

The Cyber Chronicles

Book I: Queen of Arlin

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Prologue

"More monsters have come from the Death Zone, Sire."

King Litham Alrade looked up at his trusted advisor. Lines of weariness mapped his parchment-pale skin, and steel-grey brows drew together above dark blue eyes that had lost their lustre. Shadows of pain lurked in their depths, reflecting that which gnawed at his innards and loosened his hold on life. The doctors had withdrawn from the sickbed and stood in affronted unwillingness to admit their failure.

Heavy, indigo velvet curtains covered the windows and kept the wood-panelled bedchamber gloomy, adding to the sense of doom. Smoking braziers burnt incense, thickening the air with cloying scent. Bottles, vials and pots cluttered the bedside table, testament to the doctors' futile ministrations.

King Litham's swift illness had taken everyone by surprise, wasted the flesh from his powerful frame at an alarming speed and robbed him of his strength. The King's eyes wandered over his long-time friend's face, as if seeking an answer in his elderly features. Despair flared in his eyes.

"What can I do about it now, Pervor? All that I can, I have done. Did you meet the wizard?"

Pervor nodded. "He agreed to help. He told me that he would send a tool, some sort of magical device, and it will appear in our dungeons when it is ready. Do you truly trust this man, Sire? You leave the fate of your kingdom and your daughter in his hands."

Litham sighed. "What choice do I have? The gods have decided to take me from this mortal plane, and none can gainsay them. Certainly not that brood of incompetents that lurk in the shadows. I only wish I could stay to see it through. Tassin does not deserve this burden on her reign, she is too young." Anger brought blood to stain the old King's cheeks for a moment before it drained away again. His wheezing broke the hush.

"Tassin is strong," Pervor said. "She comes from a long line of warrior kings and queens. She will win."

Litham shook his head and closed his eyes. "She is frailer than you think. Her mother was as fragile as a flower, and as easily crushed. Why do you think she died after birthing Tassin, who was such a small baby? Tassin tries to be a warrior princess, but she is too small, like her mother, her blows too puny. Mandon, bless him, makes her feel good when she does her sword training, but he tells me that she can hardly cleave a butterfly in half."

"But she has your blood in her too, My King. She will be strong when she has to."

"She will try. I pray that she does not kill herself in the process. Pervor, swear to me."

The advisor fell to one knee. "Anything, Sire, just name it."

"Protect her, and if you cannot, since you are old, find a mighty warrior who will. One who will stand beside her and kill her enemies when she cannot. She will have troubles aplenty, and not merely the monsters from the Death Zone that ravage our land. The kings will fight for her hand, and none are good. Find someone. Be he mage or warrior, prince or miracle worker. She will need him. Swear this to me."

Pervor bowed his head. "I swear, My King, upon my life and the lives of my children, to do my utmost."

"Tell her of the weapon as soon as she is Queen. Help her to use it, and defeat the Death Zone. I leave her in your care."

Pervor nodded, frowning as the King's breath rattled, and one of the healers who hovered nearby stepped closer to bend over him.

"Send for the Princess," the doctor said.

The advisor retreated into the shadows as a manservant ran out. The King lay shrunken and pale on the huge bed, the doctors gathered around him like vultures about a corpse.

Princess Tassin Alrade gazed down at her father's peaceful face, her throat tight. He seemed to have aged a decade in the last week. His lips were tinged with blue and he breathed in wheezing gasps. The bevy of doctors, advisors and servants that stood in the shadows watched her stroke his brow, lined by years of worry. The King was dying; everyone knew it. Soon she, a seventeen-year-old girl, would be queen of a vast and powerful land. Her father had wed late in life, rejecting all offers until he had met the daughter of an insignificant lord. A brief year of happiness had ended with her mother's death a few days after Tassin's birth. From her father she had inherited the Alrade black hair and blue eyes, and from her mother's blood, her slight stature and fine features.

Tassin sought his limp hand amongst the bed clothes and gripped it, and the King opened his eyes. She leant forward. "Papa? Papa, it's me."

His gasping breaths quieted. "Tassin, my child." His eyes roamed over her face.

"Papa, you must not die. I do not want you to die."

His hand clasped hers. "I am sorry, little one. Be happy, Tassin. Do not let anyone take that from you. Trust Pervor, he will guide you and take care of you. I go to join your mother."

"No! Papa!" Her tears overflowed as King Litham's eyes closed, and his breath left him in a long sigh. Tassin flung herself onto his chest and embraced him, shuddering sobs racking her slender form. A sigh came from the shadows where his retainers waited.

"The King is dead, long live the Queen," a voice proclaimed.

There was a rustle of rich cloth as the retainers knelt. A firm hand clasped her shoulder.

"Come, Your Majesty, he is dead." She did not recognise the voice, but allowed herself to be tugged away, numb with misery, hardly noticing as she was led to her room.

For ten days, the kingdom mourned, none more than Tassin. Her father lay in state, and mourners filed past to pay their last respects. He was interred in the royal tomb beside his wife, and Tassin was alone, an orphan at seventeen, barely of age. Pervor watched over her with the fervour of a broody hen, dogging her footsteps with unending advice. Her principal lady-in-waiting offered a plump, motherly shoulder on which to weep, and it was often damp. Ten days after the funeral, Tassin's coronation took place in her father's throne room.

Her ladies-in-waiting dressed her in a white satin gown, its bodice covered with intricate patterns of seed pearls and its gossamer sleeves sewn with tiny diamonds. Her silken tresses were teased into glossy bangs and swept up into a regal coif sparkling with jewelled pins and fine gold chains. Diamonds flashed on her fingers, wrists and neck. Teardrop pearls dripped from her earlobes, and a diamond-studded silver mesh was pinned to the back of her hair, falling like a rain-dewed cobweb around her neck. Her ladies praised her beauty, but were forced to rub berry juice into her cheeks and lips, reminding her of a lamb being prepared for slaughter.

The priests and nobles awaited her in the long, banner-hung throne room with a high roof and polished slate floor. Battle trophies, coats of arms and old suits of armour told the tale of her ancestors' glory days. The three rulers of the neighbouring kingdoms turned to rake her with cold, calculating eyes when she entered. They were here to vie for her hand in marriage, and her extreme youth and beauty clearly pleased them. It was not her they wanted though, but to annex her rich kingdom for the duration of the marriage and profit from it. Her father's last words echoed in her mind as she was led towards the throne, hardly aware of the courtiers who bowed as she passed.

The ceremony was a blur of droning speeches and tuneless hymns. She held the things that were placed in her hands, not caring what they were, and repeated the words that she was asked to, her mind still filled with the image of her father's gaunt, tired face. As the cold weight of the crown settled upon her brow, she vowed to obey her father's last wish. The eyes of the three kings crawled over her like slugs. Everywhere she looked, she met calculating gazes, plotting, weighing, seeking her mettle. She raised her chin in proud defiance of their judgement, and the scheming eyes slid away with cunning glints. Even at her coronation, enemies surrounded her. Her life was poised to plunge

into a dark sea of intrigue and plots, and the prospect terrified her.

Chapter One

Tassin gazed across the darkening land as the sun's afterglow faded. The distant forest grew gloomier with every passing minute, and she shivered, wishing the strange wizard, Manutim, had not insisted that she meet him there alone tonight. The forest, with its huge, twisted trees, frightened her. Legends abounded of werewolves who dwelt in its dark confines and emerged at night to seek human victims.

Turning away from the dusky vista, Tassin gazed across the grey stone battlements. The sentries' armour glinted in the light of newly kindled torches. They stood like statues, their faces blank, but for all she knew they could have been the cook's cousins, since there were so few of her trained soldiers left. Most had perished over the last two months. She wondered how long it would take for the last remnants of her once-great army to lose hope and flee before they too were slaughtered on the battlefield. Deserters had been fleeing the castle for days now, vanishing from their posts in the dead of night.

Three months had passed since her father's death, and she still missed him terribly. She now ruled the largest and most beautiful of the five kingdoms, and was the prey of the three unwed kings' ambition to rule Arlin. They had come courting, and Tassin shuddered as she recalled their bungling attempts to impress her. Fat, bearded Bardock, who smelt of wine and dogs. Old, widowed Grisson, thin and lecherous, who sucked at his food with a toothless mouth. The memory soured her stomach. All her hopes had rested upon the young, handsome King Torrian, the only one she had even considered, until she had found out that he was a rapist and woman beater.

The unwholesome glint in his eyes had become obvious when she had been informed of his true nature. Her principal lady-in-waiting, Lady Royanne, had told her tearfully, clearly aware that she was dashing the young Queen's hopes for a happy marriage. During his stay at Alrade Castle, Torrian had attacked one of the serving maids, and his retinue had spread surreptitious whispers of his appetites. The rumours were not supposed to reach Tassin, but Royanne was an able spy, unearthing anything potentially harmful to her monarch.

Tassin sighed, her eyes sweeping the night-shrouded land. The law said that she must have a husband of noble blood, and the kings could force her to wed one of them if she did not choose a suitable spouse. They had pointed that out repeatedly, and, since there were no princes of royal blood apart from Prince Victor of Olgara, her choice was limited. Olgara was a poor kingdom bordering the Badlands that relied on trade to survive, and it could not jeopardise its alliances with the other kingdoms. Prince Victor had not offered a suit, and King Xavier, his older brother, had sent only a letter of condolence. She wanted none of the three available kings, however, and had told them so.

Torrian had been the most outraged, swearing to tear down her castle and drag her to the altar by her hair, as the law allowed. In desperation, Tassin sent invitations to all the unwed noblemen in her kingdom of marriageable age. All but one had declined, and he, a young lord from the southern part of her kingdom, had been waylaid and killed, apparently by highwaymen. She knew the three kings had used threats and blackmail to prevent the other noblemen from accepting her invitation, and in the case of the bravest, had resorted to murder. In the face of this bold treachery, she could do nothing but reiterate her refusal of their offers and weather the storm that followed.

Torrian had sent men to kidnap her from her bedroom, but they had been discovered and executed after confessing their mission. In a fury of fear and defiance, Tassin had mobilised her soldiers to defend her borders, preventing spies and would-be kidnappers from entering. After she had foiled two more attempts with these tactics, Torrian had joined with the other kings to fight their way to her castle and carry her off by force. So the war had started, and, although her army had rallied to her call and her lords fought bravely, she was losing.

Three armies stood against her, united in their purpose and agreed amongst themselves that the

first to reach her side would win her hand and rule Arlin. Pervor had begged her to wed Torrian and end the conflict, but Tassin was adamant that she would not be forced to wed a rapist. In her darkest hour, when it seemed that all was lost and she would end up as a battle prize, the old advisor had told her of the magician Manutim's promise to her father. The mage's weapon was designed to destroy the Death Zone and put an end to the monsters that came from it to ravage towns in Arlin, but such a weapon might also help her to win the war.

Turning back to the battlements, she gripped the cold rock and gazed into the darkness. Manutim's promise of help gave her a vestige of hope, for he was a wise and powerful mage. The weapon he had promised her father must be fearsome indeed if it could win the war. She had sworn to die in battle before marrying any of the vile kings. Then her cousin, a weedy boy of twelve, would inherit, and her uncle would be regent until her cousin was sixteen. Raising her chin, she caressed her sword's chill hilt. She was a warrior queen, she would fight for her right to be free and choose her husband.

