that needs to be done tonight?"

I began to open my mouth, stopped, and thought. Then I said, "Only this." I slipped the ring from my finger and laid it on the table.

He picked it up and turned it over several times. I couldn't read the expression on his face. Then he looked at me. "Do you know what goes with it?"

That was the hard part. "My . . . way of life?"

He nodded. "Your old life, under your old master. Whether or not you recognized it, you were like your master in the way you approached life. You were becoming like him because of what you did for him, how you thought, and what you had to look forward to. Now what?"

I took refuge in memory. It made it easier to say. "Laesha spoke of how much you loved and cared for your slaves. And now – when I saw you first, I knew you had to be the one she'd spoken about, and I think I knew because I saw it in her, too." I dropped my eyes, but brought them back again.

"She's right." He rose. "I expect you're very tired. I'll have supper brought to you." His clear blue eyes looked into mine. "I've waited a long time for you to come home."

I fumbled. "Master – thank you."

He came and clapped a hand to my shoulder. "You are so much more than welcome. You will find love here. And first it comes from me to you."

He left, closing the door quietly, and I couldn't help it. I cried.

6.

I haven't seen Laesha yet. But I've met several other slaves, and they told me a lot about my Master. From one, Paulos, I learned the most. He's older than I am, but appears younger than he is because his face is so smooth and his eyes hold the adoration of a child.

"You will never find a man who is as . . . good, as our Master." He spoke with a quiet urgency and earnestness. "But that is not to say that he is weak, or lacking in direction. You will have work to do, and he wants it done. Yet he always allows you rest when you need it, and he spends time with you so that you can know him, even, as I think, he already knows you." He laughed lightly. "I press him that he reads my mind and heart, but he protests, always pointing out what has cued him to understand what I am thinking. I think it is a fine joke. He cares deeply for us, and meets our needs."

"Then," I asked, perplexed, "you here are always happy?"

His face grew serious. "No. We are not always happy. But I have come to understand that even unhappiness and pain can help us, and him. I hope I am wiser from what I have suffered, otherwise the pain of the memories would never fade."

I was intrigued, but thought that I ought not to inquire any further.

When I was alone again, outside on the tan-gravel path that cut through light grass, I realized that I had spoken more that day to people, without fear, than I had for many months.

Then, today, my Master met me as I was sitting on one of the stone benches at a small fountain. I had seen him coming from the direction of his own house, which I found so beautiful. It had high walls, but they were graceful and light and filled with windows, several of which were of stained glass. Around the windows and doors, as on the cornice, were reliefs of animals and plants. I had tried to determine which I liked the most. An eagle on one of the corners always caught my eye, but I was still studying them.

"You are getting to know your fellows?" he asked, seating himself easily on the bench.

"I like them very much," I confessed.

He smiled. "Good. There is one thing that needs to be done before you can begin your duties under me."

"Yes, Master?"

He grew grave. "You wore a ring from your old master, because he knows that no slave truly belongs to him. But in my house, you belong to me. Permanently. You need to accept my brand."

My eyes widened. "That is what he meant?"

"He never tells the full truth."

I looked my Master clearly in the eyes. "Where is the brand?"

"On your thigh. It is the sign of my house, of my name." He sketched on the granite an odd flowing X.

I still gazed at him. "Everyone in your house receives this? Even Laesha?"

“Even Laesha. Children who come to me receive it. Though it is painful, it is never more than you can bear. In fact, it is less than you might think.”

“Why?”

I am not sure what I meant by the question, but he answered all my thoughts.

“It serves three purposes. It says that you belong to me. You are a part of my household whom I consider very precious. Because you belong to me, you may always approach me with your troubles, and I hope you will also tell me your joys. Second, it tells anyone who sees it that you belong to me. What you do reflects upon me. Third, it is a reminder to you of me. If ever you wonder, or question me, this will serve to recall to your heart what you know, and whom you serve.

“But I do not ask my servants to suffer needlessly. I give a cup of wine mixed with herbs to you beforehand, and you shall only feel what that cup allows. Children very often feel nothing, which is why I could answer you so easily. Adults—it varies. Some feel much, some little.”

“Why do they feel differently?”

He pursed his lips a moment. “It depends on what they need to feel,” he said slowly. “You may ask others what they felt, and what they think about it. That will perhaps be clearer than any words I can say.”

I thought that he could probably explain it in full, but he had chosen not to. I bent my head, and that same perplexing flood of thoughts filled me. I could feel my face get hot, but I forced the tremor down. I wanted to do this for him, though I understood so little yet.

“I will,” I said, but even those words tripped over each other.

He didn’t leave for a long time, even though I said nothing more. Nor did he. He simply waited with me as I struggled through my thoughts. It was his waiting, and his quiet strength, that finally helped me to calm myself. I had seen the goodness in him when I was on the selling stand, and I could trust him that this, too, was necessary. To my mind, hardened as it was to expect duplicity and brutality, his integrity ruptured all my way of looking at life. Here was a man who was trustworthy. My trust in him had taken its first step at the selling stand; it would take its second step here.

7.

In my room last night, I asked Paulos and Fredegar about the mark. I was nervous, and it showed on my face. Paulos immediately sought to reassure me.

"I felt nothing when the brand touched my thigh." His eyes shone at the memory. "I saw only the Master. I fainted when it was over, and I could feel the soreness until it healed, but the iron itself I never felt."

But Fredegar shook his head slowly. He was a broad-shouldered man, but one arm had been taken off not long ago because of an infection, and his body was still thin, struggling with the loss. "The brand is not an instrument of torture, but an instrument of death. How that death comes about, and what you feel and think in the dying, that is personal to everyone. I myself felt it all, of a man that I am. Finally, tears sprung to my eyes from the pain, and I made a helpless move toward our Master. He reached out to me, and his support made the pain bearable, because I finally admitted how unbearable it was."

Their presence comforted me. When I came into the hall where the branding was to take place, I thought of them.

The hall was light, as if a normal thing were about to happen, and the people were encouraging. I had not expected so many people. Dozens of slaves whom I had not met had gathered, and I found myself wishing that I was alone. But many filed to the corner where I was, greeting me and embracing me. The embraces were the strangest thing to me. By the time Paulos led me to an antechamber, I didn't mind them being there.

I stripped to a loincloth, and my nerves got the better of me again. My muscles were strong and were tensing up. Paulos came and stood in front of me. He was so calm compared to my wild emotions. "Remember your Master," he said softly, as one would encourage a child who truly has nothing to fear. "He'll be there. The one who sought you out, who has suffered for you, and who loves you. The brand is given by the King's Ambassador; he is as trustworthy as our Master." With that, he led me out.

The platform was only slightly raised above the floor, and I forced myself to remember that I had just drawn strength from these same people who stood beyond it. But I felt very alone. Even separated from Paulos, who was beside me.

But then I saw my Master. He was clothed in simple white linen and came toward me with a smile. Once near, he motioned Paulos back, then spoke. "There is nothing to fear. I, unlike your old master, never ask you to suffer needlessly. My grace always resurrects the suffering to create life. Do you trust me?"

"I—I think so, Master." But my eyes were wide and frightened.

He laid a hand on my shoulder. "I know you do. Trust is never easy. Sit here." He pointed to the bench next to us, and I sat, straddling it at his direction. The only other objects on the platform were a small table with a silver chalice on it, and a brazier that was glowing red, a long iron handle protruding from its opening. A man, young, it seemed, stood near it, clothed in a deep red wine color. His expression was soft as he gazed into the fire.

My Master went and fetched the chalice. He handed it to me, and I looked into it. It was filled with wine, but the color was somewhat clouded. He nodded. "Drink."

I lifted it to my lips and took a swallow – and nearly gagged at the bitter taste and the fire of the wine. But without recoiling I raised it and drank it down. Then I looked up, almost ashamed, but my Master took it gently. He gestured for the other man to come forward.

I froze. I had hoped that whatever was in the wine would take some time to act, but the Ambassador was reaching for the length of iron, taking it out, and I could see the flowing symbol, glowing molten red against the black of the brazier. Now I knew why I was straddling the bench. My hands gripped it behind me, and my legs pressed against it to steady myself. I was glad I was turned away from the other slaves, because as he approached, pure terror wiped across my face.

I ripped my gaze away from the iron and sought my Master. He was standing near, and my eyes found his. I frantically sought to keep that contact, but within seconds a searing, burning, white heat pressed into my flesh, and my head whipped back with the pain. I gasped, my back arching as I choked in a sob. The pain grew more and more intense, and then, suddenly, something soothing and cool washed over me; and I froze again, but for a different reason. *I, unlike your old master, never ask you to suffer needlessly. My grace always resurrects the suffering to create life. Do you trust me?* The words were a balm, and I paused in some timeless moment away from the pain of my leg to consider them. I only knew the punishment and driving presence of my old master. I wanted to believe that I would live happily now – despite what Paulos had told me. But what my new Master promised was grace in pain, not painlessness. Grace meant that the suffering would always better me, and usually someone else as well. Grace meant that I'd be able to bear it. Grace meant that he'd be with me through it.

I opened my eyes, and my back and shoulders, and even my legs, were relaxed. Falling, actually. But in a fraction of a moment Master was there, and this time it was easy for my eyes to meet his; he supported me as I fell back against the bench. From him to me flowed the knowledge of victory. I belonged to him.

8.

The wound in my leg healed, but it took a long time. I didn't notice it anymore because of pain or soreness, but each day as I dressed, I saw it. I remembered it all the more because my Master told me beforehand that it was for me to remember.

The harvest had come, and the first chill was in the air. The nights told most clearly that winter was coming, and if I returned late I needed more than just my summer cloak. I wasn't surprised, then, when my Master ordered me to get wool cloth for the making of several cloaks—quite a few slaves needed new ones. I'd continued to do buying and bargaining in the previous weeks, little things at the open markets, and I'd wondered if my Master had any new duties in mind for me.

So I went to the city market and began comparing prices and kinds, my mind falling easily into the old pattern of observing and analyzing. The shopkeepers recognized me. One of the potters I passed stopped me.

"G'day!" He gave a partial-toothed grin. "Hain't seen y' lately. How are y' keeping?" His grin dropped a little, and he chewed abstractly at his cheek as he probed me.

"I've got a new Master," I said, trying to keep my voice clean and light. I'd heard these conversations before, and they tended to be filled with suspicion and jeers. But he must have known, that was why he asked me. It was best to be direct.

"That one, eh? Not still limping? I heard what 'e does t' his new ones."

I kept control of my face. I didn't like where he was going. I answered calmly, "His reasons are fine. It was worth it."

He cackled. "They all say that! See if your attitude stays as y' keep on with 'im. S' when're you going to shop my wares, ay?"

I laughed with him lightly and moved on, relieved. The slowed stream of people thinned out again.

I was checking a bolt of grey wool when I spotted Laesha across the way. Leaving, I jogged over to her. I had spoken to her several times since entering my Master's house, and I felt deeply indebted to her. I gave her a wide smile, and she returned in kind.

"How are you?" she asked, her head tilted at a demure angle.

"Doing well. May I help you with anything?"

She laughed. "No. I'm fine. And you have enough to keep you busy."

"True enough. I'll walk you back when you're done?"

"I'd be glad for that." I thought she looked about her nervously, but I let it go and went back to the cloth stall. The wool was a good weave and evenly colored, and the shopkeeper came up to me expectantly. "A good cloth, fine sir?"

"Rather. What's your price?"

"Four crowns to the length. It's an extra wide bolt."

"Ah." I smoothed a section out and ran my hand over it. "That's a little high. You'll get undersold. Most go for a crown, and don't squabble so. But I'll give you a crown and quarter since it's longer."

"The dye is very even, good sir."

"And it ought to be. I don't pay for what should be there." I looked at him in conniving fashion. "But I'll raise to two since the smoothness is exceptional."

"Notice the thickness," he pointed out. "The winter promises to be a cold one. And the fabric holds the stitch without ever a tear. Nevertheless, for the amount you intend to purchase, I can offer three and a half."

I shook my head. "Scandalous to charge so high! When an embroidered cloak I see for six crowns? The material itself cannot be equal to the work involved."

"At least equal, good sir," he pleaded. "Without the proper material, what kind of cloak would you have? One that lets the draft chill you, of a certainty!"

"Equal, you said?" I queried, with a gleam in my eye.

He sighed. "Equal. Three crowns."

"Two and a quarter," I mused. "That, after all, seems to me to count the sheep and the effort. Don't you agree?"

There was the brush of a sleeve at my elbow. I looked; Laesha was next to me. She plucked at my arm and I bent down, puzzled and annoyed at the interruption. Her eyes were close to mine. "Give him three," she said in a whisper. It wasn't a question. "Our Master will not have you cheating the shopkeepers." She let go of my arm and walked away without a backward glance. I watched, my eyebrows furrowing.

"Sir?" the shopkeeper looked at me appealingly. His hands were nervous.

I turned back. "Three," I said gruffly. I weighed out the coins and he clipped the cloth to the length I wanted. He was evidently relieved. And pleased.

I took the cloth and left, ambling through the market. Three crowns was reasonable, but I was angry. Then again, Laesha had the first time compared my bargains to my master. Cheap, exacting, and demeaning. I sighed, and my anger seeped away. So my buys now had to be honest and done without threatening. My face felt dragged down. I had insulted my Master in the way I bargained. Now what.

I was still disappointed when I met Laesha at the city gate to walk back. Oddly, she seemed embarrassed and didn't speak to me beyond a greeting, looking down only at the road in front of her. It took me a while, but I realized I'd have to ask her about it. I wet my lips, and tried to find words.

"I—must have seemed like my rude self at the stall . . ." I stopped, feeling clumsy.

She turned her eyes on me, wide and clear. "I'm sorry! I so didn't want to say that, but I couldn't let you bully him! I could see your fist clenching, and I knew how you go about that last bit of bargaining!"

I held up my hand and gazed at it ruefully. "You're right. I was ready to start the hard fighting." I stopped, then I realized something. "Thank you." I looked at her out of the corner of my eye.

She suddenly relaxed. Her shoulders dropped from their tense hunching, and her head perked up. "Thank you for waiting for me," she said. I knew the subject was finished, and I was glad.

"You usually walk alone?"

"I don't like to." Anxiety crept into her voice. "But sometimes I have to. Once or twice Master has met me. I—don't trust the people in the city."

"Why not all the time? Or why doesn't he have someone meet you?"

"No one has offered." Her eyelashes blinked at me, then she smiled fully. "Besides. I trust Master. I've told him I don't like it, but he hasn't suggested anyone yet."

"I—I'll do it, if I may."

"Would you? I'd be so glad."

"Just make sure I know when you're going."

We chatted further for the next few minutes, and then I bid her good-night and we parted for our separate buildings. Her hair was a soft brown in the twilight, and she seemed the gentlest person I had ever met.

9.

Evening fell, and I stayed in the city.

The day had brought rain, rain that came down grey and turned dust to mud. It had continued without a stop, and I was soaked. My cloak clung to my back, and I was tired of brushing the dripping locks from my eyes. Now I was edging toward a drinking house, simply to get dry.