The last shreds of light faded from the sky with the closing of a fist of darkness. Tassin pulled her fur coat around her as the night air nipped at her skin. A cold breeze had sprung up from the east, laden with the scent of earth and vegetation. Shivering, she walked along the battlements to the stairway that led down to the courtyard where her horse waited. Stony-faced guards watched her pass, their eyes glittering in the torchlight as they tracked her movement. If they had opinions on the rash course she had set herself, they knew better than to air them within the range of Royanne's sharp ears.

Deserters slipped away in the night, fleeing the coming bloodbath. The crippled guard captain, lacking an eye and half of his face from a sword cut many years before, kept tally of the dwindling men in the barracks and informed her daily of their numbers. He did not offer to hunt down the deserters, his reticence informing her that he did not blame them for their cowardice. Nor did she, for it was cruel to ask men to lay down their lives merely to keep their Queen from a marriage that she did not want. In a land where women were little more than chattel, a queen reigning alone was unheard of, and to most her decision to fight must seem worse than folly.

The head groom bowed as she approached, offering her the reins of her iron-grey charger, a warhorse of the highest calibre trained to kill with teeth and hooves. Falcon snorted, his ears twitching, and she stroked his muzzle when he snuffled her. A mounting block was put in place, and she swung into the saddle, gathering up the slack in the reins as he pranced and sidestepped. Falcon stood eighteen hands tall, his steel-shod hooves the size of soup plates, a behemoth of muscle clad in plates of armour. He was not the sort of horse that could be ridden side saddle, and she rode astride, the split skirt of her royal blue riding habit allowing her to do so.

"Open the gates!" the head groom shouted as Falcon paced towards the portcullis, his hooves striking sparks from the courtyard's stones. The portcullis rose with a rumble of chains, and the drawbridge beyond descended. The captain watched her pass, his disapproval of her solo, nocturnal jaunt clearly written on his scarred visage.

Falcon thundered across the drawbridge at an eager canter, defying her control. Once off the drawbridge, she let him have his head, his muscles surging beneath her as the cold wind tore her hair from its fastenings. She revelled in the freedom of the wild gallop, wishing she never had to return to her father's castle and the incessant, losing war with its inevitable tragic conclusion. Slowing Falcon to a bouncing canter, she turned him towards the wood. The stallion fought her with good natured spirit, both of them knowing he could defy her if he chose. The trees loomed ahead, and Tassin prayed that Manutim would be waiting. As they entered the forest, she slowed the mettlesome charger to a walk, only the crunch of leaves under his hooves breaking the breathless hush.

The largest of the three moons had risen by the time she reached the glade with its ring of stones, flooding it with silver light. She reined Falcon in and stroked his thick, arched neck while he fidgeted, alert to every whisper of sound. An owl's hoot startled her as the winged shape flitted between the trees in search of prey. Her eyes darted amongst the ominous shadows that seemed to move and creep in the moonlight.

Tassin slumped when a white-robed figure emerged from the trees and walked into the centre of the ring of stones. Manutim's hooded robe covered all but his pale hands, and the hood's deep shadows hid his face. She guided Falcon over to him, and he stroked the warhorse's velvet muzzle while she dismounted. Although she had never seen his face, she had trusted him since her father had introduced him eight years ago, and he had not betrayed her. The villagers spoke of strange lights in the sky when Manutim visited, but his aloof demeanour did not encourage questions. He had given her a wealth of advice and taught her a great deal about life and politics, however.

"Well met, My Queen," he greeted her in his soft, strangely accented voice. "How goes your war?"

"Badly. I rejoice to see you again. Have you been well?"

His head dipped. He never bowed to her, but always appeared respectful. "I am well, Majesty. I hope you are also in good health."

She sighed a cloud of steam. "I despair. I am losing this war, and that I will not accept. Before any of those three foul kings lock me in his castle, I shall kill myself. I fear that time approaches."

"I did advise you against this many years ago, did I not? Do you remember my telling you not to start a war you could not win? Truly you have disappointed your teacher, little one."

"What would you have me do? Wed that rapist monster, or one of the doddering fools?"

"Indeed, your options are not the best. You could abdicate in favour of your cousin and put an end to their plotting, but I know you would not consider such a move, although to die with your soldiers seems rather extreme. It is not too late to reconsider."

She shook her head. "I shall not be defeated except by death. That at least is honourable."

"Ah, and teach the kings a lesson, no doubt. Such pride is foolish, but you are too young to know the folly of your words. You will not realise how final death is until you stare into its face and feel the cold touch of fear."

"Your words are cruel. Have you no other solution to offer? Pervor said that you would help me."

"Do not despair, My Queen. I have the answer to your troubles."

"You are indeed a great wizard. What have you found?"

"I originally purchased it for your father, may his soul rest in peace. He asked for my help to deal with the Death Zone, and the weapon I have brought was for this purpose. But it will serve you just as well in your need, after which you may send it into the Death Zone to complete that mission. It resides in your dungeons, where I have conjured it. I searched the universe for this thing, and it cost much, yet I am happy for you to use it. When your war is won and the Death Zone destroyed I shall return for it, but until then it is yours."

"What is it?"

"You will see that for yourself, but do not doubt that it will defeat your enemies, no matter what you may think. Do not be deceived by its appearance. It is a powerful weapon."

Tassin disliked the mystery, but Manutim had always been an enigma. "Thank you, good wizard, your help is much needed and appreciated. I trust in your judgement, and if you say that this thing is the answer to my troubles, then it must be so. Take this as a token of my gratitude." She slid a ring from her finger, set with a green-streaked blue stone, and held it out to him.

Manutim's slender fingers closed around it like a spider clasping its prey, and he raised it to the light to examine it. "I require no payment, My Queen, but I shall treasure this gift since it is you who gave it."

Tassin smiled, turning away to find a suitable stone to use as a mounting block. "I must hurry back. I am filled with curiosity about your gift, and it is not safe for me here."

Manutim pocketed the ring. "In your dungeon you will find a casket. Press the button on its side, and within a few moments it will open and your new weapon will be revealed. I must leave, so you will not see me for a while. When I return, your war will be over and the Death Zone destroyed."

The wizard turned and walked into the forest, vanishing amongst the shadows as swiftly and

silently as he had appeared. Tassin stared after him, then led Falcon to a rock and mounted, guiding him along the faint, moon-silvered trail that twisted like a tarnished serpent between the trees, dappled with flecks of shadow. The dark forest's silence pressed in upon her, oppressive and pregnant with unknown dangers. As she neared its edge, Falcon tossed his head and pranced, ignored her soothing murmurs and communicated his unease to her. She wanted to give him his head and race from the wood, but good sense prevailed, for an overhanging branch was too likely to sweep her from the saddle. The shadows took on a sinister air, and every looming tree seemed like a dark warrior with woody hands outstretched to snatch her from the saddle.

Black figures burst from the undergrowth and leapt into her path, naked swords gleaming in their fists. Falcon stopped, tremors of anticipation running through him as he awaited her command. A suave, smug voice spoke from the darkness beside her, making her jump and whip around.

"So, my pretty, it seems I have won. There is no escape, you are now mine."

Torrian stepped from the trees beside the path, a smirk on his strong-featured face, which, though considered handsome, was somewhat coarse. She forced herself to smile and speak in a gasping voice.

"You overcome me, Torrian. I knew you would be the one to win my hand, and I am glad to be proven right."

"So this was all to test my mettle? How romantic. I approve, my dear Tassin. I had not known that you were the type of woman to sacrifice four thousand men to test your suitor." He chuckled.

Tassin quelled a shudder. "My palfrey trembles with fear, and I think he may bolt if your men do not hold him."

Torrian eyed the warhorse. "He is a goodly size for a palfrey, and armoured too."

"And yet a palfrey is all he is, for you know full well that no mere woman could ride a warhorse, though his appearance is intended to mislead those too slow of wit to realise this."

The King hesitated, then gave the order to his men, who approached, lowered their swords and reached for Falcon's reins. As soon as they were near enough, Tassin loosed the reins, grasped the pommel and shouted, "Falcon, attack!"

The stallion reared with a squeal, his forefeet lashing out to strike two soldiers, smashing them to the ground. As he dropped to all fours he lunged, sank long yellow teeth into a third man and lifted him off the ground, flinging him into the trees like a rag doll, trailing an agonised scream. Tassin clung to the saddle as he spun and lashed out with his hind legs, two solid thuds testifying to his accuracy.

"It's a warhorse!" a man yelled, and the circle of soldiers closed, their blades flashing towards the stallion. Falcon reared again, propelled himself forwards with a powerful thrust of his hind legs and smashed two more men down with steel-shod hooves. A sword clanged against his armour-clad shoulder in a shower of sparks, and he staggered. Tassin drew her sword with a hiss of steel, slashing at the dodging men. Falcon lashed out with his hind feet again, but more men streamed from the woods, too many for a scouting party.

Gathering up her reins, she urged Falcon forward, overriding the command to fight. The stallion plunged ahead, thrust men aside with his chest and squealed with pain as a soldier's sword opened a gash in his flank. He lashed out with his hind feet in retaliation, then they were beyond the soldiers, galloping through the moon-silvered wood. Tassin crouched low over his neck as the trees whipped past. Branches lashed her, scratched her skin and ripped her clothes. Hoof beats thundered behind her, and she glanced over her shoulder at the party of horsemen that pursued her. The men's swords glinted, and Torrian's roars of rage goaded them after her. She clung to Falcon's mane, praying that a branch would not scrape her from his back.

Falcon crashed through the forest, his hooves sliding on the treacherous leaves, almost sending him skidding into a tree. They burst into the open with Torrian's cavalymen close behind, their faster mounts gaining on the warhorse. As they drew alongside, one reached for her reins. Falcon lunged at him, knocking his horse down. Man and beast rolled in a tangled heap, and Falcon turned his head to snap at the horse on the other side, making it shy.

Tassin struck at the rider who drew alongside to replace the one who had fallen, her sword bouncing off his armour in a shower of sparks. The man hacked at Falcon's neck, cutting a gash in the thick muscle. The stallion squealed again, lashing out sideways with his hind feet. The blow snapped the other horse's front leg with a crack, and it ploughed head-first into the ground. The warhorse was tiring fast, his wounds sapped his strength and his blood splattered her face. Ahead, men ran from the castle, alerted by the lookouts to the Queen's peril. Two of her knights thundered across the drawbridge, their armour flashing in the moonlight.

One of her enemies darted closer and raked Falcon's flank with his sword, seeking to cut her girth. The weapon narrowly missed her leg, slipping under it. The stallion kicked, sending the cavalry horse staggering away, but Tassin's saddle slid back. Grasping handfuls of Falcon's mane, she kicked free of the stirrups and let the saddle fall. Another rider closed, his sword aimed at Falcon's hamstrings.

"Kick!" Tassin bellowed, and the warhorse obeyed, smashing the sword from the soldier's hand. Tassin urged him on as her knights reached her, engaging Torrian's soldiers in a clash of steel. She thundered over the drawbridge, glancing back at her enemies, who fled from her knights, their prey out of reach.

Falcon's hooves skidded on the courtyard's stones as he propped to a standstill, steam rolling up his heaving flanks. Tassin slid off, her legs trembling with shock as she clung to his sweaty, blood-streaked neck. She leant against him, patted him and murmured soft words of gratitude into his twitching ears. The clatter of hooves and boots echoed around the yard as her knights and warriors returned, the portcullis rumbling down behind them. A groom led Falcon away, and she noted that the stallion was lame, casting a worried look at her head groom.

"Tend to his wounds at once."

He bowed. "Of course, Majesty."

Tassin marched into the castle and headed for the dungeons, but one of her knights confronted her before she reached the stairway.

"Majesty, we have driven them off for now, but a large force is camped beyond the wood, and I fear that tomorrow they will lay siege."

Tassin eyed Sir Duxon, whose beard was streaked with grey and waist thickening with age. He had been a good knight once, but now he was one of the few survivors only because he was over cautious, and would probably be useless at the final battle. He had been sent back from the front two weeks ago with the message that her army was losing, and had arrived without a scratch on him.

Duxon valued his life too much to be a good knight. Perhaps it was because of the brood of ten children his plump wife raised on his modest estate, but Tassin did not want him beside her at the last. He was more likely to hand her over to Torrian to save his skin than he was to die fighting to protect her. In his opinion, a woman's purpose was to serve a man and bear his children, and, although he had served her father faithfully, she did not trust him.

She made no attempt to hide her contempt. "Fear not, Duxon, I have a new weapon. We will win this war."

He looked startled. "Of what nature, My Queen?"

"You will see." She swept past him, glancing down at herself with a grimace. Blood splattered her clothes and her hair flew about her shoulders in a tangled mane, but she decided to investigate her new weapon at once. In the corridor, two ladies-in-waiting rushed out from that shadowy, mysterious place where servants waited to spring upon their masters and mistresses, begging her to bathe and change her soiled garb. Tassin waved them away, grabbing a handkerchief that one fluttered to mop the blood from her face. A few strides further on, a tall, grey-robed figure stepped into her path, forcing her to stop.

"Yes, Pervor?"

Her father's chief advisor bowed. "You met the wizard, My Queen?"

"I did."

"What of the weapon he promised?"

"He told me that it now resides in the dungeon."

"Ah. Allow me to accompany you."

"If you must." She scowled up at him, resenting the way he always intimidated her. Maybe it was his air of aged wisdom, or his gaunt, cadaverous face, but most likely it was his great height, towering over her at two metres tall. All men were taller than her, but Pervor somehow managed to loom more than others.

Turning into the doorway that led to the dungeons, she surprised a sleepy guard, who snapped awake, belatedly trying to salute as he grabbed a lantern and hurried after her. She descended the worn steps, Pervor close behind her, the guard trying to keep up, his lantern swinging wildly. The old advisor opened the first door for her, and she peered into an empty cell. They continued along corridor in this fashion, and at the fifth door, the lantern's light fell on a smooth grey casket. The guard exclaimed in surprise and tried to move past her, but she stopped him with a raised hand and took the lantern from him.

"Wait outside."

"Majesty, that thing could be dangerous!"

Tassin glared at him. "Wait in the corridor."

The guard obeyed with a worried glance at the casket, and she entered the cell, closing the door. Pervor lighted the torches on the walls from the lantern, illuminating the room. A thin layer of straw covered the floor, and the walls bore the scratches of doomed men striving to leave their mark. Tassin studied the gleaming casket, which appeared to be made from moulded glass. It was at least two metres long and half a metre wide, shaped like a coffin. A square button marred its flawless surface halfway along its length, next to which were three dark crystals, one red, one yellow, and one green.

"Push the button," she whispered, remembering Manutim's instructions. She did so, then stepped back when the red crystal lighted. It stayed on for perhaps ten minutes, during which time she glanced at Manutim, who watched the casket, clearly fascinated. Just as she was growing impatient, the red light went off and the yellow one came on. This crystal stayed on for only about five minutes, then the green one lighted. With a faint whir and click, the lid rose slightly, a black line appearing around the edge of the casket. Tassin stepped back as mist flowed from the crack, cascading onto the floor. She took a deep breath, mastering her fear. Manutim would not betray her.

Fitting her fingers into the crack, she raised the lid. Mist billowed up, and she waited for it to settle. Inside, on a bed of white satin, lay a near-naked man. Tassin scowled, wondering if this was Manutim's idea of a joke. She looked at Pervor, who stared at the strange man, his eyes intent.

"This is not a weapon, it is just a man," she said.

The advisor glanced at her. "He must be a mighty warrior, My Queen. A magical one, perhaps?"

Tassin turned to the man in the casket again. A narrow strip of golden metal, embedded with black crystals, curved around his brow, no more than three centimetres wide and fifteen centimetres long, its rounded ends not quite reaching his hairline. A tiny amber light flashed at regular intervals in one corner of it, then more points of light appeared in the brow band's crystals, flashing red, then green, some continuing to flash while others maintained a steady glow. Within seconds, the man opened pale grey eyes and stared blankly at the ceiling. Tassin frowned. He had a sculpted, hawk-like face with a narrow, high-bridged nose and level dark brows above thickly lashed eyes. His well-shaped mouth was set in a firm, almost grim line, and his ears lay against his skull, from which most of the hair had been shorn. His golden skin gleamed like the satin in which he lay, smooth and hairless.

Tassin leant over him. "Do you hear me?"

The man's lips parted, and he spoke in a husky voice. "Yes."

"Who are you?"

"A cyber."

"A sabre?" Tassin quelled a bitter laugh. "Stand up."

The man moved slowly at first, sitting up, then rose to his feet a little stiffly and stepped from the casket. Tassin eyed him, blood warming her cheeks at his lack of clothing. All he wore was a pair of skin-tight silken shorts that reached to mid-thigh, but despite her embarrassment her eyes roamed over him. He possessed a lean, whipcord build with broad shoulders tapering to narrow hips above powerful thighs, every muscle prominent under a thin layer of skin. Even relaxed, lean muscle ridged his belly and padded his shoulders and arms. Although he topped her by at least fifteen centimetres, Tassin was a diminutive one and a half metres, so the stranger was only about one point eight metres tall, a short man. Even the aged and bent Duxon would top him by several centimetres, and Pervor towered over him.

"Dress yourself," she ordered, annoyed at his lack of initiative and passive stance. He bent and stripped away the satin within the casket's lid, revealing a plethora of paraphernalia. Tassin leant closer to study the strange equipment, which the man proceeded to strap on, his face blank. He ignored her scrutiny as blithely as he did her presence, taking no notice of her unless she addressed him, which she found almost as irksome as his expressionlessness.

When he was dressed in a pair of snug-fitting dark grey trousers and narrow black boots, he donned a sort of harness that held many strange items, mostly metallic. When he finished, he became immobile, staring into space. She moved closer to study his face, intrigued by the metal contrivance on his brow. The strange brow band appeared to be affixed to his head by three prongs that entered his skin. Tassin shuddered. Facing him, she gazed into his pale eyes, trying to fathom what sort of man he was. He stared over her head.

"Why did Manutim give you to me?" she asked.

"This is a cyber-bio combat unit, grade A, serial number XCA-6352-JY9019, trained in armed and unarmed combat, tactical warfare -"

"Stop! I understand none of this gibberish. Does Manutim think one warrior can win the war? This is a joke!"

Pervor coughed, reminding her of his presence. "The mage sent him to deal with the Death Zone, Majesty, he only -"

Tassin snorted in a most unladylike fashion. "I am not worried about the Death Zone now. I have a more pressing problem outside the castle walls. Manutim said that this man would be able aid with that also."

"Then I am sure he shall, Majesty."

"How? What difference can one man make?"

"He must have magic."

"Magic!" She threw up her hands in disgust. "I need a weapon, not magic! Illusions and flashes of light will not frighten Torrian." Tassin glared at the stranger. "Do you have magic, warrior?"

"Term unknown. Clarify."

"You see, Pervor? He has never even heard of magic! What am I to do now?"

The old advisor shook his head. "Trust in the mage, My Queen."

"Ha! What of you?" She turned to the stranger again. "Have you nothing to say? Tomorrow Torrian's army will attack this castle. What will you do?"

"If ordered, fight," he stated tonelessly.

Tassin swung away to pace the cell. "One more to die in the mud! Manutim has failed me. Tomorrow I will surely die."

The stranger's silence annoyed Tassin, who stopped before him and prodded him in the chest. "Sabre, you lack manners. When you address me, it is as 'Majesty', or 'My Queen', do you understand?"

"Understood."

"Now tell me who and what you are."

"This is a cyber-bio combat unit, grade A, -"

"Enough! Do not spout that drivel to me. I do not know what a - a sabre-bio unit is. I have a war to be won, and Manutim assured me that you could win it, but I fail to see how!" She glared at

him. "What good is one more warrior?"

"This unit will fight as ordered."

Tassin snorted again. "So will all my soldiers! What is so special about you?"

"This is a cyber-bio combat -"

The Queen cut him off with a curt gesture. "Are you an idiot? Have I not just told you not to spout that rubbish to me? Manutim must have rocks in his head." She turned away, thinking of the army camped around her castle, just waiting for dawn to attack. "You will stay here, food and water will be provided, understand?"

"Understood."

Tassin shot Pervor a disgusted look and quit the cell, ordering the guard outside to bring food and water as she left. The soldier glanced in and gaped at the stranger, then went to do as she bid.

"What are your orders?" Pervor asked the strange warrior.

He turned his head towards the advisor. "On command, seek the area known as the Death Zone and destroy it."

"I know you are programmed to obey me as well as the Queen, so be ready for new orders."

"Understood."

Pervor extinguished some of the torches before leaving, passing the guard returning with the food and water Tassin had ordered.

Tassin traversed the cold corridors to her suite and paced the floor, angry and afraid. A fire blazed in the gemereye fireplace, making the green stones glow. Thick woollen rugs muffled her steps, and her hunting dogs slunk from the tapestry-hung room, sensing her foul mood. She had only five hundred and seventy soldiers in the castle, and two knights. The rest of her army had gone to fight the armies of the three kings. Since Torrian was on her doorstep, they had been routed and probably slaughtered, her generals captured or dead. Tomorrow, Torrian would demand her surrender, but she would fight and die with her men, by her own hand if necessary. She was in a poor tactical position. Her castle's defences were good, but three armies would overwhelm them.

Tassin wondered why Manutim had given the man in the dungeon to her. One warrior would do her no good; she needed several thousand, at least. She did not know what she had been expecting, something magical perhaps, but certainly more than one man. She paced until the candles spluttered, then lay on her huge canopied bed and closed her eyes.

Chapter Two

A lady-in-waiting's hysterical cries roused Tassin from a deep sleep when the woman ran into the Queen's bedchamber.

"Majesty! Majesty! King Torrian attacks! We are doomed!"

Tassin sat bolt upright, finding herself still dressed in her blood-stained riding clothes. She rubbed bleary eyes as the woman wept and ran around the room, flapping her hands. Tiring of the racket, Tassin rose and grabbed the hysterical girl, putting an end to her shrieks with a slap. The girl gasped, sagged and snivelled, clutching her cheek.