I had had a list of things to buy and two messages to deliver. When I went to the tinsmiths, they had turned me away, not having what I needed. I let that go; wares aren't always out. But then I went to a glassblower and was turning a tray in my hands.

"This is well-done," I commented, glad to be under an awning as I examined it. It was oval, the wide rim wave-edged and the center cut with a wheat design. The amber color varied from dark at the engraving, lighter for most of the body, to dark again at the edge.

"For yourself or a lass?" the glassworker inquired.

"My Master." I was holding it along one arm to inspect the engraving with my other hand, and the slickness of the day betrayed me. My sleeve was wet through, and my hands none to firm. The tray slipped my grasp and crashed to the cobbles. I stared, then raised a hand to my forehead, closing my eyes in disbelief.

"Well, it seems your master bought it, but won't see it. Pay me." He was unhappy, but in his profession it was a liability. He held out a hand.

I stared at the harvest-colored shards. "How much?"

"Five crowns. You were holding my finest one."

It might have been a little high, but I was embarrassed and he slightly offended. I handed over the money without arguing. "I'll be back on a drier day," I said, as I left.

"A pity, but I've had this happen before." He turned as I did and called for a boy to clean up the pieces.

Paying the glass-smith put me in a serious position. I had not had any intention of buying that particular tray; it was merely a distraction while I decided on which less expensive one I wanted. Flattery—honest, that is—still seemed reasonable to me. But now, I had spent more than I had been allotted on an object I couldn't even bring back. I swallowed heavily and tried to ignore the much-lightened purse at my belt.

I put a hand to the leather pouch at the small of my back and breathed with relief. It was still dry. I would deliver the messages and then decide what to do.

I left the marketplace and moved through the less familiar territory of the residences. One man, Meirdath, lived in the richer area, and I felt very out of place in my drenched state as I sought his home.

When I found it, I sighed. Here, the homes were separated from one another by gardened alleys, and they rose two or three levels high. Wrought iron fences marked their boundaries. An implacable man dressed in dark purple livery came to the gate, obviously displeased at becoming wet.

"What do you want?" he growled.

"I have a message to the Lord Meirdath."

“From?”

“His Master,” I said quietly. That was how I had been instructed to answer. The man raised his eyebrows, but laughed rather darkly. He swung open the bars. “Then come in. I’m sure he’ll see you.”

I followed him to the house and in to a receiving room. He bade me stay on the entrance rug since my clothes were dripping. My brow furrowed as I looked around. The room was done in crimson and mahogany. Gold trim touched the rug and the glassware, and the feet of the chair and table legs were carved bird claws. But I only had a moment. Meirdath entered from the opposite door.

His hair was greying, and he limped. Nevertheless, his stride was strong – angry, actually. He shook his head and shoulders as if to throw off something disagreeable. “Well?” he almost shouted. “What message do you have for me?” He came to stand directly in front of me.

I had retrieved the letter from my back pouch and handed it to him, red-waxed seal up. He seized it and broke the seal with a crack. His eyes skimmed the contents in less than the space of a dozen breaths.

He threw it on the table. “Do you know what it says?” he demanded.

“No, sir,” I replied.

“It means this!” he shouted again. And he threw a punch at my jaw that so startled me, it landed full force. I was knocked back a step, but then my temper flared up. My fists clenched. But he yelled, “You tell that slavedriver that I don’t want to hear from him again! I tried to help him, but if he doesn’t want it, I’ll stay with the people who do! And if I could remove that mark from my leg, I would! Get out of here!” He stormed off, and I didn’t wait for the gatekeeper to show me out.

When I got away and into a quieter, less rich, area, I stopped and leaned against one of the low walls. I sighed. My jaw throbbed. Not only had I not succeeded in my buying, I had lost money, and now had an insulting and violent answer to transmit to my Master. I thought about the other letter. It was to a man – Lord Erasmin – whom I knew served my old master. Considering the message I had just delivered, I simply didn’t want to take another risk.

I had a meager dinner, trying to save what money I could, and thought about what to do. But I couldn’t deliver the other letter. It was too close to my old master, and too close to old acquaintances. There was even the possibility that I might meet my old master on the way. I wandered back in the direction of the market.

And so it became dark, and I was still in the city. I began to shiver with the coolness of the night. I felt numb inside, most of all from my inability to take the second message. That, coupled with the berating I would receive from failing in the market. I didn’t know what form punishment took with my new Master. I had never thought to ask.

The drinking house looked warm and inviting. I knew it wasn’t – not in the way the last weeks had shown me that friendship could be. But I had lost face throughout the day and felt embarrassed and humiliated. And very, very tired. It wasn’t worth it. I pulled myself straight and walked wearily toward the lighted rooms.

I heard running feet and instinctively stopped short, peering into the dimly lit street.

“Wait!” a voice called out. A figure hurried toward me.

That made my eyes widen. “Paulos?” I asked.

In a moment, he had jogged up to me, breathing hard. “You make yourself impossible to find! And I had thought I was beginning to know where you haunt!”

“What are you doing here?” I said gruffly.

Something extremely peaceful shone out from his face. “I’m finding you,” he said simply. He tossed me a fresh cloak. “Master thought you might need this.”

I held it, my wet fingers squeezing it, but trembling. I stared at him. “Do you know what happened today?”

He shook his head and peered at me. “What?”

I told him about it, briefly. I still hadn’t put on the other cloak.

Seeing this, he pulled the sodden one from my shoulders and helped me flip the fresh one on. It made me at least a little warmer. He stood in front of me, feet planted firmly. “First, you needn’t fear going to Erasmin. Master always acts in wisdom and grace. Second, it’s not a horrible crime that the tray slipped. Our Master would never punish someone for an accident like that. Third, at least I can answer what happened with Meirdath. He left our Master’s service and is serving our old master—yes, your old master is my old master too. You never asked, but I came to our Master eight years ago. Our Master is trying to reason with Meirdath, and Meirdath resents him.” I was startled by his adamance, but I found my weakness trailing away. His usual calmness slipped back in, but an edge of humor and fixedness remained beneath it. “So come. Home. You’ll always have a home, no matter what happens.”

I nodded, and we made our way out of the city. The rain and the darkness were still oppressive, but Paulos was right. I had a room waiting for me that was warm and dry.

10.

I went to see Erasmin.

I had spent the morning with Paulos and Fredegar. They were diligently trying to teach me to read, and I had the feeling they simply did not know how to teach. After an hour, I got exasperated.

"It this truly necessary?" I asked, throwing myself back in the chair.

"Master wants his slaves educated. Reading is useful, and can be very important," Fredegar said firmly.

"Especially if he uses you as a messenger," Paulos added.

"Well," I said, "the marks you're showing me are not making any sense. Start from the beginning again." It was the part about being a messenger that caught me. Occasionally, messengers were asked to write a return letter, and it would be embarrassing if I wasn't able to. Then again, being able to read might let me avoid instances like yesterday.

I flushed even as I was bent over the table. To think of reading my Master's messages was akin to disloyalty. I sighed and brought my concentration back on Fredegar who was earnestly writing the peculiar symbols.

On my way to the city, I went over and over the alphabet in my head, forgetting about every fourth letter. It was still cloudy out, but wasn't raining. I had been tempted to ask one of them to come with me, but I wanted to redeem myself in the eyes of my Master. I hadn't seen him yet, nor explained about the tray or money.

I couldn't shake off the sense of oppression I felt as I walked near my old master's house. I moved quickly, head down, and avoided meeting the eyes of anyone who passed me. Erasmin's house didn't have a closed gate, so I walked up to the door and my blood rose in my face as I wondered who might be seeing me. I pulled on the bell cord.

"Yes?" A middle-aged woman in a maid's dress opened the door and peered nearsightedly at me.

"I have a message for the Lord Erasmin."

"Oh. Come in." She led me in and went to find him.

She left me in the foyer, but I moved instead toward the open room next to me, which seemed to be for visitors. Nevertheless, I stayed on its threshold, lest I be taking a liberty. The room was light, done in pine and evergreen. The seats were well-cushioned, but there was an absence of gold such as Meirdath had vaunted.

I heard footsteps in the hall and immediately stepped back out of the room. Lord Erasmin was aging: his clothes rich but not pompous. He was slim, his face melancholy, and he carried a walking stick. He approached and motioned to me with a hand. "Please, enter."

I went into the room.

"You have a message for me?"

"Yes, sir." I extended it to him.

He took it and slit the seal with a knife. His eyes skimmed the contents. He let it roll back up and looked at me. The lines of his face, beneath the melancholia, were hard, and I could hear an edge underneath the softness of his voice.

"Your master tells me that I have out-lived my usefulness to my own master, and that I need beware lest my master dispose of me."

I said nothing. His tone hid a question, but I couldn't guess what it was.

He sighed and turned away, seating himself at a writing desk. "Take this back for me." He took a sheet of paper and wrote perhaps half a page. He signed it without flourish, folded and sealed it, and handed it to me.

As I turned, I didn't see him raise his walking stick until he had smacked it sharply against my right thigh. Though the tenderness from the branding had faded, I involuntarily reached a hand down to cover my now stinging leg. I stared at him, but didn't lash out – not yet.

"New to him?" he asked, his face not betraying any emotion beyond a certain moroseness.

"I am," I said, keeping my voice steady. I straightened.

He looked me over. "You're young and strong. Why leave the glitter of the market?"

I paused, choosing my words. And it was only a matter of choosing how to say it; what I felt throbbed as clearly as the pulse in my ears. "My youth won't give me well-being, and my strength won't give me worth. Those two things are more important to me than gold or glitter."

"Ah. Give him the message." He gestured without anger that I leave, and showed me to the door. When I glanced back, he was already closing it, but I thought he looked very hunched, and used the stick sadly to steady himself.

Now I had only to retrace my steps quickly to the safety of the market and decide if I ought to attempt any of the smaller purchases I hadn't gotten yesterday. I had two crowns that Master had let me keep from prior buys, and I was going to use them to make up part of my loss.

I walked hurriedly, still trying to remain inconspicuous. I was passing only a street away from my old master's house when a familiar figure just ahead made me stop. I swallowed. It was my Master.

He had seen me and was waiting, so I straightened, no longer trying to hide my face, and walked slowly to him. I was forming an account in my mind.

His grey mantle was pulled about him, but I was startled: his face didn't reflect the grey of the day or of displeasure. He smiled and cocked his head slightly, waiting for me to come near.

"Good to meet you. You returned late last night," he greeted me.

I was not used to these types of welcomes. "I – Master, I –" I stopped, frustrated. I could defend myself when attacked, but could not offer a decent, honest, explanation.

"Go on." The smile played about his lips.

I filled my lungs and looked him clear in the eyes. "I dropped an expensive tray yesterday when purchasing, and so spent most of the money you had given me. And I

delivered your message to Lord Meirdath and he said to tell you that he wants nothing to do with you."

He stance was relaxed, completely at ease. I had even more trouble meeting his eyes now that I had said what I needed to. But I felt clean. He said, "How did Meirdath give you the message?"

"He . . . shouted it at me."

"Only?"

"He screamed," I admitted.

"And?" he pressed.

"He struck me."

He nodded. "I wondered if he had given you that bruise on your jaw. That's why I don't send a woman to deliver messages to him. I gave you another message to take?"

I braced myself again. "I just delivered it today. I'm sorry. Yesterday was too much." I paused. "He wrote this in return." I handed it to him.

"Thank you." He took it and put it in his belt. "What did he say to you?"

I decided to be complete this time. "He hit my thigh—not hard—and asked why I served you rather than my old master."

"And you said?"

"That you gave me well-being. And worth."

Pure joy flooded across his face, and he reached out a hand to clap me on the shoulder. "That you should understand so much!" His eyes held mine, and I felt a sense of wonder at the peace and happiness that flowed from him to me. I was accepted by him! He went on, "You have done well. It was so important that you saw him, because I am going now to speak with him. I needed you to pave my way." He stepped back, and sought beneath his mantle. "Here." He handed me five crowns. "I expect you would have taken your own rather than ask me for more, but you don't have to. Be successful at market."

He smiled broadly at my amazement, and moved off with a sure step toward Erasmin's house. I stared after him, holding the coins in my still half-outstretched hand. Then I gave a small shake of my head to start my thoughts again, slipped the crowns into my pouch, and turned to go to the market: my head up and my walk firm.

11.

It was a hectic week.

Master had planned a banquet, but waited until only three days beforehand to tell me to go to market, and even then, let me decide what was needed.

So I had to find out what was already in his house to use, buy some more odds and ends, arrange for decorations, and settle with the cook what food to get. But it did give me my first glimpse inside his house.

How can I describe it? I always felt the presence of space. The main staircase is wide, and curves gently to the upper levels, marble overlaid with a thick crimson rug. The atrium is huge, and all the levels have balcony-walkways that look down into it. There is a circular window at the top that plunges a column of light down through the room to pool on the center of the floor.

The floor is a mosaic; a living one where geometric designs meld into vines and plants, and swatches of colorful animals roam, half-hidden. From the walls and ceiling, crystal facets spread candle and lamplight in a brilliant display. Around the edges of the room couches, plants, low tables, and cabinets encourage a sense of privacy within the openness.

But that is only the main hall. I caught sight of other rooms; soft ones of burgundy or forest green, warm places, and intimate ones. The dining hall seats thirty at a long table, soothing with dark colors and accented with stained glass along the frames of the windows. Narrow tables line one wall for dishes and decorations.

Oddly, there is a sense of fullness, not ostentation. I slipped around the edge of the central atrium, but I felt that under different circumstances I might be welcome there. I have not seen my Master's personal chambers, and I doubt I ever will.

So I had three days in which to arrange for the feast. During those three days, I also had a continual flow of messages to deliver. None were to such wealthy people as Meirdath or Erasmin, but I was continually running to and fro. As well, my Master ordered that I spend at least an hour each day learning to read and calculate from Paulos and Fredegar. I fell into bed each night nearly at midnight, exhausted. The only calm part of my days was walking Laesha home, even though I usually had to return then at a brisk pace as my own duties hadn't been finished.

I don't need to say that when I was done and everything was in order, I was very pleased. Master had asked me to report to him.

I found him at the stable, giving his dappled stallion a carrot. I had walked to him rather smartly, but as I came the last few steps I grew much more hesitating. Especially as he didn't greet me immediately, but continued stroking the horse's neck.

He then turned to me. "Yes?"

I told him that all he wanted was done.

He unlatched the stall door and led the stallion out. It was already saddled. Then he said, "Good. I want peach wine tonight. Do we have it?"

I blinked at him, nearly staring. We had every other kind of wine in the cellar. I had checked all the labels on the flasks and wineskins. We did not have peach wine, and it was rather expensive. "No, Master," I muttered.

He was still stroking his horse's neck absently. "Do you have enough money left to get several flasks?"

I sought my memory. My money pouch was still heavy enough. "Yes, Master."

"Good." He turned away and mounted easily. "Have it there this evening."

He walked his horse over the cobbles, and in moments was trotting in the field. I was still staring.

Yes, I had expected something more. I had *not* expected to have to make another trip, late in the afternoon to find something that was uncommon in the best of times. No kindness, no encouragement; simply a cordiality that asked for something more and made sure I had means to get it. Even if I didn't have the energy.

I confess I half-stalked back to the city, and was brusque at the wine-sellers', asking for peach liquor. I was not particularly surprised when no one had any.

The weather was even cooler than in the past weeks, but I worked myself into an angry heat by jogging to the open markets just outside the city walls, knowing that failure was inevitable. And it was. I was late returning to the city gates to find Laesha, and empty-handed.

"What's wrong?" She seemed a little frightened by my displeased expression, and walked a step farther away from me than usual.

I glanced at her, and suddenly realized how angry I must look. I softened my face. "I spent the last three days organizing Master's banquet and sending his messages, and he didn't say a thing about it except to ask me for the one thing I didn't buy. And no one has it, so there's little I can do about it." I sighed.

She came a bit closer. "So you've been searching for the past few hours?"

"Yes. I'm sorry I kept you waiting."

We walked in silence for a bit. She wrapped her cloak around herself more tightly.

Then she looked up at me again. "You've been branded on your thigh," she said, so softly that I almost didn't catch her words.

I felt defeated. "I know. But it's been so different than my old master. I thought . . . I thought Master would react differently to this as well."

"For doing what you were supposed to?" she asked.

I said nothing, and we didn't talk the rest of the way. I was sad, for her words struck deeply yet only left me confused. But I bid her good-night gently, because I wasn't angry at her. I wasn't sure who I was angry at. Or if I was angry at all. And it was now too late to inform my Master of the lack. His guests would already be arriving.

I was walking back from the house where she roomed to my own, and saw a group of children playing tag along the path. They scattered when they saw me, but one little girl chose unwisely to scoot through the hedges, and tripped and fell on a rose bush. She set up a wail, and I hurried over in the late dusk light, kneeling beside her and lifting her clear of the thorns.

She sniffled, then began to cry even more because she didn't know me.

"Shh," I murmured. "You're all right. Here, let me wipe those. They don't hurt that badly." Holding her on my knee, I took out a handkerchief and wiped the scratches on her lower legs and arms, marveling on why she was out with only a dress and not something warmer.

A woman hurried down the path. "Deirdre?" she called.

"Mama?" Deirdre squirmed out of my hands and in a moment was snuggled in her mother's arms. Her mother smiled at me as I stood up, and pulled my handkerchief from her daughter's grasp to return it to me. "Thank you," she said. "Children don't always quite remember where not to run." She ruffled Deirdre's hair fondly.

"Glad to be there," I said, inclining my head. I plucked a late rose off the bush and handed it to the child. "Roses aren't all bad.

Her mother smiled as Deirdre gulped in her tears and grasped the flower. "Have a good night."

"You as well." She moved off and I went slowly in the direction of my own quarters.

I was only sad as I pushed open the door to my room. I moved to the lamp and lit the wick, and there on the table, practically beneath my hands, was a cloak pin. I stared, perplexed. Then I picked it up, turning it over in my hand. It was in the form of a rose, the flower fashioned from red gold, and it caught the lamplight in glints of warmth. My eyes widened and I glanced over the length of the room, turning toward the door to complete the inspection.

My Master was standing in the open doorway.

He was dressed for the banquet, clothed in rich wine-colored velvet. A slim chaplet circled his hair. He was never imposing, but always manifested the clearest presence. He spoke from where he stood. "Who are you?"

I was suddenly consumed with shame. "I am your slave, Master."

"Do you deserve anything from my hand?"

"No, Master."

"How far do your duties extend?"

My jaw was trembling, and I was completely unable to meet his eyes. Miserably, still holding the pin, I managed, "Beyond what you directly say, Master. Through every hour."

"What is anything I give you?"

"A . . . gift, Master." I was crying, and the tears splashed on my hand. I heard, and could just see him, come toward me finally.

"You are my slave," he said quietly. "Yet you are more than that. You are my brother. The brand does many things that you have not even glimpsed yet." His touch fell on the pin in my palm, and my hand shook. "That is why I give gifts. You are so much more to me than property. There were only two times today you acted selflessly. Walking back with Laesha, and helping Deirdre." He took the pin from my weak hold, and as he paused I finally dared look up at him. I felt as if I was in an agony.

"I won't have you keep this," he said. His eyes were very deep. "You will remember well enough without it."

"I will, Master," I said in a low voice, dropping my gaze again. Tiredness and sadness filled me.

But his voice brought my head up again. "There will be other times, many times, when you shall receive gifts from my hand." He moved to go.

"I deserve none, Master."

"I know." In a few steps he was out of my room, closing the door softly behind him. Tears welled up again as I looked after him, and I went to collapse beside my bed, burying my head in my arms.

12.

Master continued to entrust me with the market and as a messenger. Had he not, I would have sat, guilt-ridden and not seeing anyone; but even the next morning the usual parchment was outside my door listing my duties for the day. It took me that day and nearly a week after it before I realized he had completely forgiven me, and I slowly began to forgive myself.

Then he left on a fortnight's journey. There was a noticeable absence in his estate, a void that we all wanted filled again. I hadn't known how often I saw him, and how often he spoke to me. Now I knew, and we all waited; I more anxiously than most. He had left us our tasks, and the first week he was gone I buried myself in each thing I had to do. I found his not being near very hard. By the second week, I had completed most of my duties, and found myself looking for ways I could help Paulos, Fredegar, and Laesha. I grew slightly more patient. When he came back, I wanted to have no regrets.

Paulos acted as messenger very frequently, but with Master gone he worked in the woodshop most days. I was with him early in the second week, cleaning up wood shavings from where he was planing a tabletop. I had already organized several miscellaneous piles of tools.

He looked up at me. "You're not going to the market today?"

"Later," I replied. "Just for some small things."

"You don't have to clean up, though I certainly appreciate it."

"Glad to." I wagged a finger at him. "I've seen you get to your room late just because you have your own and other people's clean up to do."

He sighed. "That's too often the fault of finishing last. But they do it other days."

I knew that he always cleaned his own area, that it was especially one of the other men who consistently left chips and shavings and tools scattered near his bench. He went on, "Anyway, you're more than welcome here whenever you want."

"I'll fight you for him," rumbled Fredegar, blocking the entrance to the shop momentarily. He grinned and came near, settling himself on a stool. Despite the loss of his arm, he was back training the young horses at the stables. "Only man I've ever known who mucked out the stables when he wasn't ordered to."

I laughed and raised my hands. "I have enough time this week to give you both. And you've both spent time checking my reading and writing."

"You've done so well!" exclaimed Paulos. He stretched from his bent over position. "I'll do some more with you this evening."

"I . . . might be back a little late this evening."

Fredegar raised an eyebrow. "And where might you be?"

"Walking Laesha back." My gaze slid away from his.

Paulos choked a laugh. "Then I guess we'll cancel our lesson. I'll have to tell Master that you had more important matters to attend to!"

I looked stricken.

Paulos noticed. He immediately lifted a calming hand. "I'm joking. And Master would approve anyway. He doesn't hold all your time in his fist, he only wants that you always honor him with it. And you and Laesha definitely honor him."

"He leaves time for you to relax," agreed Fredegar. He slipped off his stool and pushed me toward the door with his arm around my shoulders. "Let's go. I'll show you that beauty Master just got. He's making to be a fantastic stallion! And you're *not* mucking out the stables!"

We spent the rest of the afternoon looking over the animals, and I watched Fredegar teaching a young mare to respond to basic signals; walk, trot, left, right, halt. I did give him help surreptitiously, but he refused to let me do any of the large and dirty chores. I had a marvelous time.

The only thing I needed at the market was to have a medallion engraved. I found a skilled man who offered a good price, and was pocketing the piece after he'd finished when a slave I knew only casually came up. I paid the engraver, then turned around. The man's name was Handar.

I greeted him.

He sidled a glance toward the engraver. "I hope he did a perfect job for that price."

I frowned, and walked several paces away so that the craftsman wouldn't hear us. Handar trailed with me. I looked at him squarely. "He recognized it as a good price. And so did I."

Handar flicked his fingers dismissively. "Fine. Master must have left you with a lot of money to be able to pay prices like that."

"I have enough," I said evenly.

"Enough to make me a small loan? A thief slit my pouch today." He displayed a money pouch with a clean slice in it.

"What do you need?"

"Just a crown."

"No – what do you need to get?"

He glared at me. "A meal."

My brow furrowed. Then I noticed a rather fresh stain on his cloak. I reached forward and though he drew back, startled, I ran my fingers along it. My fingertips came away greasy red. I touched them to my tongue. "A rather spicy dish," I said. My mouth set. "Did someone throw it at you?"

"I sat on a chair," he growled. But he moved back half a pace.

I nodded. "Probably at the same time you had your money robbed. Amazing that you didn't hear the coins slide out."

"You damned groveler!" he spat. He began to stalk away. "'Such a help to everyone, so honest!' So piggish!" He pulled his cloak about him and was soon lost in the crowd.

I stood there for a minute, thinking about it, then turned to go myself, choosing to leave in the opposite direction. The engraver caught my eye. "Bit of a weasel?" he asked.

I spread my hands helplessly, shaking my head, and bid him good-night.

I met Laesha a little while later and we stopped for supper. We picked a table near the main fire place, and as we ate I told her about Handar.

She nodded. "He drinks." She flushed lightly.

"I suspected so. Has he spent Master's money?"

"He always does. He thinks each time that Master won't know, but Master is never taken in by his tricks. This meal is from your own?"

"Completely," I assured her. "I'm allowed to keep the small coins." I took a sip of mulled wine. "What will Master do when he comes back?"

"To Handar?"

"For all of us."

"He'll see us all, even though it may take a few days. He'll ask what you've done, and – I know from doing it – he can tell when you're lying or hiding something."

"I won't," I said with fervor.

Her eyes caught the firelight. "You wouldn't need to. You've been a model for people. Like Handar."

I chuckled. "I sincerely doubt he'll imitate me."

"He should." From there, we drifted to other topics, coming back occasionally to our mutual desire for Master to return.

When we walked back, the grass underfoot was already shining with the beginning of a frost. We laughed, and the sound was picked up by the moonlight. It was definitely too late to have a lesson with Paulos.

Part II

13.

It was the second summer after Master redeemed me. During the past months my duties in the marketplace had become less – reserved mostly for the large feasts Master would hold. Instead, he gave me more and more the duties of a messenger. I had had no concept of how much Master corresponded with slaves of my old master, and with my old master himself. The responses varied as much as summer differs from winter, but I learned to reply as Master would. To speak quietly and with the care I knew each letter was penned with, and to hold down my more angry retorts.

Thankfully, he never asked me to deliver a message to my old master. I don't know to whom that duty falls, but I don't envy him – or her.

However, I had made trips to our two neighboring cities; just a day or perhaps overnight. So I wasn't surprised at the first words Master spoke when I came in one evening.

"Sit," he said, his expression somewhat grave. "I need you to travel for me."

I sat. We were in one of his studies and the lamp, though bright, left a darkened sense about the mahogany and burgundy. I usually met him in the open solar, or he would come to my quarters. "I'm willing," I said. But I was aware of his serious attitude – much more so than often.

He nodded, as if recognizing my awareness of his mood. "Not just an overnight passage to Oreshen or Timurandi. I need you to be my spokesman in Daelmor."

I went motionless. Not a messenger – a spokesman. One who bore letters but who also had the status to discuss the matters in the parchments with the recipient; not to make decisions or alterations, but to argue the case of the sender and to speak for him.

I wasn't certain whether the amazement of what Master would entrust me with struck before or after the name Daelmor impinged itself on my mind. The city was a five day caravan journey south. No, this would not be a brief trip.

I wet my lips. "I will go, Master." That was not the issue. But my face begged my questions.

"I cannot be certain," he answered, and his voice was pained. "Perhaps two months. It might need be more."

"Two months?" I stared. Or more. I looked down. "Master—leaving . . . for that long . . ."

He leaned forward. The copper-bronze of his hair and beard glinted in the lamplight. "I have confidence in you. And it is not forever." His lips twitched in a slight smile.

I took a deep breath. No, it was not forever. "Will I be able to write back here?"

"You may write."

"When would I leave?" I was aware that my questions were coming in the wrong order, but my thoughts seemed addled.

He was patient. "Two days from now."

"Two days?" Again, my eyes widened. I met his gaze, and suddenly became embarrassed. Then I managed a smile. "Laesha will be upset."

"As are you," he observed.

Very true. I would miss her deeply. I couldn't imagine living in a place without her, and without Paulos and Fredegar. I took a deep breath. "What do you need me to do?"

He nodded—almost with a kind of pride. "Good. As my spokesman, you will be setting the groundwork for me to enter the city. I will say that I have already been there. You must take letters from me to many of the highly placed men and women—all slaves of your old master, yes—and you must answer all their questions and tell all you can so that they will know of me."

"Master, don't you have slaves there?"

"They were killed a generation ago," he said softly. "Daelmor is a hard stronghold."

"Then what will I accomplish?"

He smiled. "You are not the first I have sent there since that purge. You will accomplish what I want done now. The fruit of it won't be seen for a time."

I suddenly froze. "But you won't be there!"

His eyes were the deepest pools I had ever looked into. "You do not know where I'll be," he said. "I trust you to go."

"Why will they not kill me?"

"They will not."

"How can you know?" I pleaded.

He grew stern. "If I asked you to go to a certain death, would you?"

I stared at him, then the words sunk slowly into my mind. The brand seemed to burn into my thigh and I answered without ever taking my eyes from his, "What you order is my duty."

He must have known what I drew my answer from. "What did I promise you?"

"That I would never suffer needlessly. But . . ."

"They will not kill you." He paused. "Trust me. You are my own. I care for you."

"But Master," I said, almost desperate, "I do not *want* to leave you."

At a slight gesture of his finger, I looked to the corner made by the bookcase and wall. On the floor was a parchment-satchel, neatly full. His voice was firm. "I am asking you to go."

14.

It was not easy; the saying good-bye. I ate with Paulos and Fredegar at my favorite inn the day before I left but its familiar warmth seemed removed; we were inhibited in our talk, no matter how hard we tried to relax.

Fredegar finally set down his wine cup with a sigh. "I'm going to miss your smile around the stables. You've been wonderful for the two new boys; teaching them how to work."

I was embarrassed, and dropped my eyes.

Paulos urged me gently to look up again. "I'm sure it will all be well; Master chooses whom he sends very carefully. Remember, you are representing him in Daelmor."

"How could anyone truly represent him?" I said, trying to laugh. I couldn't, and I sobered. "It makes me nervous. I'm going to be alone."

"Not alone," Paulos corrected. Then he considered. "In some ways, you will be, but remember—Master is trying to win the heart of the whole city, not just its nobles. Make friends. Talk to people. But . . . remember us."

"Every day," I said fervently. "Send back letters with the courier who brings further messages to me, whenever he goes."

"We will."

I met Laesha that evening. We went for a walk and I carried a lantern to light our path. We reached a boulder that jutted through the turf and sat on one of its lower ledges. We joined hands and were silent for a while. The night was warm and humid.