The faint sounds of battle came from outside, distant shouts and screams of dying men mingled with the clash of arms and the hiss of arrows. The thick castle walls had prevented the noise from waking her, and she cursed. Her knights, it seemed, preferred her to stay abed while they fought, perhaps hoping Torrian would wake her when he claimed his bride. Why did they not just roll out a red carpet and invite him in?

A knock made her glance around as Royanne entered, her round, motherly face pale but composed, her brown hair confined in a frilly white mobcap and her generous figure clad in a dull green gown with yellow lace on the sleeves. "Are you well this morning, My Queen?"

"No. I am awakened by a brainless female with hysterics to find my castle besieged, and no one even thought to wake me when it started. When did it start?"

"Just before dawn."

"And of course it is not going well."

Royanne shook her head. "There are too many of them."

"Oh, God." Tassin sat on the bed and covered her face.

"Will you have some breakfast, My Queen?"

"How can you think of breakfast at a time like this?"

"You still have to eat. A bath and a new dress will make you feel better." Royanne jerked her head at the snivelling girl, who scurried out.

"And smell better when Torrian claims me?"

Royanne sat beside her, sliding a plump arm around her shoulders. "Now, now. If you accept one of the others, Torrian will have to withdraw."

"How nice. A husband who sleeps with his hounds, as well as every wench in his kingdom, or one so old that he sucks up his food through a tube and is seldom sober. A good choice."

"Better than one who will ravish and beat you."

Tassin sighed. "I would rather marry a peasant."

"Don't be like that, my dear."

"Did you love your husband when you married him?"

Royanne nodded. "Of course."

"So why can I not marry for love?"

"Because you're a queen, little one."

Tassin rubbed her eyes. "It is not fair."

"Life seldom is."

The young Queen stood, straightening her shoulders. "I am going to see what is happening outside."

"You should stay here, Majesty, it's not safe out there."

"I do not care."

Pulling on a fur-lined jacket, she left Royanne gazing after her with deep concern and marched down the corridor that led to the battlements, ignoring the frantic cries of the four ladies-in-waiting who crowded it. When she pushed open the door at the top of the last set of stairs, the sights, sounds and smells of the battle almost overwhelmed her, forcing her to pause.

A distant roar underscored the shouts and crashes of combat close at hand, and crimson splattered the castle's stones. She stepped out into the cold dawn wind, where a sky that blushed pink with bright streaks of sunrise bathed a grisly scene with crisp light. The green-liveried bodies of dozens of her soldiers sprawled on the battlements, arrows sprouting from many of them. Some still groaned and twitched, others lay still. The stench of death and smoke fouled the air.

Tassin almost slipped on the blood-slimed stones as she headed for Sir Duxon, who issued orders to his captains while arrows hissed overhead in a deadly rain. A wall of soldiers held the attackers at bay, defending the doorway through which she had just emerged. Sir Tyron stood beside Duxon, his tall, slender frame resplendent in polished armour. Tyron had been her father's champion and was now hers, the finest knight in all the land, sharp of eye and mind, strong and loyal. She had first seen him on the summer's day when he had won a jousting competition and her father had knighted him. He was now thirty, a quiet man whose skill with sword and lance had earned him the respect of his peers and the awe of the masses.

Tyron turned pale blue eyes upon her and bowed, sweeping her dirty garb with a warm glance. His eyes twinkled as he smiled, his helmet's chin guard hiding the rest of his face, which, she recalled, a broken nose and a habit of cocking one brow made raffish. A bloody sword dangled from one fist and gore streaked his armour. Sir Duxon, by contrast, was unsullied, his weapon still in its scabbard.

Bitterness tinged Duxon's faded brown eyes as he dismissed his captains and turned to bow to her. She surveyed the carnage. A desperate battle was being lost on the walls, where Torrian's red-liveried soldiers swarmed up notched tree trunks and makeshift ladders, pouring onto overcrowded battlements. A seething melee of sword-swinging men surged back and forth, stabbing and slashing with wild abandon.

The clash of steel was almost deafening, and the sheer brutality of their struggle chilled her stomach and made it squirm. Her men fought savagely, but the attackers swamped them, forcing them to give ground. Even as she watched, a dozen of her soldiers fell, adding to the piles of dead already littering the bloody stones. Wondering what had happened to the moat, she went to the crenulations and peered down. A section was filled in, and the invaders mounted the ladders from this platform. The area was a quagmire, but men rushed about with buckets and barrows, dumping fresh soil to harden the ground. Her archers were too busy to shoot the sappers, their fire concentrated on the enemy warriors on the battlements. She met Duxon's accusing gaze.

"They did it last night," he said, forced to raise his voice in order to be heard over the battle's clamour. "They killed the sentries with crossbows. My Queen, defeat is inevitable, surrender now and save these men."

Tassin scowled. "How dare you dictate to me, Duxon? I will not marry a rapist, to be beaten and abused by him."

"Then marry Grisson. He is an old man, you will be a widow soon enough."

"Never! He is revolting, toothless! He stinks of age and corruption."

Duxon's face sagged into resentful lines. "These men die for your whimsy. When the battle is over, Torrian will have you, for it is he who is outside the gate. Then you will have no choice."

Tassin narrowed her eyes as an arrow whizzed past, dangerously close. She ignored it, but Duxon flinched.

Tyron's soft voice spoke beside her. "It is not your place to speak to the Queen in such a tone, Duxon; it is her choice whether to fight, and your duty to obey."

"As I do!" Duxon blustered.

"I have yet to see you draw your blade this morning."

"My blade will drink enemy blood soon enough."

"You see no folly in my choice, then?" she asked Tyron.

"Majesty, the battle is lost, and with it, our lives. Whether this be folly or fate I know not, but we cannot keep you safe."

"When the castle falls I shall fight beside my men until I die." She turned back to Sir Duxon.

"So shall the last warrior queen perish, Duxon, fighting beside her men for freedom. I will not be a

queen in name only, stripped of my power, abused and held prisoner. Torrian will bear the shame of my death, and my cousin will rule. At least Torrian will have no wish to marry him."

Duxon looked stricken. "You are young and headstrong, Majesty, but death is not the answer. Life is too precious to squander."

Tassin raised her chin. "I prefer death to any of those three, and the choice is mine."

The old knight's despairing expression made his disapproval clear, and Tyron had the same anguish in his eyes. They knew this war was lost, and plainly longed to save her. Duxon might give in to the urge, but Tyron would not go against her. Duxon shook his head at Tyron, who frowned.

As Duxon stepped towards her, an arrow thudded into his chest, punching through his armour. He staggered, his eyes widening, then dropped to his knees. Raising his head, he rasped, "Flee, Majesty! Save yourself!"

Tassin stood frozen with horror and shock as Duxon's eyes rolled back and he crashed onto the stones. A pang of sorrow shot through her, then her eyes were drawn back to the battle. Men fell screaming as they were hacked down, and swords clashed with vicious metallic clangs or found their mark with meaty thuds. Many of her soldiers broke and ran, only to be cut down from behind.

The remainder fought to defend her, holding the invaders at bay at great cost to themselves. The stench of blood and spilt bowels sickened her, and the sight of her men writhing in agony filled her with rage. Tassin drew her sword and headed for the melee. Tyron accompanied her, raising his bloody blade. A rumble of chains told her that the drawbridge was down and the invaders who swarmed into the courtyard were winching up the portcullis. The castle had fallen and her fate was sealed.

Pervor stood in the doorway and gazed at his queen, admiring her determination. Tassin might be too diminutive to ever be considered a warrior queen, but she did not lack courage. She strode towards the mass of fighting men, her soldiers surrounding her in a wall of slashing steel. Tyron's sword became a silver blur as he hacked and parried, thrust and blocked, dead bodies piling up at his feet. The sight of the prize spurred on the invaders, who fought with renewed vigour, pushing back the defenders. Tyron staggered as a blade slipped under his guard from behind, piercing his armour. Even the best swordsman could not hope to win against so many.

The aged advisor had spent a sleepless night pondering his best course of action, torn between obeying his queen and his late king. She was determined to die rather than marry a man she hated, while King Litham had only wanted his daughter to be safe and happy. Pervor was reluctant to unleash Manutim's magical warrior because Tassin would, in all likelihood, hate him for interfering and, if all did not go well, probably have him executed for disobedience. A slight hope that she would see reason when confronted with the battle's bloody slaughter and accept one of the kings had kept him in check, but she clearly intended to go through with her childish threat to kill herself, or try. The risk to her life was too great. He must take action, no matter what the consequences.

His mind made up, Pervor turned and descended the stairs, hardly aware of the scurrying, terrified servants who dived into doorways like hunted rabbits. A wailing lady-in-waiting clutched his arm, but he shook her off. He hastened to the dungeons, finding the steps unguarded. Going straight to the fifth cell, he opened the door.

Sabre stood beside the casket, apparently asleep. At Pervor's entry, his eyes opened, staring through the advisor with a chilling lack of expression. Pervor stopped just inside the door. Manutim had instructed him on how to give orders to the warrior, explaining what he called the weapon's 'set up'. He had shown Pervor tiny images of the chief advisor and Tassin, and played recordings of their voices, which he had claimed would be used to ensure that the weapon recognised them.

Pervor had found the glowing images and disembodied voices somewhat alarming, but his king had ordered him to trust the wizard. The weapon's human form had surprised him, and he had refrained from trying to persuade Tassin of its true nature, knowing that she would find it hard to believe, as, indeed, he did. He did not doubt Manutim's claim, however, especially when the weapon's lack of humanity in all respects other than its appearance bore it out so convincingly. He

recalled the strange words and manner in which the wizard had directed him to address the warrior.

"Voice recognition confirmation."

The brow band flashed. "Voice recognition confirmed. You have level three access."

"Command override input, password, star fall."

"Acknowledged. Password accepted."

"Input: new assignment of bodyguard duty to primary command subject Queen Tassin Alrade.

I order you to take the Queen from this castle and protect her. No matter what she says, or how much she protests, this order overrides that. In all other things you will obey her, but you will not leave her side while there is danger, and you will protect her. Do you understand?"

"New input, command override status level three. Understood."

"Go then!" He gestured to the door. "Hurry!"

Sabre strode out with lithe, gliding steps, and Pervor followed, falling behind as the cyber broke into a lope down the corridor.

Tassin hacked at an enemy soldier, incensed when her sword clanged off his chain mail and Tyron skewered him instead. She was buffeted from all sides as the attackers pushed back the soldiers who fought to defend her. The knot of men around her dwindled fast, their blood slicking the stones. Tyron bled profusely from a wound in his side, and his helmet was dented.

Tassin thrust her sword into the face of an enemy, gladdened and sickened when he fell back with a scream. Her resolve to die with a sword in her hand warred with the fear that coiled in her gut. A cry of anguish was torn from her as Tyron fell, a spear protruding from his side. He cut down his killer as he collapsed, and his eyes met hers for a heart stopping moment before they closed. The loss of her champion filled her with anguish and rage, and she flung herself into the fight with reckless abandon.

A flash of brilliant blue light made her flinch and squint as a hot beam shot past her. A dozen enemy soldiers fell screaming and writhing, smoke pouring from their tunics, their armour sizzling. Her soldiers drew aside with shouts of confusion and fear, and she turned to face the source of the hot blue light.