"I am going to miss you," she said softly. Her voice was as sweet as the moonlight. I felt wonder again that she was with me—I, the former bully and roughneck. "So much." She looked at me, no longer shy, but with such a grace—

"Laesha—" I glanced down, then back again. "I'm worried about this trip. It's the first time I'll be apart from Master and all of you. I'm trying to remember to trust him. But for you, I want you to remember, too—remember how much you mean to me."

I caught up her free hand in mine and at the brush of metal she looked down, startled. An amethyst pendant hung from the looped necklace draped on my hand. She let out a light gasp, then turned her grey eyes on mine.

"There's something else I want to ask you," I said. "But I have to ask Master first. When I come back."

She slid her hand under the necklace, turning the pendant to catch the lamplight. She smiled at me. "You know I'll be here."

A heavy burden lifted from me. I met her smile with my own and took the necklace, placing it around her neck as she bent her head. "I love you—" The words could not contain the intensity I knew, and our silence was one of joy as we returned.

15.

The caravan was dusty. I lifted my eyes from my inward-turned gaze and saw once more the thorny shrubs and dry ground. We were able to ride horses since there were wells to tent at each night, but it reminded me that the river's fertile land near the city was a thin band of life in a very empty landscape. And this was only the third afternoon.

The other riders in the caravan—merchants and their guides and bodyguards—shunned me. They had only allowed me to travel with them as a result of Master's gold; even then, Master had warned them that I was expected by his Ambassador in Daelmor, and if I didn't meet him they would all be brought to the King's court. But I kept a close watch around me. I might reach Daelmor; the gold I carried was another matter.

I closed my eyes, letting my mare follow the others. When Master parted from me, he said, *"Do as I have told you. Don't worry about what happens afterwards; and remember, I care for you as a brother."*

I opened my eyes and slid my hand up my left sleeve. The cloth was light, in weight and in color. My fingers closed over the wide bracelet that hugged my arm; small garnets and blue topazes glittered in a double row set in gold. Red for the letting of blood, blue for the renewing of life. Master had given it to me during the winter.

Something firm touched my shoulder and I looked around. One of the guides had tapped me with his riding crop, and now urged his horse beside mine. "What are you wearing?" he demanded in a low voice. His eyes pierced mine. He didn't want to draw attention to his actions.

"Nothing for you," I said quietly.

"Let me see it."

"No."

But he moved his crop swiftly and lifted my sleeve away from the gold. I snatched my arm away, glaring at him. "Ah!" he said. Then his face darkened. "Give it to me."

I kept my gaze level. "I would rather die than give it to you."

He mouthed a soundless laugh. "You? A slave of that house? You would never defend yourself."

I took my knife, without any show, from its sheath. He looked at me askance. I shook my head. "I am fully able to defend myself. And understand me in this—I will. If you attempt theft now, I may injure you."

His gaze narrowed. "We will see." He pulled his horse's head around and dropped back.

I sighed, but kept my head up and steady. It was only the third day.

16.

I did not meet the Ambassador himself when I came to Daelmor—I was surprised enough to be met by one of his messengers, a brusque man who handed me a parchment, checked to make sure all was well with me, and directed me to an inn. After he left, I did not see him again.

For the next three days I made my way about the city, learning its streets and delivering the first few letters. I was received coolly and dismissed without discussion. Only one of the lords gave me any comment.

He was a portly man and squinted up at me from where he sat in a low chair. “Don’t you know, young man, that Daelmor does not welcome your master’s slaves?”

“I know, m’lord,” I responded.

He chewed his lip. “But you came anyway?”

“Yes.”

He shrugged. “Strange. Well, I’ve no messages for you. You may go.” He paused. “But you’re better than most I’ve seen.”

I left with a sigh. Perhaps it was a compliment, but if nothing changed then there was little use of my being a spokesman.

Daelmor was more crowded than my home city. The streets were narrow, and twisted around sand-colored buildings that had at best a thin alley separating them. But the colors were bright in the awnings and stalls where merchants sold their goods, and in the clothes of the people who thronged the ways.

On the second day I was eating alone in an open air restaurant when a boy—no, a young man—sidled up to me nervously. I thought him a boy at first from his threadbare clothing and the frightened look in his eyes. I smiled only slightly, because I was unsure how to respond to beggars in this city, or of how they would approach me. His hair was black and wavy, and fell almost in front of his eyes. He came up beside me, his posture hanging back.

“Sir,” he said in a low voice, “sir, are you the one who has been visiting the high lords?”

I raised my eyebrows. I had not expected any such question as that. “I am. Do you need to ask me something?”

“Yes—sir, I have heard the rumors—that you are a slave of the Master, the one . . .” his voice trailed off.

“I am. Have you heard of my Master?”

“Yes, sir. I know him. I—”

My eyes widened. “You know him? He said that he had no slaves in this city!”

“Perhaps, perhaps he forgot me. But—I have just come here in the past moon . . . maybe he wouldn’t know.” He straightened slightly, and took a deep breath. “Will you let me serve you, sir? I can cook for you, buy you food and anything else you need. Then—maybe I can go back with you to the Master.”

My head reeled, and I shook myself to clear it. I realized the boy was still waiting for an answer. I gestured for him to sit across from me and he did so, but uneasily. "What's your name?"

"Maerden."

I tried to make my next query gentle. "How can I know if I can trust you?"

"I—I love the Master, sir." His eyes pleaded with me. "Please believe me."

"Well . . ." I stopped, and thought. Paulos had encouraged me to meet people. He had meant the cityfolk, and I would, but I could not turn away a fellow slave. Perhaps we could help each other. The question was, whether I could trust him.

I would let him come with me. He had approached me first by asking about Master, and I would let that guide me. If it ended with my losing gold then I would have to appeal to Master to help me, and make the best of what I could.

I met his eyes. "You can come with me. Here, have some bread. We'll go back to my quarters."

17.

Maerden was a constant source of strength and support for me. Everyday he cooked and cleaned and did any errands I asked of him. Each evening he hovered near me as I ate what he had prepared, and asked how my own visits had gone. I found solace in unburdening my days. He would listen, always seeming slightly hesitant, as if I were an object that was to be revered lest I be injured. He never gave advice, but would encourage me in what I first thought was a halting way, then began to realize was the stammered outpouring of his love and respect for me.

By the end of the third week I was in sore need of such love. Master had sent a second bundle of messages for me to deliver, but the messenger who found me had come from Giraten where Master had been visiting. That meant that I had no letters from Paulos, Fredegar, or Laesha; and that I had no means of sending them my own growing stack.

I brought the satchel into my quarters with a kind of sorrow and silently went about organizing them. Master's note to me, which I eagerly opened, was only a brief catalogue of instructions. Maerden peeked over my shoulder. "Is it a letter from Master?"

I nodded, then bit my lip as tears gathered in my eyes. "Yes," I answered huskily.

"What does it say?"

"Just—just telling me what I need to do. That's all."

"Oh." Maerden fell silent, but didn't move from me.

After watching me set the rolls in order, he said, "They haven't been as welcoming, have they? You've been quieter the last few days."

I leaned back in my chair with a sigh. "No. They haven't been. Because I'm a spokesman I see the contents before I deliver them and that helps me prepare for their response, but it has been getting worse. Lord Remiltor threatened me yesterday not to come again—and here I have another letter to give to him." I gestured at the pile.

"Sir—sir, why don't you go home? We can go . . ."

I paused. Then I shook my head. "No, Maerden. Master has asked me to do this. I must finish it, for as long as he needs me here."

"But he wants them to welcome him . . . doesn't he? They are becoming angry."

"Master doesn't make mistakes," I said quietly.

Maerden stayed a minute longer, then went about setting the table for my dinner.

But it was getting harder, and I was getting worried. The next day proved my anxieties well-founded.

I went to the Lady Ilenia, who received me coldly. "If this is unwelcome, I will not allow you to come again," she informed me. She was middle-aged, her hair drawn back severely from her forehead and kept in place with an elegant comb. She opened the parchment and read it. I knew what it said, and I didn't relish her response. Master had told her in clear terms that her mode of living was unacceptable to the King, and

that when he came he would call her accounts into view and punish her accordingly. Included was the reminder that the debtors' prison into which she would fall was the same for poor and rich alike; there was no difference due to status. Everything would be taken from her.

Ilenia folded the letter and set it on the table. Then she glared at me. "I see no basis for this letter. My way of life is my affair, and shan't be interfered with. Daelmor has its own laws that allow me to do as I please."

"Your pardon, madam. The King's law overrides those that Daelmor has chosen to put in place."

"So says your King. Daelmor is allied to enough cities to contest him quite vigorously on that point. I trust your Master is aware of this?"

"He is, m'lady. But what is an alliance of cities against the King's might? And can you not see? He is making an appeal to *you*, so that when Daelmor falls, you will be spared."

"Talk to the masses, little man. Perhaps they will hear you."

"I do. And they follow your ways, desiring your riches even as they curse your name."

"You are becoming quite a nuisance. I was listening to a conversation yesterday between Remiltor and Horel. They agreed—and I do as well—that we should inform your old master of your activities." Her expression grew harsh. "Because I know what you are asking. Do you think a person of my age and state could agree to be put on the slave block? I would rather die first, assured of my bed and with my house around me.

"Now you," and her mouth firmed, "you are playing with death—were you aware of that? So I will make it plain to you. Do not come here again. I suggest that you leave Daelmor at once. I will not refuse you entry, but if you choose to come you will not find me nearly so hospitable." With that, her manservant showed me to the door.

18.

It was at the end of my third fortnight in Daelmor that Maerden found me sitting on my bed, knees up and my arms loosely hugging my legs.

“Sir?” he asked. He put down his bundle of vegetables and came closer to me.

“Yes?” I answered quietly.

“Is there something wrong?”

I looked at him, and the tension around my eyes drew him nearer. “No messages have come?”

I had begun asking everyday. His face dropped. “No, sir.” I glanced away again. “I don’t write to them anymore. Something inside me dies, because I know my letters will never be read.”

“Find a messenger to go for you?”

I shook my head. “I don’t have the money to do so anymore. And they – maybe they have written as well, but until Master sends a messenger, who could they get to go?”

Maerden sank to the edge of a chair. His eyes implored mine. “Sir, I would go, but I cannot leave you for that long.”

I smiled slightly.

He waited, but I did not speak. He wet his lips. “Sir, is that most why you are so lonely? For – for Laesha?”

“For all of them. Very much for Laesha, yes.” I had spoken often of my friends to him. My gaze went distant, but I ruthlessly brought it back to him. “But no; most of all, I am lonely for Master. Every day I wait, every day I imagine in my mind what I would say to him, how I would tell him, what he might say. And every day I go to bed emptier than I had begun. He never comes, he never sends a message – he doesn’t know.”

“Surely he cares, sir?”

“Surely he does. But he will have to prove it to me again.” My mouth pulled down. “I never thought him capable of such silence.”

Maerden was devastated. His head fell to his chest, and in a moment I heard low sobs – sobs for me, for he could not say anything.

I listened. My own heart had a sorrow in it that could not be released even in tears now. Tears were so vulnerable. I felt as if a single touch would cause me to shatter, to crumble to a thousand pieces. I finally spoke softly. “Do not worry. I love him still. The why of what is happening – that, I do not understand.”

19.

Three days later, I received my third satchel of letters.

Maerden wasn't in, and I opened the sack with intense anxiety. Four neat rolls lay there. Only four! My mouth dropped open. Perhaps my exile was nearly over!

I hurriedly took them out, but dropped three as I saw the last one sealed with his stamp. That was for me. I broke the seal and spread the parchment out.

"My son, I write this from Giraten again, but take heart – a messenger will be coming from my home very soon. Laesha, Paulos, and Fredegar miss you sorely.

"These are your final three messages, after which I will direct you how to return safely. Deliver them one each day; make certain that the one is given to Remiltor first.

"It is imperative that you be my spokesman in this. One of the King's servants passed through Daelmor and reported that you have done well by me. You shall soon be home."

I closed my eyes and let the sweetness roll over me. I heard the door creak, but didn't move. I recognized Maerden's footsteps.

"Sir? Sir, are you well?"

I opened my eyes, and smiled. "Yes. I'm well."

His face lit up. "Master has written!"

"He has. Only a set of days, Maerden, and we can return to his home."

Maerden seemed to glow, and set about his preparations for supper with quiet joy. I was full of happiness as well, and for the first time looked with fondness at the pile of letters I had written that were placed against the wall. Why not? I would write another. I might be the very messenger to carry them back, but so be it. I would write to them anyway.

As my pen travelled over the paper in words to Laesha, my mind wandered to the satchel. Remiltor. My writing slowed, then stopped. I turned over the three parchments. The others were to Ilenia and Horel—neither welcoming people. But Remiltor had sworn that I shouldn't enter his house again.

Maerden was oblivious to the shadow that fell across my face. But then it lifted. Master had vowed that death would not come to me here. Now it was only a matter of days before I would begin the journey home.

I bent my head back to my letter, leaving the parchments where they lay.

20.

The next day, I went to deliver the letter to Lord Remiltor.

His palace, for it was far more than a house, took up the length of an entire side street. Where its front bordered on a wide avenue it was enclosed with a marble wall, and purple-flowered vines hung over the top to hint of a lush garden within. I went to the scrolled iron gate.

A watchman met me. "Yes?" His expression was unfriendly.

"I have a message for the Lord Remiltor."

The man scrutinized me. He seemed to make up his mind. "His lordship will not welcome you."

"Nevertheless, I must deliver my message."

The man shrugged and pulled wide the gate. I entered. He led me across a courtyard that was bordered on either side by gardens, and up the steps into the house. He exchanged a brief word with the butler who then led me through several turns in the hallway. Without speaking to me, the butler pushed wide a door and showed me into a room. Remiltor was there, along with a few of the less wealthy lords to whom I had delivered messages.

They looked up as I entered. Remiltor was standing—a heavily muscled man with curly dark hair and beard. He drew himself straight when he recognized me. "I warned you not to come here again!" his voice was almost exultant.

"I have a letter for you," I said quietly.

"Then let me have it." He extended a hand, and I approached and gave him the parchment.

He didn't open it. "Tell me what it says."

I suddenly felt a deep sense of danger. I reached out a hand. "If you give it to me," I said, "I will be glad to."

"No. You are a spokesman. You are aware of its contents. Tell us what your esteemed Master has to say to me."

All their eyes were on me. I concentrated my gaze on Remiltor. "Sir, you are the leader in this city. Yet you have consistently robbed from the poor, and dealt in blackmail, deceit, and bloodshed. You never soil your own hands, but you have many people willing to do your bidding. Know then, that the King traces all these crimes to you, and you shall be the one to pay for them. Your henchmen will also be judged, but it is to you that he places the greatest condemnation."

"Condemned already?" he asked with a smile. "And what shall my punishment be?"

I kept my voice steady. "Death."

Remiltor froze. The room was completely silent. The King's word was apparently still a force that was recognized, despite their proud pronouncements. Then his face hardened. "And am I condemned without recourse? Can anything turn the royal anger away from me?"

"You know there is. But it bears the name of the selling block and a brand burned into your thigh. There is no other hope."