The blank-faced warrior from the casket strode towards her, thrusting aside her astounded men, who gaped at him. She became aware that her mouth was open and closed it, but before she could enquire as to just exactly what he thought he was doing, he reached her. His hand shot out and gripped the front of her jacket, yanking her towards him as he turned and dragged her away from her men. They closed in behind her to prevent the invaders following, although they seemed too stunned to act for the moment. She gasped at his effrontery and dug in her heels, but this only made her slip on the bloody stones.

"Unhand me!" she shrielled.

"Orders are to remove you from this structure."

Tassin struggled, flailing at him. "Damn you, let me go!"

"Orders are to protect you."

"Whose orders?" She tried to pry his fingers from her jacket.

"The human male designated alpha two, able to command, Pervor."

"I order you to let me go!"

"Unable to obey. Orders to rescue you override yours." He hauled her towards a doorway that led to the upper battlements, three metres above them. The courtyard was overrun, the last of her soldiers holding the enemy at bay.

Remembering that she still held a sword, Tassin swung it at him. His free hand flashed up, gripped the blade, twisted it from her grip and tossed it aside. She growled as he pulled her alongside him, her jacket cutting into her neck. Her stumbling steps could barely keep pace with his long strides, and only his brutal grip on her jacket kept her from falling. He shifted his hold to her arm, ignoring her yelp as he trundled her up the steps. She grabbed the corner as he towed her past, and almost got her fingers ripped off for her pains.

"Let me go, you idiot!" she shouted. "I shall have you flayed..."

A group of Torrian's men appeared on the stairs above them, swords drawn.

"...Impaled on a hot spike..." Tassin gasped as, with a yank that almost dislocated her arm, Sabre thrust her behind him. He raised his other arm, fist clenched, and blue fire spat from it. The men screamed as the beam of searing light sliced through them, some falling dead, almost cut in two. Others staggered away, scorching their hands as they tried to beat out the flames that consumed their clothes. Sabre lowered his arm and continued up the steps. The remaining soldiers fled, trailing smoke from their smouldering attire. Tassin tried to loosen his fingers so blood could resume its flow down her arm, but his hand was like iron.

"I will have you drawn and quartered, roasted slowly over..." She was yanked around a corner and dragged up another short flight of stairs. "...hot coals!"

They entered a corridor, and more men ran towards them with drawn swords. Sabre raised his arm and burnt them with the blue fire without breaking his stride. He headed for the upper battlements, towing the stumbling Queen. A group of crimson-clad soldiers emerged from a doorway ahead, blocking their path. An arrow buzzed past her ear as Sabre raised his arm, and the blue fire sliced through the men.

A clatter of footsteps made Tassin glance back, and she yelled as a soldier ran up from behind, a battle axe raised. Sabre spun, dragging her off her feet, and his arm chopped into the man's throat with a sickening crunch. The blow flung the soldier back, and he hit the ground with a terrific crash of armour, writhing and clawing at his crushed throat. Sabre turned back towards the steps that led to the upper battlements, Tassin still trying to get her feet under her and free her arm from his merciless grip. He swung, releasing her, and smashed a spear from the air with a lightning-fast punch. Tassin wondered how he had known it was there, since this time she had not warned him.

Before she could dart away, Sabre yanked her to her feet, inflicting more bruises. Soldiers converged on them, her proximity to Sabre forcing them to attack with swords while the archers stood idle. Sabre seared them with his magical light, killed some and sent the others staggering away, beating at their burning clothes and red-hot armour. Their screams echoed through the castle, falling behind as Sabre strode on.

They reached the upper battlements, and Tassin wondered what the madman intended to do now; fly? As he headed for the wall, she drew breath to shout at him to stop, but he took a running jump from the battlements, dragging her with him. He released her in mid-air, and she let out a wailing scream of pure terror.

The cold black moat water hit her hard, punching what little air she had left from her lungs. She sank, struggling, the foul water rushing into her nose and mouth. A hand gripped her arm and pulled her to the surface, where she coughed and spluttered. Sabre waded from the moat, hauling her after him like an overgrown fish. Tassin spat dirty water and flailed at him, but he ignored her feeble attempts to hit him. Apparently finding it difficult to drag her, he turned and slung her over his shoulder. She spluttered with rage at this further ignominy, beating his hard back with her fists.

"Put me down! I order you! You moron! Imbecile!"

With a smooth movement, he swung her off his shoulder and dumped her on the ground. Tassin's legs seemed to have turned to rubber, and she staggered drunkenly before collapsing in a heap. Sabre stood immobile, staring into the middle distance as water trickled from his clothes. Tassin glared up at him with white-hot fury, mopped her streaming face and spat out foul moat water.

"How dare you?" she bellowed. "I don't want to be rescued, you idiot! I would rather die with my soldiers! Just how far do you think we are going to get?"

"Enemies approach," he said.

"I will have you gutted for this, and roasted slowly over a fire! Your eyeballs will be impaled on hot pokers, your..."

Tassin trailed off as Torrian's soldiers boiled from the castle, some mounted, the thunder of their steeds' hooves mingling with their triumphant shouts. Her gut turned cold, then she

remembered the blue fire and glared up at the man who stood beside her. She tried to get to her feet, but found her legs still rubbery.

"Well, do not just stand there, idiot! Fight them!"

Sabre bent and hoisted her onto his shoulder again, then marched away from the castle, ignoring her screamed insults and furious blows. If she ever got her hands on Pervor. How dare he send this muscle-bound moron to rescue her! Tassin raised her head to look back at the enemy cavalry, her hand itching for her sword. When the pursuers were about two hundred metres away, Sabre turned. He raised his arm, and there was a soft pop. The earth before the chargers exploded with a huge boom. The blast caught some and flung them into the air, others were sent sprawling. Horses squealed and bolted, throwing their riders, and the charge disintegrated. Sabre turned and loped away, the dripping Queen bouncing on his shoulder.

Behind them, men milled in confusion, while Torrian's bellows tried to rally them. More banners approached from the forest, and she recognised Grisson's purple and black colours. A dozen heavily armoured knights broke away from the advancing army and thundered towards her on warhorses. Torrian must have seen them, for his shouts became frenzied even though the knights were still distant. His men regrouped, skirted the crater and came after them at a run.

Again, Sabre waited until they were within two hundred metres, then turned and fired the magical weapon. The explosion went off in their midst, and most were sent sprawling, not to rise again. Tassin grudgingly revised her estimation of the strange warrior. He was indeed magical. Torrian's outraged bellows summoned another wave of mounted men from the castle, and the King leapt onto a spare charger to lead them.

King Grisson's men closed too, banners flying, racing Torrian to the prize. Grisson would not be amongst them, of course, he was far too old and frail. Most likely he watched from a sedan chair. Torrian's faster cavalry horses soon outstripped the knights, and, as they drew near once more, Sabre turned and raised his arm. Another soft pop heralded an explosion that decimated Torrian's soldiers. Sabre turned away. Evidently Grisson's knights were still too distant.

Three horses galloped from the castle; two bays and a grey. Her lame stallion followed the two war mares, and she cursed as they vanished into the forest. Grisson's knights were close now, and yet again Sabre turned, raising his arm. Another great explosion went off in the knights' midst. The warhorses screamed and bucked, some falling, others galloped away riderless.

Sabre continued towards a stand of trees, breathing puffs of steam. Entering the grove, he stopped and dumped her onto her feet, her legs almost buckling. He turned away to survey the carnage he had left in his wake. The warhorses had scattered, leaving their riders wandering on foot, some appearing drunken in their meandering. Another group of Torrian's foot soldiers headed towards them, however. Tassin wrung stinking moat water from her hair and coat, shivering.

"Now I will freeze to death!" she said. "Use your magic to dry me."

Sabre faced her. "You need transportation."

"I want a sword in my hand and Torrian's neck within reach! If you wish to leave, do so! Find a horse."

The crystals on his brow band flashed, and he blinked. "No such animals are within range."

Tassin snorted, reviewing her situation. Since she was now safely away from the battle, it seemed prudent to seek assistance. This uncouth idiot's intervention had ruined her plans to die nobly with her men, and no other way was open save to continue to flee and find help.

"I shall go to my uncle's castle. He will protect me. There I will fight again, and this time you will not stop me."

Tassin stomped away through the trees, anger lending her strength. Sabre watched the soldiers out on the field for a few moments, then caught up with her, his gliding stride deceptive. Tassin eyed him. An ordinary man would have been tired after carrying her for that distance at that speed, yet Sabre breathed normally. Only a slight film of sweat on his brow showed that he had exerted himself at all. He ignored her scrutiny, his eyes fixed ahead of him.

Soldiers crashed through the woods behind them, following their tracks. Glancing over her

shoulder, she increased her pace, gasping. As the soldiers drew nearer, she shot an angry glance at Sabre.

"Destroy the soldiers behind us."

The cyber loped back the way they had come, vanishing amongst the trees almost at once. Tassin gave a cry of anger and fear, unexpectedly left alone. Glaring after him, she stamped her foot in fury. How dare he run off and leave her alone and unarmed? She had wanted him to simply blow them up, not run back to them first. She wondered if she should go after him, but he had moved swiftly. An eruption of screams made her jump and gasp, shivering in her wet clothes. Within a few moments Sabre materialised from the trees, startling her again.

She glared at him. "How dare you leave me unattended?"

"Orders were to destroy the enemy." His grey eyes stared over her shoulder.

"I did not tell you to leave me!"

"Enemy was out of range."

Gritting her teeth, Tassin trudged through the trees once more, Sabre at her side. Her wet riding boots pinched, and soon she could bear it no longer. She sat down on a rock and pulled off the offending footwear. Sabre stood beside her while she inspected the blisters on her feet.

She looked up at him. "My feet hurt."

"You require medical attention?"

"Yes." Tassin frowned at his strange words. Sabre knelt beside her, angling his head towards her feet. She got the impression that he was blind, for his eyes stared through her as if she did not exist. Yet how could he manage if he could not see? The crystals in his brow band flashed, and he straightened.

"The injury is minor."

Tassin hissed. The man had absolutely no manners! She was a queen! "It hurts! I cannot walk like this."

The cyber drew a long knife, and his hands flashed towards Tassin, who shrank away in sudden fear. He grasped the damp material of her riding habit and cut a long strip out of it. His high-handedness rendered her speechless, and he tore the cloth again, then grasped her foot and wrapped the material around it. In moments, her feet were wrapped, and her trouser leg had a gaping hole in it. The cyber sheathed the knife and stood up.

With an effort, Tassin stifled her anger and pulled her boots on again, finding that her feet no longer hurt. She rose and continued through the wood, glowered at Sabre and held together the rent in her riding habit through which an icy draught now blew. The wild woodland made the going hard for Tassin. Roots tripped her, briars snagged her clothes and scratched her skin. Unladylike grunts and exclamations of pain marked her progress as she stumbled into trees or banged her head on low branches. Sabre, by contrast, moved through the undergrowth with silent skill, avoiding obstacles with uncanny ease.