"And all of this?" he flung his arm out to indicate his palace. I suddenly became even more earnest. "No slave owns anything. All this must be given up, so that Master can be the giver of everything to you—from the clothes on your back to the shelter above your head."

Remiltor appeared to think. Then he turned to his peers. "What say you? You have all heard how the King considers us. We cannot live any longer calling such a one royal. Our city has the support of seven others—it is better to die than to agree to live under such a tyrant. One who refuses us our lives and livelihoods! One who treats free men like slaves."

My voice came quiet after his urgency. "Free men? Each of you wears a ring on his finger. I see them."

"The one who gave us these rings gave us our independence," growled one of the lords.

"Did he? No one was born for independence. We were born for freedom—or depraved slavery. But you have never understood how to attain true freedom."

They exchanged glances with one another uneasily.

I looked at each one of them. "I worked under your master's eye for most of my years. You fool yourselves, because he does not come to Daelmor often. Why should he? You are obedient to all that he would order. But you also forget, not being near him, that his favor is as fickle as the wind and that he receives great pleasure in flinging you golden lords into the mud. Then you will beg. And he will laugh."

Remiltor was silent with all of them, then he crossed his arms over his chest. "We will not beg. Ever. If that requires throwing off every master, then we will."

"Try," I said, without anger. "You cannot. Your master causes all his slaves to beg at his feet. All to no avail."

Remiltor's voice matched mine in its control. "I will take my chance for now. I know one thing as a certainty—your master will never be mine, and I will no longer bow even in falseness to your King. All your master's slaves are to represent him, are they not?"

"We are," I replied.

"Then I will treat you as I would treat him. But you are a spokesman. If you were a messenger, I would have you beaten, and released. If you were the Ambassador, I would have you killed. As you are a spokesman, I will have you flogged till you cannot stand, then cast out into the street. Whether you live or die then, I will not know." He clapped his hands, and immediately the door opened and four guards came in. They must have been waiting there for his orders.

My mouth had gone dry. "For what purpose?" I gasped.

"You are the gauntlet that I am throwing down," he answered. "Take him away."

I was dragged to the courtyard, where any who passed by the gates might see what happened. There, they chained me to an iron pole and stripped me to the waist.

My remaining pieces of gold they took from me, and in despair I watched them take the bracelet from my wrist. It glittered in the sun, and was gone.

The flogging was worse than the beatings I had received in my old master's house. The whip cut into my flesh, opening wounds that bled until my whole back throbbed with the pain, and the blood dripped to the paving stones. But I knew it was not nearly over. Though on my knees, I still had my strength, and my consciousness.

Suddenly, there was a warning shout. "Get him out! I see King's men!"

The next blow did not fall. Instead, the chains snaked with a clatter from the ring, and I was grabbed and carried to one of the back entrances of the palace. There, I was taken into the street a little ways away and dropped. My vision blurred with the jarring.

I was alone. I collected my thoughts as best I could and struggled to push myself up on my arms, but dizziness overwhelmed me and I had to lower myself back to the cobbles.

I might have blacked out for a minute. Then I heard scuffled footsteps, and a shadow blocked the sun. I opened my eyes, blinking, and saw Maerden. He seemed to be crying.

"They told me," he said, choking, "I came and found you." His hands moved over my back, and coolness washed across me. The touch stung, and I shuddered. "Quiet," he pleaded. "I'll get you back. I'll get you back."

He reached down to lift me, though I was sure he wouldn't be able to. The moment his arm touched my back, I fainted.

21.

I woke in my room in the inn, lying on my stomach. I was very groggy, and for the first few minutes I simply tried to gather my thoughts.

My back felt heavy and sore but there was none of the intense pain and throbbing that I had expected. Instead, there was a slight numbness. Then I heard two voices.

"Is he all right?" asked Maerden, anxious.

"He is." The other voice was a deep, quiet baritone. "And I think he has just about woken up. Tell me then, are you well?" I could hear that the question was directed at me. I tried to open my eyes, but sand and grit were clogged in their corners. A wet cloth was wiped across my eyelids and then I could open them.

The other man must have been kneeling beside my bed because I could see him as I opened my eyes. He had black hair and a full beard, and wore loose robes. He studied me with care.

"Thank you," I managed.

He nodded, approving, and set a reed straw to my lips. "Drink slowly. You are more than welcome. Maerden found me. I'll come by each day. Are you thinking clearly now?"

"I—I think so."

He chuckled. "As much as you can tell? Well, listen well, and you too, Maerden. You are not to move from this room for at least three days. Ah!—" he raised a finger at my opening mouth. "No. Three days. You may feel all right now, but that is because you aren't moving and I've bandaged your back with an herb salve. I've also left a drink here for Maerden to give to you. I'm telling you to stay because I've heard what you've been up to, and if you leave here Remiltor or one of his friends will finish your beating. So you will stay. I will come by and change the bandages on your back until I'm certain they've healed well." He stood up to go.

"Wait," I called weakly. He dropped down again. I peered at him. "What's your name? And how can I pay you? I—" my memory flashed to my lost bracelet, and the corner of my lip turned down. "I have hardly enough money left to buy our food."

"I am Casael. Don't worry about paying me now. You're in the King's service, and I know that when you get back to your Master I'll get my pay."

I was disappointed. "You're not one of my Master's slaves?"

"No, I'm not one of his slaves. But I know he's honorable enough that I can treat you. Drink what I've left here, try to eat—and slowly, Maerden—and I will come back early tomorrow morning."

This time he rose and in a moment shut the door behind him.

I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, and when I opened them Maerden was in my view. His eyebrows were drawn. "You aren't in pain?" he asked.

"Not much," I answered.

"Can you eat? What happened? Why did they do that to you?"

I smiled weakly. "I can eat. I'd rather not, but I should. Ask me the other questions afterwards."

Eating was a difficult affair. With Maerden's help I was able to sit up, but the action made it quite clear why Casael had warned me against going out. I was terribly weak. My stomach didn't want to take any food, but Maerden had made a soup and I slowly ate, then drank what Casael had left. It was very bitter.

"What happened?" asked Maerden again, tentatively, when I had finished.

I shrugged, then winced at the motion. Maerden started out of his chair in concern, but I waved him back. "Sit. I'm all right. Remiltor made good on his oath that I wasn't welcome in his house . . . oh!"

"Sir?"

I grimaced, and a furrow of worry creased my forehead. "I have two more letters that I'm supposed to deliver! Tomorrow and the day after."

"You can't!"

"But Master told me to! They're the last ones."

Maerden shook his head anxiously. "You can't. You'll be hurt again."

"Well . . ." I bit my lip. I was feeling very tired.

"Sir?" Maerden looked at me almost shyly. "You've told me so much—can I deliver them for you?"

My expression softened. "Maerden! No. I can't let you. I trust you, but I don't know if you could speak to these people. Both Ilenia and Horel are very hard, and very cruel."

He looked down. "I—I could try. I'm not a spokesman, but I could at least deliver them."

"No. They would never let you in. Even as far as that goes, my clothes were taken with . . . everything else."

His eyes widened. "Sir! Your bracelet—it's gone."

I swallowed, and nodded. My head was spinning. "They took it from me."

"Oh, sir!"

"I know." I put a hand to my head, and Maerden immediately came and helped me lie down. "I'll tell Master," I said weakly.

"I wish I could help you," Maerden whispered. It only occurred to me as I fell asleep that Casael's drink had undoubtedly caused most of my intense slumber.

When I awoke the next morning, it was to Casael moving about the room preparing bandages for me. I squinted at him and looked about as best I could.

"No!" he cautioned, raising a hand. "No moving. Not until I see how you look."

"Where's Maerden?" I asked.

"I met him as I came up the stairs. He said he was going on an errand for you. He must have borrowed some clothes, because he looked better than often."

"An errand?" I gasped. My mind flew back to the previous night. "Are there two parchments there? on the table?"

Casael turned his head. "No. There's one. Is something the matter?"

I groaned. "Oh, no! I told him not to go! He's gone to deliver one of the letters—" My eyes widened. "They could kill him!" I struggled to get up.

Casael took a long stride to me and forced me back. "Down," he said sternly. "If he's gone, he's gone and you can't stop him. Give him room. He's devoted to you. I don't think it would shake him at all to stand up for you."

"But he doesn't know how to talk to them!" I protested.

"Well, he was clean and looked good, so perhaps he'll do better than you think." He began to remove my bandages, and I drew in a pained breath.

"Where did he get the clothes?" I managed, trying to distract myself.

"Easy there. I know this is catching on the sores. I don't know. He knows the streets here well, perhaps he found them at the back of a lord's house. They throw out good clothes occasionally."

I lay silently, very anxious. Casael finished dressing my back, and brought over water for me to drink. He frowned. "Don't get yourself too agitated. He'll be fine."

"You don't know that!" I snapped. I caught myself. "I'm sorry. I am worried."

Casael pulled over a chair. "And you've been here awhile yourself, haven't you? News of you started leaking to the streets over a month ago, at least as I remember it."

I nodded against the pillow. "It's been a long time."

"Didn't know your master let you alone for so long."

I winced, and slowly pushed myself up. Casael gave me a hand. I felt very weak. "I didn't know it either."

"No word?"

"Little, but then a letter came a few days ago. I'll be leaving soon. He knows what to do for the best."

"And you beaten? Well, you can never tell. I need to go." He rose, and replaced the chair. "But I'll be back tomorrow. Will you keep to the room?"

I nodded, dejected. "I will. If you hear any rumors of Maerden, will you tell me?"

"I'll come tell you, if necessary. Now try to rest."

The time passed by very slowly, but eventually I heard a familiar footstep in the hall. The door was pushed open quietly, and Maerden stepped in.

He had hardly turned around before I asked, "You're all right?" I sought him anxiously.

He shut the door and hurried over. He was wearing his normal clothes, and his hair fell in its usual tumbled waves. "Sir, I'm fine—I'm sorry, I went anyway . . ."

"Casael said you had other clothes—" I was worried; had they been stolen from him?

"I hid them," he said nervously. "I found them once, and I keep them hidden—where I used to live . . ."

"That's better, then you won't get hurt." My brow was still furrowed with worry. "But what happened? Did they let you in? Did you see Ilenia or Horel?"

"I went to see Lady Ilenia." He had dropped his eyes, but now raised them, and I could see excitement in them. "She did read it! And I answered her as I thought you would."

"What did she ask?"

"She asked a few questions about the Master, and I told her—just as you've talked to me."

"They didn't hurt you? Or insult you?" I pressed.

He shook his head. "I think she thought of it, but then decided not to." He moved a little closer. "Sir?"

"Yes?"

He set a hand on my bed. "Can I deliver that last letter for you?"

I felt a weight lift off my mind, and my body relaxed. "Yes," I said softly. "You can go for me tomorrow."

23.

Maerden didn't leave until mid-morning, then I was alone until Casael came in the afternoon. He busily began to remove my bandages.

"These look good. How are you feeling?"

"I can sit up without being dizzy, and can walk a little about the room. It's still quite painful."

"Well, it's probably best that you try to move. But don't injure yourself. Is Maerden gone again, then?"

"He is."

"Did he do well?"

"He seemed to. I am so glad that he's been here."

Casael took out some light linen cloth. "You're healing well. This will be a lighter bandage." He placed it over my back and then helped me sit up. He leaned back in his chair. "I heard a very interesting rumor this morning."

"About Maerden?" My stomach tightened.

"No. Concerning the lord Remiltor." He paused. "He had himself put on the selling block today."

"That can't be!"

"True. And it's more than a rumor. I saw it myself."

"Why would he?" I was astounded.

"He answered that. There were many of his fellow lords in the crowd that gathered. I think he was deeply humiliated, but he answered them when they asked. He said it was you—he watched you getting beaten, and for the first time he couldn't forget that someone was bleeding because he had ordered it. More than that, he was horrified at it. And he made his decision."

I got up and went to the window. I looked down at the street; busy, and dirty. "I can't believe it. He would never do that."

"He did. And since I was there, I told him that I was caring for you. He asked me to give you something."

I turned around, and my eyes widened. Casael was holding out my bracelet. I stumbled back to the bed and sank down. "How could—" I extended a trembling hand.

As Casael placed it in my palm, I had another image: of Master when he first gave it to me. The gentle, strong hand. I blinked, and something odd struck me. The hair on Casael's arm, where it was not hidden by his sleeve, was a fair brown. Not black. I looked up.

He was smiling at me. "Is two months so long that you can't see past a wash of henna?"

I stared. The face behind the full beard and shorter hair was the same—and now his voice was lighter, and his eyes twinkled. "Master!" I cried.

He moved, and in a moment I was in his gentle embrace.

When I released him, he took back his chair, a smile all the while playing at his lips. "How long have you been here?" I asked, drinking in the sight of him.

"Here?" He chuckled. "Three days. Before that, who can tell."

"Maerden will be so glad!" I breathed. "Does he know that it is you?"

"Well—" He stopped to listen. "I hear footsteps on the stairs. Wait a moment."

I watched the door and in a moment it was pushed open. "Maerden—!" I began.

But I stopped. Maerden stepped into the room, and I hardly recognized him. He wore clothes of midnight blue, trimmed with silver, and a sword was swinging lightly at his side. His hair was clean and brushed back from his face, and his posture was straight and strong. I remembered him now. I had seen him only once before—when I had received the brand on my thigh from him. He smiled, and came to rest on one knee beside me. His eyes were still the same; honest, and full of a wonderful love.

Master spoke, his voice clear and soft. "Now you understand what you could not have before: I will *never* leave you alone."

I gazed at him in wonder. "And Remiltor . . . ?"

"I hoped. For him and many in this city. You have been faithful to me, in what was a very difficult command."

I dropped my eyes to the bracelet that still lay in my hand. Maerden took it and slipped it onto my arm. I looked at him. "The last two letters?"

He smiled. "As the King's Ambassador, I delivered them."

I took a deep breath and met Master's eyes. "I needed word from you, then."

"I know you did. Sometimes the pain is necessary. For you, for others." He nodded at my bracelet. "The letting of blood and the renewing of life are always closely intertwined. It is never easy. But now, it is done."

I closed my eyes, savoring the word. He laid a reassuring hand on my shoulder, and I looked at them again. Their presence filled me with unspeakable joy. I turned to Master, and he nodded at my unasked question. "Now, we will go home."

We didn't go directly home. Rather, for the first time, I went to the King's palace. Had it not been for Master and the Ambassador – whom I still called Maerden – I would have been overwhelmed. As it was, seeing them in their royalty was more than I could comprehend.

I told this to Maerden one afternoon as we walked through a garden. I was still in awe from seeing Master as the judge in the King's court that day. I only just managed to express my wonder to Maerden.

He smiled. Quietness and warm understanding showed on his face. "And you are amazed how you could speak to him as freely as you have?"

"Why should he be so gentle with me?" I grew shy. "Why should you have stayed with me for two months?"

"Because of love. The depth of love we bear for you and all our slaves is very great. Deeper than any other." He looked around the garden, then to the palace walls and arching windows. "Remember, this is your home as well as your small quarters outside the city."

"But – but Master is the Prince," I stammered. "And the crown . . ."

Maerden smiled broadly and I blushed. He himself was wearing silk and the finest linen, and graceful jewels sparkled at his fingers and throat. He laughed at my discomfiture. "That is true. And I am the King's Ambassador. But you know me as Maerden, a friend who came to you. I think you know the Master also in such fashion. Look there."

He pointed, and I looked and saw Master further ahead on the path, kneeling beside a lily. A speck of blue shimmered in the sun, and in a moment a sapphire hummingbird danced away from the flower. Master rose.

He wore the white garments that I most often saw him in, accented only by the embroidered belt at his waist and the medallion around his neck. He turned and saw me, and beckoned me to come near. I came, and sank to one knee.

His hands caught mine. "Rise. We will return home in a few days. You need but that to heal fully. Remember to come to me – here, as you do at home – when you need me. I know you have questions; ask them."

"But you –" I paused.

"I love you," he said softly. "Do not be afraid."

I looked into his eyes, into his clear, beautiful eyes and they were the same ones that had drawn me on the selling block; the same ones that taught me, rebuked me, and comforted me. He would never turn me away, and there was no other that I longed to come to. I nodded, wonder filling me, and we went to join Maerden who waited for us with quiet peace.

Part III

25.

We returned soon after that—to a reunion I never would have dreamed of three years ago. Master continued using me as a messenger to people in the city, and the impact I had been part of in Daelmor had its influence on the lords and ladies that I delivered letters to; either in increasing their curiosity or their anger.

It was mid-winter when I sought out Master in his study. I took a deep breath, and knocked softly.

“Come in!”

I pushed open the door, and the lamp and firelight on the burgundy furnishings reminded me strongly of a night not many months ago.

But Master rose from behind his writing desk and gestured me in. “Shall we sit by the hearth?” he asked. “The wind is cold outside.”

I went with him near the fire and we sat. I looked at him, and he met my eyes with his gentle smile. “What is it?”

I had thought it through many times, but it came out differently, as I knew it would. “Master, I—” suddenly, sitting there with him, my apprehension dropped away. I smiled. “I would like to ask you if Laesha and I can marry.”

His own smile broadened. “You may. Why did you not come together?”

“We decided that I would ask.”

“Ah. She needs you to be bold for her. Soon? I know you both have wanted it for a long time.”

My heart beat faster. “If you would, and if you think it wise, Master.”

“I would be glad to,” he said softly.

Not an hour later, muffled in my cloak, I came up outside Laesha’s door. I knocked, and in a moment it opened. “Oh!” she exclaimed—she sought my face eagerly, but I had half-hidden it in the fur of my cloak. “What did he say? Did you go?”

Dropping the cloak away, I gathered her into my arms. I was grinning, and couldn't stop. "We're going to the market tomorrow," I told her. "For a celebration and a feast – and it's for you and me!"

She gave a glad cry and met my lips with her own. Then she drew back to look at me. "I was so worried – when you went away. And then that you suffered so much, I feared that you would bear the pain forever. I've never been happier than to see you with peace and joy in the last few months." I came into her room and shook off my cloak.

Except for once or twice, she had avoided mentioning my two month absence. I did know how lonely she had been, and how worried for me. "The scars we get don't have to inhibit our movement," I said gently. "But they are always there as reminders."

"I wish they weren't."

"Often, so do I. But I expect it is somehow necessary."

"I know." She was thoughtful, and I knew that she was contemplating what had befallen her in the past years. Her service in our old master's household had not been kind.

I drew her away from the thoughts with a squeeze on her hand. "Come. You're coming with me tomorrow, but I want to have an idea what we're looking for. Master has given us sixty crowns as a gift. And he wants it all spent."

Her eyes shone. "Sixty? It will be beautiful!"

"So tell me – what shall we have?"

We discussed the ceremony and feast for several hours, and I returned near midnight to my quarters. Despite the late hour, I woke up Fredegar and Paulos to tell them that in five days my rooms would be moved elsewhere.

26.

Laesha and I went to the market together. Paulos had come to help us carry our purchases, but stayed a discreet distance behind us so that we could talk.

We had already bought ribbon and silk-crafted roses to decorate with, and had moved on to a coppersmith. Laesha touched a double candle holder that had fluted settings. "Do you have many of these?" she asked the smith.

The man smiled broadly and pushed a thick lock of hair away from his face. "That I do, miss. If you're looking for a hall or the like, I think I might have twenty-odd . . . more than enough to grace a feast."

She looked at me. "Do you like it?"

I picked it up and turned it around, checking the soldering and looking for signs of tarnish. It seemed to be carefully made. "I do. I think the copper will accent the color of the ribbon very well. We need twenty, do you have them here?"

"No, sir, but I could deliver them to you this evening. Would that be well with you?"

Laesha laughed lightly. "Paulos would definitely prefer that. Yes, smith, if you would."

"Very good. I need a payment to insure this . . ."

"Certainly." She turned to me, then frowned. "What is it?"

I glanced back at her. "If you would? I see someone I met once." I pressed my money purse into her hands, kissed her lightly on the forehead, and gestured for Paulos to join her. Then I strode briskly past the shops, looking for the figure I'd seen.

I found him down the next turning—an elderly man, walking unsteadily with a cane and carrying a sack of flour.

"Sir?" I asked quietly. "Lord Erasmin?"

He turned to look at me, and I bit my lip. His beard and hair were straggly, and his face was pinched with hunger. When he met my eyes, I saw they held the same melancholy as when I first knew him. He smiled, if sadly. "You were right, young one. Or your Master was. I outlived my usefulness, and my master has relegated me to carrying goods for his cook and scouring dirty pans. I expect it won't last long." I noticed the bruise on his collar bone, not quite hidden by his thin cloak.

"Sir," I said, ignoring the eddy we were creating in the flow of people, "won't you ask to be put for sale?"

"As if your Master would come for me? I am an old man, my friend, and a tired one." He shifted the sack of flour to the cobbles carefully. His eyes pierced mine. "One who has spent over sixty years thwarting your Master—and cursing him, however silently, in my refusals—is hardly worthy to be bought with a tenth of a crown. Much less with the price he was willing to pay."

"The question is not one of worthiness. No one ever is worthy of him. The question is of willingness, and trust. Please," I said, extending a hand. "Ask."

He again let the small smile drift across his lips. He hefted the flour, weaving momentarily under its weight. "Perhaps for your sake, young one. But don't wait for

it." He made his way from me, and I closed my eyes in pain as I knew he was going back to my old master's house. I retraced my steps to find Laesha.

She was waiting for me, with Paulos. "Who was it?" she asked, taking my hand.

I felt sad. "The lord Erasmin. Our old master has reduced him to something worse than a beggar. I spoke with him." I looked down at her, and lifted a hand to caress her cheek. "But sometimes that is all we need."

We were silent for a minute, and then with an effort I pushed the mood away. She nodded in understanding. "Let's go. You can tell Master when we get back."

27.

Once before I had stood in this spot, that time to receive a brand on my thigh. I kept my gaze on Master's face, and I wondered if I saw a twinkle in his eye. His words were not only to us, but to all the assembly gathered there.

"It is no coincidence that all of you, and these two especially, received the brand here years ago, and now are here again."

I was beautifully aware of Laesha next to me. She was as lovely as a breath of flowers in the spring air.

"The first time they stood in this spot, they swore their life and obedience and trust to me. Now, they swear their service also to each other."

He looked out over those present. "Marriage is to be a picture to all of freely chosen service born of love. In marriage the welfare of the other is considered greater than one's own – therefore both members are upheld and strengthened.

"The life in marriage is also a reflection of your commitment to me. Only by placing your obedience and trust in me first, will you ever be able to love and serve your partner well.

"Remember these two words, then, in all your married days: service, and love."

He turned to me. "In all your life in my house, you have been faithful to me. In taking Laesha as your wife, I charge you to be faithful to her – to hold her in honor, to love and respect her, to give to her as I have given to you. Do you swear that this is your desire and that you shall strive with my grace to fulfill it?"

I knew my eyes were shining as the stars. The brand mark on my thigh seemed to burn with new fire. "I do."

He looked at Laesha. I saw movement out of the corner of my eye and missed the first few words. ". . . to be faithful to him – to hold him in honor, to love and respect him, to give to him as I have given to you. Do you swear that this is your desire and that you shall strive with my grace to fulfill it?"

I nearly swept her into my arms at her soft, "I do."

Master nodded to his right, and the person whose movement I had seen came near. I took a quick breath. Maerden! I knew he was to come, but I had not seen him earlier.

He met my eyes as he drew near, and I know Laesha's too, and I could sense his warmth and happiness. He held forth his right hand, draped with a silken square of white cloth, and I saw the sparkle of two rings lying in his covered palm. Master took them from him, and he withdrew.

Master looked at us again. "Marriage is both a choice and a gift. You have chosen to give yourselves to each other, but I too have given you to each other. I not only give now, but I will continue to give to you throughout your lives.

"These rings reclaim their place as a rightful symbol for you. As unbroken circles, they attest to your unity with one another. With gold, they proclaim your highest and never tarnishing gift to one another, that of your lives. With diamonds, they speak of the strength and purity of your love."

He nodded at me. "Give me your hand."

He placed the ring in my palm. Then I took Laesha's hand, and as I slipped the ring onto her finger I repeated my vows to her. "I do swear this day, before our Master, that I shall take you, Laesha, to be my wife. To have and to hold from this day forward, in all times and seasons, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death parts us. This is my solemn vow."

I saw only her gray eyes as she took my hand, and felt unspeakable joy as the diamond-graced band slid onto my finger. I was amazed that I would finally be united with her delicate life. Her voice had the calm assurance that I treasured. ". . . in all times and seasons, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death parts us. This is my solemn vow."

Master took our joined hands. "As your only Master, in the Name of the High King and in the presence of his Ambassador, I now pronounce you husband and wife."

Our lips met, and then with our hands clasped we turned to face our joyful friends.

28.

Perhaps a fortnight later, Laesha and I went to the market. "Greetings, sir and lady!" grinned the shopkeeper. He was a carpenter, a small man who radiated both eagerness and humor, and his furniture was arranged on the cobbles to entice passersby. "What might I have for you today?"

"We're looking for a chair," answered Laesha. She took her hand from where it had been tucked in my arm and began searching among the wares. I also walked about, sitting in a few and testing most for their craftsmanship. I was pleased with what I saw.

Laesha looked my way. "Do you like them?" It was a question of whether they were solidly built as well as whether I preferred them. I nodded, and called, "I do. Take your time." She was satisfied, and continued looking.

Suddenly there was an abrupt exclamation behind me. "You! — you've been gone awhile."

I turned. A husky man stood there, even his stance suggesting a swagger. His face was uncompromising.

"Hello, Bordeth." I returned. I had known him while in my old master's service, and had never trusted him.

"Think you're good, don't you? I bet your master keeps you in gold for all the message-running you do for him." His eyes burned.

"Actually, no," I said. "Master's rewards don't come in gold."

"No?" He spat to one side, and pulled his shoulders straighter. "They come in goods, don't they? Like that tart there—I'll bet you've enjoyed her." He pointed at Laesha.

My wariness snapped in pure fury. With hardly a thought, my fist drew back and I slammed his face, feeling bone crunch under my knuckles.

"No!" My hands were still clenched and Laesha was pulling me back. I stopped, and as I became aware of her I sobered.

Bordeth was curled on the ground, yelling incoherently as he held his face. He was bleeding profusely from his nose. The crowd that had been progressing through the street had halted; then, just as imperceptibly, they began to move again. I put a hand to my head.

Taking Laesha's hand, which was as cold as ice, I turned to the shopkeeper. He was no longer grinning. "Your pardon," I said. "May I have a cloth?" My voice was tired.

Shakily, he rummaged behind him and handed me an old square of linen. I took it and turned to go back to Bordeth, who was just standing up.

"Get away from me, you bastard!" he swore. I could see the pain in waves across his face, even as he held his hand up to staunch the blood. I handed him the cloth which he snatched, cursing, and then he stumbled out into the street and from sight.

I sighed and went to the shopkeeper. "I'm sorry. Thank you." I handed him half a crown. "I apologize for my actions."

"I don't think he'll accept an apology," he said with a weak smile.

We left and decided to return home. I was too shaken and ashamed to spend more time in the city. Laesha was quiet for a while.

Then she looked up at me. Surprisingly, she didn't seem upset. "Don't worry. I love you."

I felt dejected. "I lost my temper."

"We all do sometimes. It's not an excuse, but it is understandable." She slipped her arm around me. "Besides, it's good to know how quickly you defend me."

I lightened a little, and squeezed her against me. "For you, I'll do whatever it takes. With Master with me, I'd take on an army."

"And you'd win!" she chuckled.

We walked the rest of the way in peace, but nevertheless when we got back I asked her to wait before making supper. I went in search of Master and finally found him in the solar, looking out across the winter dusk. I immediately knelt in front of him.

"Yes, my son?" he asked. His voice held the depth of the twilight.

I didn't look up. I felt ashamed – ashamed of my strength as well as ashamed of what I had done with it. But it had been for my wife, and I had been violently hurt by what Bordeth had said. "I struck a man," I said, the words low. "I probably broke his nose."

"Why did you strike him?"

"He insulted Laesha."

"Did you speak with him first?"

"No, I hit him immediately after he said it." I raised my head.

Master was looking directly at me, resting in his chair, his eyes compassionate. "Anger is not wrong, but violence is," he said. "I forgive you. Remember not to act without thinking carefully first, even when you are hurt."

I didn't move from my kneeling, letting the truth work in me. He stayed, not only with patience, but with his presence. Finally, as I exhaled a sigh, he reached and put a hand on my shoulder. "Put it behind you. I love you always."

"Even when I hurt you?" I asked.

"Even then. Always. Part of love is bearing the hurts, and part of love is healing them. Go now, in peace."

I left the darkening solarium, but the image I took with me was one of warmth, not of winter cold. I returned to Laesha and we shared the evening in joy.

Early the next week, just past dawn, there was a knock on our door. My eyelids felt sticky as I pulled myself from a dream and tried to remember what had woken me. Again, there was a knock.

I got up carefully and went to the door, perplexed at who would call at such a time. I opened it, and Master stood there, wrapped in a thick cloak.

My sleepiness fled and I grabbed my own cloak and stepped outside, shutting the door so that Laesha wouldn't awaken. I shivered.

His voice was low. "Get dressed. We need to go to the city."

I went back in, hurriedly slipping into my clothing and pulling a comb through my hair. Laesha sat up. "What is it?"

I kissed her, and again put on my cloak. "Master is outside. We're going to the city."

"What for?"

"I don't know. Take care."

"And you." She lay back down, but watched me until I left.

Master was waiting for me, and I followed him to the stables where two horses were saddled. "Mount," he said. "We need to go quickly."

I did so, and we pushed the horses to a gallop. I was frozen by the icy air, my hood doing little even when I held it closed at the throat. By the time we reached the city gates and slowed to a walk, I was chilled to the bone and even Master was breathing hard and chafing his hands together. The horses snorted steam from their exertion. We dismounted and began leading them down the street.

"Master—what are we here for?" I asked. He seemed to be going toward the residential section, where the lords and ladies had their houses.