Tassin hated him more and more. Not only was he rude, but unchivalrous too, making no effort to help her. Sir Tyron would have been at her side to hold aside branches and help her over obstacles, but not this dolt. She resolved to have him imprisoned when she reached her uncle's estate. He would not interfere with the next battle.

Uncle Niam was a good man, she reflected, much like her father in looks and manner. He was only a duke, of course, with a small estate, but he had an army and she was sure he would help her to fight the vile kings. She tripped over a root and sprawled, grazing her hands. Sabre waited while she scrambled to her feet, her muscles protesting this unheard-of abuse. Brushing leaves from her knees, she glanced around. They had reached the edge of a clearing, and she gave a cry of delight. Three warhorses grazed in the lush grass with eager jerks of their heads, oblivious to anything other than the delicious herbage.

"Falcon!"

The stallion raised his head and whinnied a greeting, limping towards her. Tassin ran to him and stroked his muzzle. The two bays were saddled, and trailed broken reins. They had belonged to

the Sir Duxon and Sir Tyron. The head groom must have thought they would be needed, and had had them ready when the invaders had stormed the castle. She patted Falcon, then caught the mares and turned to Sabre, flushed with triumph.

"I found them. They waited for me."

Sabre stared across the clearing, and Tassin pushed her tangled hair out of her face and scowled at him. Now that she thought about it, she had been following him. Had he known that the horses were here? She dismissed the thought as silly; how could he possibly have known?

"Can you ride?" she asked.

"Yes."

Tassin passed him one of the mares' reins and looked around for a tree stump or rock from which to mount. Finding none, she turned to Sabre.

"Help me mount."

The cyber helped her into the saddle with casual disregard for the niceties of handling a queen's anatomy. Her yelp of indignation went unnoticed, as did her killing glare. Tassin urged her horse from the clearing, the thought of him hurrying after her a salve to her wounded pride. Moments later, he was at her side, riding with consummate skill. She shot him a venomous glance, promising herself a sweeter revenge soon. Falcon followed, his head bobbing as he favoured his injured hind leg. Tassin set a fast pace along a well-worn path through the forest, eager to outstrip the distant pursuit.

They reached her uncle's estate at dusk, by which time Tassin was stiff, cold and miserable in the extreme, a frown wrinkling her brow. Her hair hung in damp rat's tails, her skin itched from the drying moat water and her damp clothes chafed her tender parts. The stench of the moat's slime clung to her nostrils and fouled her mouth, making her stomach churn. The castle gates stood open, but a sentry stepped out of the guardhouse beside them and blocked the way, crying a challenge.

Tassin gestured at him. "Stand aside for Queen Tassin!"

The man obeyed just in time to avoid being thrust aside by her warhorse, and they clattered into the courtyard. Tassin slid from her horse, bruised and weary. Grooms came out to take the animals, and she turned as her uncle approached, looking concerned. Niam swept her into a bear hug, then held her at arm's length and inspected her, clearly shocked by her bedraggled appearance.

"You're filthy, and cold! The ladies will run you a warm bath." He swung away and bellowed, "Bethan!"

A short, mousy woman with brown eyes and sharp features prodded him in the ribs. She had arrived at his side moments before, unnoticed by his lofty glance. Casting a withering look up at her huge husband, she said, "No need to deafen the whole castle, Niam." She shook her head in sympathy as she took in Tassin's dishevelment. "You poor thing! You need a hot bath, right away, clean clothes and broth. Who is this?"

Tassin found Sabre at her side, and her uncle scowled at him.

"Oh, him." She sighed. "He is a... soldier, he helped me to escape."

"Ah!" Niam's black brows rose. "Good man, go and find a meal in the barracks."

Sabre ignored him, and Niam eyed his niece. "Is he deaf?"

Tassin frowned at Sabre. "Go to the billets, they will feed you there."

The cyber turned and headed across the courtyard towards the barracks. Tassin watched him go, puzzled.

Niam also gazed after him. "There is something odd about that fellow. Did you say he helped you to escape?"

Tassin nodded, opening her mouth to explain, then thought better of it. "Yes."

Bethan took her arm and tugged her across the courtyard, pointing out the dangers of standing about in the cold wind. The Duchess guided her through the castle to a bedroom on the third floor, warmed by a fire that roared in the grate. Serving maids were already hard at work filling a tub with steaming water.

The cyber entered the barracks, where a pot of meaty stew and a stack of plates were set out on a table. Off duty men relaxed in the long room, most clustered around the fireplace at one end. Some soldiers sat and ate at the rough-hewn tables, and hard beds filled the rest of the room. The cyber fed the host body, then went in search of water, aware that the host was dehydrated. Locating a horse trough in the yard, the cyber pumped clean water to drink, then stripped off the clothes and equipment, hanging them on a nearby wall. It washed the host body and clothes in the icy water, and many soldiers gathered to watch this amazing spectacle with amused grins. Judging by their smell, the soldiers never washed. Serving maids giggled and blushed as they hurried past, bolder ones stopped to stare.

Dressed once more, the cyber re-entered the billet and assumed a resting stance beside the fire, back to the wall. There it relaxed the host body, allowing the eyes to close. The tiny supercomputer imbedded in the black crystals never rested, however, tracking the movements of the off duty soldiers as they ate and drank. The men eyed him, whispered and pointed.

By the time the lights were doused and the soldiers ready to bunk down for the night, the cyber had been resting, immobile, for four hours. An old soldier approached him, and, when he came within a metre, Sabre's eyes opened. The old man stopped and gestured with a scrawny hand.

"There's an empty bed there, lad, feel free to use it."

The cyber turned his head towards the indicated bed, and the veteran retreated. After a few minutes, the cyber went over to the bed and lay down, arranging the host body comfortably before allowing it to rest again.

Chapter Three

Tassin woke in a bed so familiar that for a minute she remembered nothing of the previous day. Opening her eyes, she gazed at her strange surroundings in puzzlement. When she sat up, however, she winced as her bruises and scratches reminded her of her ordeal. Sunlight flooded in through tall windows framed by brocaded curtains on one side of the room, and a freshly lighted fire crackled in the grate. Gilt-framed portraits of long forgotten ancestors, prized horses and beloved hounds gazed down from the walls, and a suit of armour stood in the corner like a vacant sentinel. Niam's keep had an air of aged opulence, its battle-scarred walls dating back to the war that had divided the land. The Duke spent the bulk of his time entertaining local nobles, hunting and chronicling Arlin's history in the dusty tomes that filled his library.

A least she was safe with her uncle now, who would undoubtedly shelter her from the monstrous kings and perhaps help her to escape them, too. Buoyed by this thought, she rose and dressed, also relieved that she would be rid of the hateful Sabre, who, for all his magic, was insufferable. She had related the tale of her misadventures to her uncle and aunt over dinner the night before, but had claimed that her escape had been her plan and not Pervor's, and omitted the indignities to which Sabre had subjected her. While Niam and Bethan had listened with apparent sympathy, they had not offered any workable plans to outwit the kings. She shrugged it off. Perhaps they needed time to think of one.

The dress that had been laid out for her, scented with honeysuckle and warmed by the fire, was a lacy creation of yellow taffeta and white ribbons. She would have preferred her more practical riding clothes and battle jacket, but her split skirt was ruined, so the dress would have to do until she could find something better. A knock at the door heralded a serving girl, whose eyes widened when she found the Queen already up and dressed. The maid brushed the tangles from Tassin's hair and arranged it in a plaited coil with ringlets to frame her face, while the Queen fidgeted.

Tassin skipped down the sweeping white marble staircase to the bright morning room whose tall doors opened onto a sunlit balcony overlooking a sweeping, forested valley. The open doors allowed in a scented breeze that ruffled the white silk curtains, giving the room a pleasantly soothing ambience. Niam's three lazy wolf hounds dozed on rugs near the walls, and her uncle, cousin and aunt waited for her to join them for breakfast, seated around one end of a long polished redwood table. Liveried servants stood behind them armed with pots of tea and jugs of cream. The Duke rose and bowed, as did her aunt and her cousin Prince Dellon. Tassin tucked into the hearty meal of crisp bacon, poached eggs, smoked fish and grilled mushrooms in a tangy sauce, washing it down with aromatic, honey-sweetened tea. Becoming aware of the strained atmosphere when her hunger was assuaged, she glanced from her uncle to her aunt, raising a brow.

Niam cleared his throat and leant forward. "You must marry one of the three kings, Tassin. Your army is defeated, your castle fallen. I cannot help you; my army barely numbers three hundred men."

She shook her head. "Never, Uncle. I have eluded the kings for now. All I require from you is shelter while I demand aid from King Xavier, who will undoubtedly supply it, and -"

"Tassin. We had another visitor during the night. We did not want to disturb you, and he graciously consented to wait until morning."

"Torrian!" She jumped up. "How could you, Uncle? I came to you for help and you betray me?"

"No, my pretty," a deep, familiar voice drawled behind her. Tassin spun to face Torrian, whose green eyes were alight with triumph. "He is helping you, and his advice is sound."

Tassin backed away as he advanced, shaking her head. Torrian was over two metres tall, bull-necked and barrel-chested. His helm hid his thick brown hair, and his shaven, coarse-featured face held the trace of cruelty she found so repellent. The gold band that encircled his helm denoted his

rank, just as the slight sneer that curled his lips revealed his arrogance. His silver armour was moulded into muscular contours, and a gold-hilted sword hung at his side. She glanced around for an exit, bumping into a chair as she retreated around the far end of the table, Torrian following. Seizing her chance before he got too close, she made a dash for the door, where two guards stood.

"Stop her!" Torrian roared.

The guards crossed their spears, but she ducked under them and ran down the hall, gathering up her skirts. Heavy boots pounded after her as Torrian and the guards gave chase. Tassin flew down the broad staircase, slipped on the smooth floor at the bottom and banged her knee. Torrian's bellow echoed through the fortress, calling for more men. A guard blocked her way, but stepped aside when she charged him. No soldier dared to lay hands upon the Queen, especially her uncle's men, who were practically her own. Bursting into the courtyard, she spotted some grooms loitering by the stables.

"Bring my horses, now!"

The men ran to obey, and a group of red-liveried soldiers looked up. A twenty-man honour guard was all Torrian had brought into the castle, but they were far more of a threat to her than her uncle's soldiers. They headed towards her, and Tassin glanced around. Trying to run was hopeless, even if the long skirts did not hamper her. Spying a wood pile nearby, she ran to it and snatched up a sturdy faggot, brandishing it. The men hesitated, but then Torrian came out of the castle.

"Hold her! Do not let her leave!"

Niam's soldiers watched, grim-faced, as ten of Torrian's men surrounded her. They would have to be careful; if they hurt her, Niam's men could retaliate, for they hung on a knife edge of loyalties. Tassin swung the faggot, making a soldier jump back, but another grabbed it and wrenched it from her while two more gripped her arms. Tassin yelled and struggled, and several of Niam's men started towards her, then stopped. Her uncle stood in the doorway, his hand raised.

"Traitor!" she shouted. "Your brother is cursing you from his grave! You hand me over to a rapist! A woman beater! A -"

"Silence!" Torrian's roar drowned her out, and Niam hung his head, his face pale and haggard. His men shuffled their feet, but would not go against the Duke's orders. Tassin kicked at her captors, hit one in the shin and made him hop and curse.

"Stop that, you little wild cat." Torrian loomed over her, his eyes hard. "I am going to have fun taming you." He grinned, revealing large yellow teeth. "You will enjoy being my queen, never fear."

She glared at him. "I will take a knife to you one dark night, you bastard!"

He laughed. "No you will not, my beauty. We will have a great marriage, though."

Tassin spat in his face, and he slapped her. Pain exploded in her head, and she sagged in the soldiers' grip, tasting blood. Niam stepped forward, frowning, and his men gripped their weapons. Torrian waved the Duke away.

"See what you condemn me to, Niam!" Tassin yelled. "I hope you can live with yourself! You could have helped me!"

Torrian gestured to his men, wiping his cheek. "Get her out of here."

Tassin glanced around, desperate for a way out of this predicament. The grooms had returned with the saddled warhorses and Falcon on a lead rein. If she could reach the horses, she might have a chance to escape. Perhaps there was one man who could, and would, help her, insufferable though he was.

"Sabre!" she shrieked as the soldiers dragged her towards the gate. "*Sabre!*"

The cyber emerged from the billets, the crystals on his brow sparkling.

"Help me, Sabre, damn you!" Tassin shouted.

Torrian's soldiers moved to intercept the cyber as he broke into a lope towards her. He raised an arm, and a lance of blue fire shot from his wrist, slicing into four of them at waist height. They collapsed with grunts, and her captors turned to gape at their dead comrades. The others backed away, drawing their weapons. Torrian stepped in front of Tassin and drew his double-handed broadsword.

Sabre stopped, dwarfed by Torrian's great height and bulk. He raised his arm again, but the beam of light that struck the King was weak, only making him step back as a glowing spot appeared on his armour. Sabre reached for a tube on his harness, something Tassin did not recall him doing the last time he had used the blue fire. It had seemed inexhaustible, but apparently it was not.

Torrian roared and charged, his sword raised. The cyber dived aside as the weapon whistled down to strike sparks from the stone where he had been an instant before. He rolled to his feet, spun and leapt, one foot lashing out to strike Torrian a glancing blow on the side of his helm that staggered him.

The King growled and slashed at Sabre's legs, forcing the cyber to leap over the blade. As he landed, Sabre lunged and punched Torrian in the midriff. The King sprawled with a crash of metal on stone, his armour saving him from serious injury. The soldiers, seeing their monarch in danger and Sabre no longer able to use the blue fire, charged with a roar.

Tassin was certain he would be cut to pieces, but he leapt aside and chopped the closest man in the throat. The soldier coughed and dropped his weapon to paw at his neck, falling to his knees. Sabre ducked under a sword stroke and punched its wielder in the chest, sending him flying backwards to lie winded and writhing. The cyber swayed aside to avoid a thrusting blade, which grazed his ribs and sliced through his harness. He punched the man in the face, and he dropped and lay still, blood oozing from his crushed nose and split lips.

Sabre skipped back, blood running down his side, and Torrian's men charged after him. The cyber twisted aside to avoid a blade, whipped around and kicked the man in the gut, sending him flying with a coughing grunt. Diving under another swinging sword, Sabre sprang to his feet close to a soldier and chopped him in the throat. He dropped his weapon and fell over backwards, writhing and making horrible gurgling noises. The men fanned out to encircle the cyber.

Sabre dodged a slashing weapon, ducked under the swing of another sword behind him and kicked backwards, sending the soldier sliding over the cobbles with a glitter of sparks. Stepping closer to a man, Sabre landed a spinning straight-armed blow on the side of his head, dented his helmet and knocked him down. The remaining soldiers snarled and pressed home their attack in a mass of brawn and sharp-edged weaponry. Sabre evaded a sword and sent another soldier sprawling with a kick, accompanied by a sickening crunch of breaking bone.

The rest impeded each other in their eagerness to cut him down. Sabre deflected a blade with a lightning-fast punch, ducked under another swinging weapon to lunge at a soldier, and then dropped into a crouch to punch the man in the ribs. The warrior staggered sideways and fell, his armour dented. Sabre flung himself backwards as a sword skimmed over his chest, landed on his hands and jerked up his legs. His foot cracked into the underside of the soldier's jaw, jerked his head back and sent him crashing onto his back. Sabre thrust himself back onto his feet with a powerful push of his arms, twisting to elude the stab of another blade. His hand flashed up, caught the soldier's wrist and yanked him forward, driving his sword into the man on the other side while Sabre swayed back to avoid the swing of the second man's sword.

The injured man reeled away to collapse and the cyber snapped the first man's wrist with a savage twist and a sharp crunch. The soldier howled and recoiled, dropping his weapon to clutch the fractured limb.

Torrian sat up, spat blood and shook his head, spied the brawl and roared, "He is mine!"

As the men retreated, Sabre swung to face the King, who stood up and raised his sword again. Torrian kept the weapon pointed at Sabre as he circled, looking for an opening. Tassin glanced around at Niam's soldiers, who watched in patent amazement as an unarmed man took on the armed and armoured King, whose reputation as a swordsman was unrivalled. The fact that Sabre had already defeated fourteen armed combatants and emerged almost unscathed was undoubtedly not lost upon them, however. A few of the men Sabre had knocked down climbed to their feet, looking dazed and clutching their injuries, but most lay still.

Tassin's captors gaped at the cyber, forgetting to drag her out of the gate. He reached for a tube on his harness again, but it hung askew, due to the cut strap, and his hand found bare webbing.

Torrian charged, forcing him to leap aside. Twisting away too fast for the King to swing the heavy sword, Sabre kicked the hilt, sending the weapon spinning to skitter away with a clatter. Torrian tried to go after it, but Sabre drove his foot into the King's flank. The blow sent Torrian sprawling with a grunt, and the cyber stepped towards him, then spun as the soldiers attacked again.

Sabre batted away a sword thrust at his chest and stepped back. Torrian rolled onto his side and grabbed Sabre's ankle. As the cyber tried to jerk free, a soldier chopped at him, and he threw himself aside. Torrian's grip on his ankle forced Sabre to twist like a cat, landing a glancing blow on Torrian's chin as jerk of the King's head deflected it. Torrian held on, and Sabre had to break his fall with out-flung hands. The soldiers closed in, hacking at the cyber as he rolled aside.

"Hold him! He is mine!" Torrian bellowed.

The five men flung themselves at Sabre as he tried to jerk his foot from Torrian's grasp, but the King hung on long enough for them to grab the elusive cyber. Mindful of their sovereign's claim on Sabre's life, the soldiers tried to pin him down. Two grabbed his arms as he sent a third rolling away with a punch to the solar plexus. The other two went for his legs, but Sabre kicked free of Torrian's hold and raised his legs in a swift movement that gave him enough momentum to roll over backwards, twisting his arms from the soldiers' grip. As he regained his feet, the men lunged for him again, knocking him down with the force of their concerted charge.

Tassin winced as Sabre's head hit the flagstones with a dull crack, and he writhed as the men piled on top of him, two of his previous victims joining them. Torrian staggered to his feet, clutching his ribs, while his men struggled to hold Sabre down. The soldiers punched the cyber in an effort to subdue him, pinning his arms and legs. One man yanked off Sabre's loose weapons' harness and tossed it aside. Torrian waded into the melee as his soldiers dragged Sabre to his feet. The King drove his armoured fist into Sabre's face with a crunch, snapped his head back and ripped him from the soldiers' grasp. He hit the ground so hard that he bounced with a soft grunt, his head cracking onto the stones again.

Tassin winced, wondering if her magic warrior would be defeated. Torrian wrung his hand and cursed, then walked to the cyber's side and kicked him in the ribs with all his might. Sabre coughed and writhed as the air was punched from his lungs once more. Torrian stamped on Sabre's head with a sickening thud and stepped back, certain of his victory. The soldiers released the cyber and stood up, grinning at their king, who frowned and flexed his hand. Sabre writhed, the lights on his brow band flashing, a lot of them red, then he rolled away and staggered to his feet. The brow band's lights remained bright, but some turned green again. Several soldiers muttered in amazement, and the King looked perplexed.

Sabre faced Torrian once more, his expression as blank as ever. Blood trickled from his nose and one ear, and he turned his head from side to side, presumably looking for his harness. Torrian charged, and Sabre dropped and tackled the King's legs as he overshot him. Torrian crashed to the cobbles, and Sabre leapt up. About a third of the lights on his brow band still flashed red. The soldiers closed in again, preventing the cyber from reaching the supine King. Sabre spun to face a soldier who charged him from behind, as if he had eyes in the back of his head, smashed his fist into the man's face and sent him crashing onto his back.

Torrian climbed to his feet, shaking his head, and advanced on the cyber, a furious scowl knotting his brows. Tassin got the impression that Sabre would have tried to reach his harness, but knew that if he went after it Torrian would prevent him again. The cyber yanked his knife from his belt, and the King paused, considering the weapon, then swung his fist as Sabre's head, missing when he ducked. The cyber lunged and stabbed Torrian in the thigh, since he wore full torso armour and arm-guards, and the King roared and recoiled. Sabre followed and landed another double-fisted punch in the King's solar plexus, denting his armour. The force of the blow lifted Torrian off the ground, and he sprawled yet again with a crash of metal on stone. The soldiers charged into the fray once more, this time with deadly intent.

Sabre spun away from the blades that swished past his neck and chest, landing a vicious blow on the side of the nearest man's head. He dropped like a pole-axed ox, and Tassin did not doubt that

he was dead, despite his helmet. Sabre spun to face the last two men, ducked under a sword and swayed past a jabbing weapon to lunge closer and send the soldier sprawling with a throat punch.

The last man stabbed at Sabre from the side, his sword sliding past the cyber's belly as he sprang back. He spun and leapt, his foot striking the man on the side of the neck, and he collapsed with a grunt. Sabre went over to pick up his harness and strap it on, tying the cut webbing.

Turning towards Tassin, he plucked a tube from his harness, ejected the spent one from his wrist weapon and inserted the fresh charge. He retrieved his knife from the unconscious King's thigh, sheathing it in his belt. As he advanced on the Queen's captors, one released her and drew his sword. Sabre raised his arm, then lowered it and ran at the man, leaping high to kick the soldier in the face. The flat of the man's sword hit the cyber on the side of the head as the soldier was flung backwards, his neck breaking with a dull report.

Sabre stumbled as he landed, then approached the soldier who held Tassin before him, twisting her arms behind her back. She struggled, but the man only tightened his grip. Sweat ran down Sabre, mingling with the blood that oozed from the numerous grazes on his chest and arms. The soldier dragged her backwards, but not fast enough. Sabre reached around her head, his arms touching her cheeks, and gripped the man's neck. The soldier released her as his throat was crushed with a dull crunch that turned her stomach.

Tassin slipped out from between them as the man collapsed and ran to the groom who still held the warhorses. Snatching the reins from him, she ordered him to help her mount. He boosted her into the saddle, and she spurred the warhorse past Sabre, heading for the gates. He vaulted onto the second warhorse as it passed him. Tassin glanced at her uncle, who raised a hand, and the soldiers at the gate stood aside. Falcon followed as she galloped across the fields towards the forest, beyond which lay the mountains and safety. Torrian's army, encamped in the fields around Niam's castle, watched her pass, several officers running towards the keep, doubtless to find out what had become of their king.