"Wait."

I kept my silence.

We entered the streets of the nobles. They were mostly empty; only a few servants were out whose duties demanded it, hunched against the cold. I was familiar with more of these houses than I had realized.

Then I gasped. Ahead was a selling block. It was of polished wood, and raised up to the biting wind.

There was a thin figure on it, bowed in the freezing air. He stood, but I could see him shaking with failing strength. It was Erasmin.

Beside the block lounged my old master, his fur-lined cloak mocking the wind.

Master looked at me, and I turned my shocked face to him. "He listened to you," he said gently. "That is why I wanted you to come. I will need you." We continued on.

My old master was on his feet when we came up. I did not look at him, but only at Erasmin. The lined face was desperately pale, and his bare arms clutched his torso.

"How dare you!" shouted my old master.

Master's eyes were iron. "You would seek to take the life of one who has finally come to me. Be silent! You are condemned in the King's sight." He looked up at Erasmin.

"My son—you know me. Will you accept me?" he asked.

Bitter tears rolled down Erasmin's face. "My lord. Too late—I am yours."

"It is the beginning, not the end." He quickly glanced at me. "Help him."

I sprang up onto the block, immediately removing my cloak and placing it about Erasmin's thin shoulders. I was appalled at the weakness I saw in him, and with hardly a thought I caught him into my arms and felt him collapse with fatigue. His feet were blue with cold. I stepped down, holding him carefully, but as I went to look questioningly at Master I was caught instead by my old master's eyes. Pure hatred stared at me and I felt ripped by tremendous violence.

Nothing physical had happened, but I reeled under shock. Then Master's hand came down on my shoulder and his clear strength cut through my confusion. "You shall not touch him! My son, look at this fallen slave."

I brought my eyes back into focus and hesitantly looked again at my old master. This time, in searching his face and eyes, I saw the chains that indeed bound him—chains of hatred, fury, and resentment. And he could do nothing. Master then touched my shoulder again. "Take Erasmin to an inn. Care for him. I brought what is needed. I will come soon."

I turned, just managing to both carry Erasmin and lead Master's horse. There was an inn near.

Then I heard my old master's hard voice behind me. "Do not think I am nothing. You will die. I will have you killed! Your service will be forgotten and your death will destroy your Master's name!"

I shut my ears and walked onward.

I found the inn and had hot water and linen sent up to the room. Making sure the water wasn't too hot, I slowly warmed Erasmin's frozen limbs. He shook uncontrollably for a long time, but said nothing. Finally, I wrapped him in blankets and had him sit before the hearth. I sat next to him and spooned him a hot broth.

He seemed to calm down, and even slept. Intermittently, he wakened and I gave him more of the broth, wondering when Master would come. When evening fell I thought that perhaps Erasmin would sleep through the night, but then without warning he whispered, "I should have listened to you long ago, my friend. I lost everything." His voice was cracked with exhaustion, and he opened his eyes to stare at the ceiling.

I said nothing, and he went on. "It's enough for me that your Master has warmed me. It was all I longed for."

"He is your Master now," I said softly.

He looked at me. "Yes, he is. But I am a husk, not a man. At best a dog, not a slave."

I shook my head. I was disturbed by his motionless weakness. "Master promised you that this was a beginning, not an end. You will find that being his slave is the most glorious place in the world."

"'Well-being and worth,' you told me years ago. That is where true treasure lies." His eyes turned to the fire. "But of what worth am I? And soon nothing."

I groped for words to say. "He called you 'son.' Does that mean nothing to you?"

He looked at me. "I could not understand that. I am a slave. I will be branded as such. I will always be a slave."

The door opened, and Master entered the fire-lit room. Erasmin closed his eyes and seemed nothing but a withered shell. Master took off his cloak, then came near. "Erasmin. Look at me, my son."

Erasmin's eyes opened. He shuddered deep in his blankets.

"Do you still think I will punish you?"

Erasmin said nothing, and I retreated a few steps into the shadows.

Master's voice was warm—warming as fire could never be. "Do you still think that you are nothing?"

Again, Erasmin did not answer.

Master placed a tender hand on his arm. "You know me, Erasmin. You have long known the price I paid for you. That is not a price given a worthless person. Out of my love for you, because you are so precious to me, I gave everything in order to redeem you." The fire crackled in the hearth. "You fear being beaten again. You fear the tearing down of your inward parts. You are my son. I will never harm you."

A tear rolled down Erasmin's cheek. "My lord—" he whispered, but couldn't continue.

Master's head bowed, and I thought I could see heavy sorrow in the tension in his back. "You came seeking escape—even if into death."

"I am . . . so old, my lord. I have been worthless so long. I felt no worth even to seek you."

Master was silent for a long time, then raised his head. "What do you see in him?" he gestured for me to come nearer.

Erasmin looked at me, weariness in his face. "I see a peace I've never known. I see a . . . confidence that does not come from his youth. I don't know what it is."

As if drawn by Master's own longing, I came and knelt also beside Erasmin's chair. "Brother," I said, wonder touching my voice, "you see trust in me. I trust Master—with my life I trust him. His love surrounds and supports me; whatever he asks, I can do with my whole heart. And yet all I do is as nothing compared to all that he does for me. I—I can trust him in pain because he gives me life."

Amazement began to show in Erasmin's face. He looked at each of us. "You call me 'son,' and you 'brother'?"

Master nodded. "A bond-slave is one by choice, not by tyranny. The relationship is then that much greater, formed as it is by love and not oppression. Will you rest now?"

Slowly, Erasmin nodded. His eyes held mine. "I saw the Master in you. But I did not realize it could be mine."

I had tears in my eyes as I lifted him into the bed. I spread my cloak to sleep on the floor; then I realized with a shock that Master had also spread his cloak on the wooden floor, nearer Erasmin. He saw my startled look and met my eyes with a smile. "Why are you surprised?" he asked softly so that only I heard. "I need no bed."

"Master?" Erasmin spoke hesitantly.

Master immediately rose and sat beside him.

I could just see Erasmin's hand lift feebly, and Master gently setting it back to rest under the blankets. "Master, I have wanted a—friend for so long."

"I am here. You're safe."

I laid down, letting the darkness lend them privacy. Master sat on the bed, occasionally murmuring a few words until Erasmin fell asleep. Then he stood carefully and went to lie on his cloak. The peace of knowing he was there pervaded me, and I slept.

31.

It was the summer, the second year of my marriage to Laesha. I had been in the city all day, and was coming home as the sun was approaching the horizon. I was dusty and sweaty but stopped on the way to pick wildflowers for Laesha. When I had gathered jonquils, daisies, and blue bells, I carefully plucked three sprays from a wild rosebush that grew tangled over a wayside rock and headed for home.

When I got there, I looked around to make certain no one was watching, then knocked on the door.

"Just a minute!"

I smothered a smile.

In a moment, the door was swung wide and Laesha opened her mouth to greet her visitor – then burst out laughing as she saw me. I was grinning. "What's this?" she asked, still laughing.

"Just for you, my sweet," I said, coming in and kissing her.

She took the bouquet from me and buried her nose in its scent. "Oh, they're wonderful! I'll get a vase." She paused. "The roses won't fit –"

"No," I corrected, "they're not for you. They're for the other woman I love."

She pursed her lips with a smile and went to get a vase. I took the sprays of roses and went into our bedroom. Gently, I placed them above the crib, out of little Melanie's reach but where she could stretch for them. She did so, and a soft, "ooh!" escaped her. She lifted a hand to the fountain of pink and I obligingly plucked off a single rose and let her play with it – she turned it clumsily in her hand before making a fist around the petals.

"What do you say, little girl?" I asked her, bending down to lift her into my arms.

She gurgled an answer, and laughed as I tickled her. I carried her with me as I went back to Laesha. "Was she good today?"

Laesha smiled. "Oh, she was. She didn't want to nap and was crying for a while, but she finally slept. You should be glad she did." She admired the flowers now set on the table. "How was your day?"

"Well enough. Silametta threw several glass jars at me – it wasn't easy to convince her to hear me out. After that I met Fredegar for lunch and we talked until I calmed down. Meeting Nurafel was worlds different than last time. I honestly think he might ask to be put for sale. Soon; not yet."

"What did he say?"

"That he had decided to watch his master and our Master very carefully, and that he might even request me to come see him at some point. It was so different!"

"Mm," she agreed. Melanie said something garbled to me. Laesha looked fondly at her. "Shall I take her?"

"You've had her all day. Rest. What have you done?"

"I'm making that wedding dress for Feona. I'm still just setting the pieces; I haven't even begun cutting the lace and ribbon yet."

"It will look beautiful, I'm sure."

She gave me a pleased look. "Thank you. Erasmin stopped by to see if you were here."

"I wanted to see him tonight; do you mind if I'm gone for an hour or so?"

She took out dishes to set the table. "Not at all." She chuckled. "He showed me a new carving one of the boys whittled for him. A frog, and its rather good."

"He asked Paulos if he could have a new shelf made; the gifts the children have given him are spreading even to the table he eats at."

"He's the best loved teacher I know. Put her back in her crib, and I'll set out the meal."

"All right." I carried Melanie back to our bedroom and laid her down beneath the wild roses. "Rest quietly," I whispered with a smile, kissing her forehead. She gurgled at me and waved up at the roses, trying to reach them.

It wasn't many days later that Nurafel sent me a message asking me to come see him. I was pleased, and showed Paulos the letter. He frowned.

"He doesn't say that he wants to be put for sale."

"No," I agreed, "but perhaps he will after this. I'm going this afternoon to see him."

"Do you mind if I come with you?"

"Not at all." I studied him. "Are you worried about something?"

"No . . . only, shouldn't you tell Master?"

Now I frowned. "I would, but Master already told me to use my discretion with Nurafel. He said I might go there as I felt I should."

Instantly, Paulos' face cleared. "All right. But I'd still like to go."

We went together, stopping first at Lady Valena's house. She was curious and cordial. Afterwards, we went to Nurafel's walled-in home. The gatekeeper let us in courteously and escorted us toward the front door.

I don't know what first caught my attention, but I was already distracted toward the corner of the house when I heard the desperate scuffle. I broke into a sprint just as a boy—not yet a man—stumbled from behind the granite. He was clutching his head where it was bleeding profusely, and bruises showed through rents in his clothing.

"What happened?" I called, skidding to a stop next to him and ignoring the gatekeeper who had run after me. I took his shoulders carefully and peered at his head. The slash was shallow but long.

"Let him alone," answered a gruff voice, and two men with pinched, hard faces came around the corner. They wore Nurafel's livery. They made toward the boy, whose eyes widened in fear.

He looked up at me anxiously. "The lord's after you, sir, and I was making to warn you. I warn't fast enough to get out." His cheeks were tight with pain.

I stood straighter. "Paulos," I said. He was there, next to me. His eyes were deeply concerned. "Take care of him. Since it appears that Nurafel is playing a double game, I may as well go inside."

I turned on my heel, startling the gatekeeper, and glared at him. "So show me to the lord Nurafel," I ordered.

He swallowed, and I expect that any plans to bind me stopped at that point. Rather, I was led freely through the doors of the house. I hoped fervently that Paulos would not be stopped in helping the boy. And that he himself would not be injured.

It was a much larger, more elegant room that I was shown into than the one I had been in before. Gold glittered along the edges of the tables, on the window sills, and in crystal candelabra. Nurafel was there, red hair smoothed with oil, his once open face surprisingly calculating as I entered the room. He was leaning next to a window. His whole attitude was one of giving precedence to someone else—but in a way that served himself.

My old master was in the room, one hand resting on the long table.

I said nothing, nor did I flinch. I looked him in the eyes and remembered only Master's touch on my shoulder. His arrogance faltered and he scowled.

Before he could speak, I turned calmly to Nurafel. "What did you hope to gain by treachery?"

Nurafel raised his eyebrows. "Treachery? My dear fellow, I was merely following orders. Whatever that means for you I fear is none of my concern."

"You wanted to know the difference between my Master and yours—even if that was a lie. Well, know this. My Master takes concern for you as well. For your well-being, and your redemption. I hope you yet come to him."

"Not this one, dog!" snapped my old master. He moved away from the table. "I haven't yet repaid you for Daelmor, not to mention the trouble you've caused me here."

"I am acting in the service of my Master," I replied. "If you desire to take your so-called debts out of my skin, then do so. I am well aware that you treat all his faithful slaves as you once treated him."

He paused, and his eyes narrowed. "You tempt me to flay you alive."

I was absolutely steady, though I didn't know how. I answered, "I don't think you will. For the sake of this one." I returned my attention to Nurafel. "He will not touch me. So that you will learn one more thing, if against your will. My Master is the son of the High King. Your master cannot touch me unless he is given permission. He does not have it this day." I turned to leave.

"I will kill you!" fumed my old master, clenching his fists.

I paused, and looked at him. "You threaten me," I said quietly. I left.

Outside, I found Paulos and the boy under close watch by the two guards. He was very tense, but the boy's head was bandaged. I walked to them.

I met the guards' uncertain gazes. "We are going. Release them."

"We . . . can't," they replied.

"Then come with us," I said with an amused smile. I reached to give the boy a hand up, for he was sitting on the pavingstones.

His grip was tight and fervent on my hand, and his look pleaded with me. I nodded reassuringly.

Abruptly, the door again opened to the house and my old master stalked out. Paulos swallowed, and the boy went white.

He came up to us, and looked from me to Paulos and back again. "You foul dog!" he spat, and his arm flashed out to backhand me across the mouth.

I stumbled, but caught myself. Beyond him, I saw Nurafel standing on the steps. I looked at my old master. "Go," I said.

"You would order me!" he laughed spitefully.

"We are servants of the King," Paulos said.

He was holding up the boy, who was weak and afraid. His face reflected the clear peace it so often knew. "It is our Master who orders you to go."

Our old master glared at us in hatred, then spun around and strode out across the court and through the gates. The guards didn't stop us as we left, each of us helping the boy.

Once outside, we sought refuge in the bustle of the market. Paulos peered at me. "How do you feel?"

"Well enough," I said with a surprised laugh.

He breathed a sigh and relaxed. "You won't soon. Your cheek is swelling already."

I touched it gingerly. "Ouch." I closed my eyes. "That was incredible."

"Tell me what happened."

I opened my eyes. "I will, but let's first see to him. What's your name?" I asked the boy.

He was gazing at me in amazement. "Adar. You—you told him to go and he did!"

I nodded. "True. But we told him to with the authority of our own Master, not just by ourselves."

"I wanted to be put for sale," he said in a whisper. "Does that mean I have to go back and . . . ask?"

I glanced at Paulos, who shook his head slightly. "No," I said. "Let our Master—who'll be your Master—deal with it. Just come home with us."

He seemed to go limp with relief. After we'd had something to eat, though in truth I could hardly take in a bite, we headed back. I carried Adar most of the way since he had bled heavily.

Once home, the shock of the day overcame me and I had several fits of trembling. Laesha stayed beside me the whole time, first tending to my jaw, then simply letting her presence reassure me. Though I wanted to see Master immediately, I fell into an exhausted sleep. A peacefulness claimed me that let me know tomorrow would be soon enough to speak with him. I needed to rest.

33.

The next day, I sought out Master. He wasn't within the house, and I finally found him in the vineyard. He had evidently been working in it for he was wearing an old, stained tunic and his hands were dirty. A pair of shears was tucked in his belt.

As I approached, I suddenly felt overwhelmed, "Master!" I called softly. I dropped to one knee onto the fertile ground.

He came to me and placed a hand on my head. "No, my brother. You have done very well. Come."

I stood, breathing deeply of his reassurance. When I met his eyes, I was further strengthened by the familiar welcome there. I smiled.

He nodded toward my jaw. "Does it hurt much?"

"No. It just makes talking and eating difficult."

"Was Laesha upset?"

My own eyebrows raised in surprise. "No, actually not."

He began walking, and I joined him. He glanced at me. "I think she would be able to meet your old master now and not be frightened. You have helped her gain that strength." He reached to touch an unripe cluster of grapes as we passed, letting the fruit slide through his fingers. "Adar too will be strong, because he saw you and Paulos."

I looked down. "I am not strong. It was knowing you that let me say what I did."

"I know. Your own strength would never be sufficient." He stopped, and sought my eyes and face. "You are my crown, my joy. I suffered for you because I love you—your love for me is a higher reward than perhaps you can imagine. You, Laesha, Fredegar, Paulos . . . you are all my joy. Yet you have only as yet seen a glimpse of what your slavery and sonship truly is."

"I know I have failed you often . . ." I said, downcast.

But he smiled and laughed lightly. "No, my son. You have been faithful. Failure is frequent as you learn; it is your faithfulness that lasts. You are right, you shall continue to learn what sonship is, so you shall also continue to learn what joy is."

I looked at him, and it seemed for a moment as if our thoughts must be one, flowing fully in each of us. "To be with you," I said, my trust resting completely in him.

He nodded, and the sun beat warm upon us. Finally he said, "Come. Work with me."

I am sure some of the vines were less productive that year for being under my care, but it was more occasion for laughter between us than concern as he patiently taught me to follow the curling tendrils of green.

Two days later, Erasmin and I had lunch as usual in the market. It was hard for him to go into the city, but he always insisted on it and I know Master was pleased that he did so. When he was in the city, people who had known him as Lord Erasmin saw him, and saw the change that his new slavery had made in him.

We were seated at an outdoor restaurant having only fruit and fresh bread since the day was hot. He breathed deeply and smiled. "I met young Adar. A marvelous boy."

I laughed in realization. "So you're the one he met! I spent some time with him yesterday and he told me of an older man whom he hoped to see again; said he really looked up to him."

Erasmin was amazed. "Me? I would think he'd be searching out you and Paulos; you rescued him."

I chuckled. "And so we apparently seem rather out of reach. You, on the other hand, he understands, because he's seen the kind of life you used to live."

"I will take time to be with him. It was and is the time you have given me that has helped me so much." His sight seemed to drift farther away. "I always dreamed of having a son. Perhaps if I lived long enough, and we became deep enough friends, I might adopt him."

I nodded, and let him contemplate the thought in silence. In a bit, he brought himself back. "And you?" he asked, taking a slice of melon. "How is Melanie? I haven't seen her in a few days."

"She misses you," I said with a grin. "She's wondering where the beard is that she plays with."

He touched his beard and his lip twitched. "I have to find something else to distract her. Otherwise I won't have any beard left."

"She would definitely be sad if that happened. Are you ready to leave?"

"I am." He stood up, leaving the money on the table, and we left.

He was there with Adar that night before the boy received the brand. I wondered if perhaps his desire for an adopted son might be fulfilled in the coming months. But after the ceremony it was the Ambassador that I searched out—Maerden.

He welcomed me with a warm embrace. "You look well."

"I am," I agreed. "You know that I have a daughter?"

He nodded with a smile. "She is beautiful."

"Will you . . . come back to our home? I would be glad if you would."

He assented. "But first I have to speak with others here. I will be there within the hour."

I left, and went to our rooms. Laesha was radiant when I told her that Maerden would be coming.

She scooped Melanie up. "Did you hear, Melanie? The Ambassador is coming!" She cradled her in her arms. "You know your daddy's told you about him." Then she gave her to me, and set about cleaning the house.

I watched her, then laughed. "What if he'd come back with me right then? You wouldn't have had time to clean."

She came over and kissed me. "You were a bachelor far too long. If he's given me the time to clean, I'm definitely going to do it."

I held Melanie on my knee and said to Laesha, "Adar will be a strong man soon." Melanie giggled as I bounced her up and down.

"I'm sure he will. All went well tonight?"

I nodded. "Very well. Come, sit by me."

She set her hands on her hips as if to give me a tongue lashing, but then broke down to a smile and put away her dusting cloth. She snuggled beside me in the circle of my arm, holding one of Melanie's hands.

"I love you," she murmured to me, her gray eyes looking into mine.

"And I, you," I replied. "And to be holding the two people I love best means more than I can say." I squeezed her lightly, and we talked little until Maerden came.

He knocked and we stood up, Laesha holding Melanie as I opened the door.

"Thank you for coming," I said softly as he came in.

"I thank you," he said with a smile. "Laesha, you make a beautiful mother."

She blushed. "Thank you."

He came near and took Melanie in his arms. "And she is lovely." He brought her to his chest, and she cooed against the wine-colored silk. "Someday may you, too, take the brand I give," he murmured to her. "You shall grow up knowing the Master, and seeing the joy of your family and all those here. May that be a strength to you, and a help so that even as a young child you shall love and trust the Master and come to him. Be strong, my child. Grow in love."

He held her a moment longer, eyes closed as he rested his cheek against her head, then he handed her back to Laesha. Laesha's lashes glistened with tears. His hand rested briefly on her shoulder. "Your faithfulness is strong, and your love is as deep as a river. Put any remaining fear from you, and with gentle trust lean on Master for your strength. He will supply all that you need."

He then turned to me, and I felt his strong, tender hand on my shoulder. "Your life is a light to all who see you. Your faithfulness and trust are a treasure that continues to increase. Rest fully in Master's wisdom, and you shall never be shaken. Grace flows through your life to fill you and all those around you."

We spoke together for a little while, then he left, but the warmth of his presence remained. The tender love in his smile and the deep wisdom of his eyes touched us both, and we slept together that night in utter peace.

35.

A few days later, Master sent for me to meet him in the solarium.

It was morning, so the sun had not yet heated the room to the humidity it would reach at mid-day. Master was standing looking out toward the city. "Master?" I asked.

He turned to me. "Good morning. Come; sit." He gestured me to one of the marble benches, and came to join me. "I need you to give two messages for me today – one to Silametta, one to Trael." He handed me the rolled parchments.

I took them and nodded. "I will."

"Fredegar will be going in to look at two saddles he commissioned. Go together."

"We will." I sought his face. "I love you."

He smiled at me. "I love you, my son."

I got up and left quietly, for he seemed pensive. As I closed the door I saw he was again at the glass, looking out.

I found Fredegar near the stables; he was taking a last look at the horses he wanted the saddles for. "'Morning!" he said cheerily. "Ready to go?"

"When you are. Are we riding in, or walking?"

"Walking. I won't be taking the saddles back today; just checking on them. It's a beautiful day, so I'd rather walk."

It was definitely beautiful, with the golden sun giving everything vibrant color. We talked and laughed on the way there.

We arrived near noon and paused before parting.

"How long do you expect it'll take you?" he asked. Sweat glistened on his forehead.

I shrugged. "I don't know. Master didn't tell me the contents, so I don't think I'll have to do much talking. But Silametta tends to be wild in her responses—just in throwing things. So that could take longer."

"Or shorter!" he grinned.

I chuckled. "True. So why don't we meet at our usual restaurant? Waiting is easier there."

"Sounds good to me. See you in a while."

"All right."

We split up and I wound my way to Silametta's house. It was not as pretentious as some.

The doorkeeper showed me into her receiving room and went to tell her I had come. I sighed as I looked at the many glass bowls and vases that adorned the shelves. Hopefully, she wouldn't have as strong a response as before.

She came through the door. "You again!" she said in her strained manner. She seemed nervous, her hands folding over and over themselves. "Well," she managed with a laugh, "let's see what you have." She glided to a small round table on which sat a crystal decanter of wine. "Would you care for a drink? I will see what your master has to tell me this time."

"No, that's all right."

"Oh, please," she said, taking the letter from me, "I'm doing what I can to apologize for my outbreak when you were last here. And it's terribly hot today." I shrugged and accepted a glass. But I watched her carefully lest she suddenly become angry.

Her hands began shaking as she read the letter, and her eyes went wide. "Oh, no!" Trembling, she blindly sought the edge of the table to steady herself. She looked up to stare at me. "Do you know what it says?" she gasped.

I frowned, and put down the wine. "I don't. Do you need to ask me something?"

"Oh no!" She crumpled the parchment in her fingers. "Just go! Just go now! Get out of here!"

Disturbed, I turned quickly and left. I heard her sobbing behind me and almost went back, but I was uncertain of what I could do. I would tell Master immediately when I returned.

Sadly, I went four streets over to Trael's house. He was a very young lord, and I knew he was still dominated by the views that others took of him. He was desperately trying to establish himself, and Master was just as earnestly trying to convince him to stop, and be put for sale. His was a rich house, and enough eligible women were bidding for it. Eligible and cunning women.

I gathered myself at the gate, rubbing my forehead. The day was hotter than I'd thought and I was getting a headache. But I took a calming breath and requested entrance. I was shown to the usual oval room that Trael met me in.

As always, I admired the mosaic on the floor. It was a simple geometric pattern, but the interwoven blues and greens were expertly designed and laid down. I looked up as footsteps sounded in the hall.

Trael, dressed in perfect fashion, entered uncertainly. "Good-day," he said in a low voice. "What brings you here?"

"A message for you." I extended it to him, and he came slowly forward and took it. "Have you thought any more of what Master has said?"

His eyes dropped. "I . . . have."

"And he has rejected it," cut in a cultivated sneer.

My muscles tightened and I looked up. Nurafel was standing in the doorway. As I met his eyes, he sauntered into the room.

"Yes, he has rejected it," he said, stopping a few paces away from me. "I have rejected it, Silametta has rejected it, Curadin has rejected it—as a matter of fact, we all have rejected it. And we have all decided that we are also rejecting you."

I was shocked motionless and stared at him. My blood pounded hot and fast through my body. The tension I felt crashing down led to a wave of dizziness.

"Nurafel," said Trael suddenly. He was holding the letter, open. "I think you should read this."

Nurafel gazed at him scornfully. "Put it away. Ignore it."

"But it mentions you."

The older lord was exasperated. "Undoubtedly it does. And it most likely tells me that if I don't *put myself for sale* –" he glared at me, "then I will have to pay the price myself. Would you just leave it?"

Trael was unhappy as he folded the parchment several times and tucked it away.

I found my voice. "Don't put it away," I said gently. "Take what it says. My Master does not lie – nor does he warn lightly." My throat was dry.

But Trael only shook his head, and looked at his peer.

Something in his expression made me wrench my gaze back to Nurafel. The red-haired lord was balancing a long dagger in his hand.

His mouth twisted. "I told you we were rejecting you." His hand snapped in a quick arc, and I know I screamed when the hard stab buried itself low in my side.

I fell to the floor, hands pressed to the wound, and Nurafel came and crouched beside me. He waited until I could see him. "That is my last answer to your Master." He grabbed the hilt and yanked it from my flesh. I nearly fainted.

"Nurafel . . ." came Trael's fearful voice.

"Quiet, you fool. You have no backbone. Bring them in."

Perhaps it was from shock, but I lay there unmoving, staring dazedly at the door. There were sounds of people, and suddenly four guards entered, shepherding someone in. They separated, and it was with another breath of anguish that I saw Fredegar – beaten. But the look on his face was one of tormented care. He ran to me, not stopped by the guards.

But he wasn't the only one. With him came a young woman, and I recognized Valena. She was stripped of her usual jewels and gold, and also of any concern for herself.

Fredegar dropped to one knee beside me. "What have they done?" he whispered.

Even had I been able to speak, Nurafel cut it off. "So now you can return – helped by a cripple and a woman." He came closer, and Fredegar and Valena moved to shield me. He stopped and smirked. "Even if you get him back – which I doubt – don't hope for much. Silametta poisoned him."

Valena gasped, and stood involuntarily. I closed my eyes, understanding with sorrow why I was so hot, and why I had grown steadily weaker. Even as the realization came, I felt my fever take on new heat.

"How could you have done this?" cried Valena, her voice breaking.

Nurafel dismissed her protest with a flick of his fingers. "We've been waiting for him. So get him out. The floor needs to be cleaned."

Somehow, they lifted me and stumbled from the house. Fredegar must have been in pain from his own beating, but he never so much as moaned. His one arm was stronger than they had thought, and with Valena's help he was able to bear most of my weight.

Once away from the street they stopped, lowering me to the ground. Valena ripped strips from her skirt, and worked to stop my wound. Fredegar washed my face with water from a drinking trough. "Can you speak?" he asked. "What can we do?"

I had managed to gather some strength. "It hurts," I whispered. My head swirled. "What happened?"

"I was arrested, and they brought me to Trael's house. They were too many for me."

I blinked at Valena. "Why did they take you?"

"Because I challenged them," she said sadly. "I was and am going to put myself for sale." She gazed at me. "And I will tell them what has happened here. Maybe this will shake them to listen. They are so complacent so often—except those who truly hate." She broke down. "I am so sorry!"

My pulse was throbbing. "Can . . . can you get me back?" I wanted more than anything to get back. I wanted to be home.

"Yes," Fredegar answered, grimly. "Try to stay quiet. Master has horses here, and a carriage. We'll get you back."

Valena steadied him as he lifted my torso, then she took my legs and they headed for Master's stables. Blackness and a dull throbbing threatened to claim me, and once we were on the road from the city, it did.

It was very quiet in the room—one in Master's house. I knew who was there and had managed to speak with them all, but that had exhausted me. Laesha was beside me, and I thought that Paulos must have taken Melanie from her because she was clasping my hand in both of hers. Master held my other hand.

"Leave us," he said quietly. He calmed Laesha with a touch as she looked at him, stricken. All the others silently left.

My breathing seemed to calm. A while ago, tight pains had gripped my stomach and chest, but those stilled now. I looked at Laesha. "I love you," I said softly. "Don't worry." She nodded, but was unable to speak. I saw her mouth move in the words.

Then I looked to Master. His hand soothed mine gently. "I have long told you, my son, that there is so much more in the brand that you took than you can imagine. Don't worry now.

"The price that I paid for you transcended death. So also, your slavery and sonship go beyond death. You are ever my own, my son, my brother."

We rested there, and gradually Laesha stopped weeping. I knew my breathing was growing weaker. I tried to squeeze her hand, and then I met Master's clear, gentle eyes. "*I love you.*" I wanted to say it, and sadness overwhelmed me that I couldn't form the words. But he smiled, and I could just feel the touch of his hand on mine. His voice was soft and full—"*I love you.*"