The trees forced her to slow down when she reached them, Sabre close behind her. She continued at a trot for an hour, glancing back often at Sabre with growing concern. Although still angry at his unwanted rescue from her castle, her conscience pricked her. After all, without him she would be at Torrian's mercy now. Many of the lights on his brow band remained red, and she stopped beside a stream and slid from her horse with a sigh. Sabre dismounted and stood impassively.

Tassin approached him. "Are you all right?"

"This unit is functional."

Tassin scowled. It annoyed her when he spoke gibberish. She was sure the lights on his brow band meant something, but not what. "Why are the lights on your... um, thing... red?"

"Some damage has been sustained. Greater control is necessary."

Tassin shook her head in disgust and confusion. The man ought to be half dead, and he did not even show pain. "Sit down."

He sank to his knees, then sat back on his haunches. She knelt beside him and tugged at his harness. "Remove this."

Sabre unclipped the webbing and stripped it off. Deep grazes on his chest and shoulders oozed blood down his belly and back, more ran from the gash on his ribs and scrapes on his elbows and knuckles. Tassin took the knife from his harness, keeping a wary eye on his reaction, but he merely turned his head towards her. She cut a strip from one of the many petticoats that came with her ridiculous dress, wet it in the stream and wiped away the blood. A part of her wondered why she performed this menial task instead of ordering him to do it. Much as she strived not to notice it, there was something terribly seductive about this terse, lethal man with his subtle aura of leashed power.

Sabre sat immobile, although an occasional twitch betrayed his pain. When this happened, the lights on his brow band flashed, some turning red. A mottled bruise formed on one side of his chest where Torrian had kicked him, and a swelling seeped blood on the back of his skull from its impact

with the flagstones. Tassin had seen men injured in fights before, and, after the beating he had taken, she was surprised he could still function. Although he gave no sign of it, she knew he had to have at least one broken rib, and by rights he should have more.

Although his knuckles bled, his hands should have been broken after punching an armoured man hard enough to make dents in the curved steel. That, in itself, was incredible, but how he did not have a cracked skull was also a mystery. Cuts patterned a mottled pink area at the top of his nose where Torrian had punched him. Once again, she was amazed that his nose was not crushed, and, on the pretence of examining it, she scrutinised the brow band.

The three prongs pierced his skin, and the flesh around each one was slightly raised. She ran her finger along the band, which was warm, as if it was truly part of him. Although she was almost nose-to-nose with him as she peered at it, he remained expressionless.

Emboldened by his lack of reaction, she tugged at the band, finding it solid, as if it was bolted to his skull. Revolted, she sat back, and started in surprise. For an instant, so brief that she later dismissed it as imagination, his piercing, luminous eyes focussed on her face, and seemed to look right into her soul, making her gasp. Then the moment passed and his eyes returned to their vacant gaze. The brow band sparkled as three of the diagonal line of seven green lights on the right hand side of it flashed red for several seconds before turning green again.

Tassin stood up and gestured to the stream. "Drink if you are thirsty. Since an honourable death in battle is denied me, my uncle has betrayed me and I no longer have a weapon, it seems escape is now my only option. We will follow the stream into the mountains. I will be safe on the other side."

Tassin led the way upstream for the rest of the day, heading for the distant mountains. As fingers of dusk crept across the land, they set up camp in a dense copse of black-leaved jilla trees that offered some shelter from the wind. She shivered in the night chill and ordered Sabre to light a fire. He gathered wood and constructed a suitable pile, lighting it with yet another device from his harness.

Tassin huddled close to it, spread her hands to the warmth and studied Sabre, who sat on the other side. He was a handsome man, she decided.

"Sabre, where do you come from?"

The lights on the brow band flashed. "This unit was manufactured on Myon Two."

"Manufactured? You mean born."

"Yes."

She tossed a twig into the flames. "Where is Myontwo?"

"Star cluster GZ482."

She frowned. He was talking gibberish again. "How old are you?"

"Unknown."

"You do not know?"

"Time spent in cold sleep cannot be calculated."

Her temper frayed. Why did he keep talking nonsense? "How old do you think you are, then?"

"Time spent in operation, twenty-six years."

Although she despised her uncharacteristic interest in him, she was curious about his many oddities. "Why do you speak so strangely?"

"Cybers are not designed for conversation."

She shook her head. "It is more than that. You are injured, yet you show no pain. You have no expression, as if you are some kind of idiot, yet you are not. What of the magic you use?"

The brow band's crystals sparkled. "Magic is a mythical power with no basis in fact."

"But you use it, the blue fire is magic."

"That is a laser, standard weapons issue for cybers."

She prodded the fire. "You talk riddles. What is a laser?"

"A weapon that uses light."

"Where does it come from?"

"Myon Two."

She glared at him. "I mean the light."

"The power packs store the energy used."

She sighed. The more questions she asked, the more confusing his answers became. Her stomach rumbled. "Can you hunt?"

"Yes."

"Good, go and catch something for us to eat then, a rabbit or pheasant."

Sabre rose and vanished into the darkness. Tassin instantly regretted her order, for the forest was spooky without his comforting presence. She reviewed that thought. Comforting? The man did not even look at her, and his utter obedience frightened her, yet exhilarated her, too. If she had not seen it, she would not have believed him capable of defeating Torrian and his broadsword, especially whilst unarmed. Yet, magical though he was, his injuries were real and his blood was as red as hers. What would happen if she set him an impossible task? Would he refuse and argue as any sane man would, or obey and die?

Although she was accustomed to people obeying her, none had ever done so quite the way he did. Yet her feelings towards him remained mixed. He was terribly rude, and his strange ways made her nervous. There was no subservience in his manner, none of the eager-to-please boot-licking she had experienced in the past from minions who curried her favour. She stared into the leaping flames, lost in thought.

Tassin jumped when Sabre emerged silently from the darkness, but she was glad he was back. He carried two rabbits whose heads had been burnt off, and she recoiled when he offered them to her.

"Clean them! Skin them and cook them, Sabre!" She grimaced. "Do you expect me to soil my hands?"

The cyber vanished into the darkness again, returning with the rabbits cleaned, washed and spitted. He set them on the fire to cook, and Tassin eyed him. Despite his skimpy outfit, he did not appear to be cold, while she shivered.

"I am cold," she informed him.

Sabre raised his head and looked in her general direction, then went over to the saddles and brought her one of the blankets. Tassin wrinkled her nose at the smell of horse sweat.

"This stinks."

"It will provide warmth."

"It still smells."

"Yes."

Tassin pulled the blanket over her legs and settled down to watch Sabre cook the rabbits. She did not normally engage servants in conversation, but she needed to talk to someone, maybe to dispel the forest's eeriness. She gave a mental shrug. Okay, she was curious.

"Sabre, what is the thing on your head?"

"It is the cyber."

"What does it do?"

"It controls the host body."

"How?"

"Cyber design is classified."

Tassin lowered her gaze to the flames. Curiosity plagued her, and she longed to ask more questions, but his replies were so unintelligible that she only found them annoying. Now he was keeping secrets, which was even more irritating. Sabre handed her a cooked rabbit, and she wondered why he spoke gibberish sometimes. Was he touched in the head? Possessed? He was certainly not normal. She had noticed that he never referred to himself in the first person either. Across the fire, Sabre ate his rabbit, apparently unaware of her confusion or her scrutiny.

Chapter Four

The trilling of a lyric bird woke Tassin, and she groaned as she sat up, her muscles protesting the previous day's abuse and a night spent on hard ground. Never before had she slept anywhere other than her soft bed, and she cursed Torrian, Bardok and Grisson with renewed venom. She rubbed her stiff neck, becoming aware of her dew-damp clothes and unpleasant pungency. Knuckling her eyes, she yawned and stretched, then looked around. Sabre sat beside the fire, his head turned towards their back trail.

"Enemies follow," he informed her.

Tassin glanced down the trail. "How do you know?"

"Scanners detect twenty-five mounted men armed with ancient weapons."

"Scanners?" She waited several moments for a reply, then gave up and went to splash her face in the icy stream. After braiding her tangled hair, she found some wild mint to get rid of the foul taste in her mouth, tucking several clumps into a hidden pocket. Upon her return, she found Sabre still sitting, gazing blindly down the trail.

"Saddle the horses," she ordered, irritated by his lack of initiative.

Sabre obeyed, and she was amazed that his injuries did not appear to hinder him, for purple bruises mottled his ribs and the side of his head.

Tassin led the way upstream at a trot, and Sabre followed, turning his head occasionally to the side. The forest consisted of gnarled, twisted trees with many low branches that impeded their progress, and briar patches often blocked their way, since they followed no path. In places, fallen trees formed barriers of dead wood and sharp branches, and, in others, clumps of young trees hid the rotting remains of the fallen elder that had given them life.

Tassin cursed her thin, impractical dress. The skirt exposed her lower legs to thorns and twigs while the low-cut bodice allowed an icy draught to invade her bosom. She needed to find a village soon and buy a more practical outfit, and a sword. She had no money, however, and she could not claim to be the Queen of Arlin; no one would believe her. Sabre's husky voice startled her from her contemplation.

"Enemy is drawing close."

Tassin looked back at him, wondering how he could know such things when there was nothing to see or hear. His head was turned to the side again, as if he harkened to some inner music. She urged her horse into a canter and concentrated on avoiding low branches and obstacles. After only a few minutes, hoof beats came from behind, gaining rapidly. The soldiers rode faster horses, and came on at a gallop, whooping in triumph when they caught sight of their prey.

Tassin kicked the mare into a gallop, ducking and weaving to avoid lashing branches and tree trunks that skimmed her bare legs as the skirts of her court dress billowed behind her. Branches yanked her hair, and tears stung her eyes as she strived to duck the clawing boughs that seemed to reach for her with fiendish glee. Sabre raised his arm and pointed at the soldiers. The launcher's soft cough heralded the boom of the explosion that ripped through trees and men alike, and, although a score fell, the rest came on undeterred.

Three cavalymen drew alongside her, crowding their horses close to try to grab her. Sabre fired three laser bolts that struck the riders and caused the horses to shy away from the searing beam. Tassin's mount leapt sideways in fright, scraping her leg against a tree. The overgrown forest gave way to open woodland dotted with tall slender coalwood trees whose smooth grey bark was furred with the orange symbiotic fungus that protected them from wood-eating vermin.

Tassin glanced back at Falcon, who still followed despite his lameness. Beyond him, riders flitted, wraith-like, between the trees, the thick carpet of soft, newly fallen autumn leaves muffling their horses' hoof beats. They had spread out to avoid the devastation of Sabre's magic, and he had lowered his arm. Tassin yelped as an arrow buzzed past her head, crouching over her pommel. A

cavalryman charged towards her from the side, angling his steed to ram her warhorse in the shoulder.

"Attack!" she shouted at the mare, and the big bay flattened her ears and lunged at the soldier's mount, biting its neck. The cavalry horse veered away, and the soldier's grasping hand missed her arm as he was carried off. Riders converged from all sides, and crossbow bolts hissed past, aimed at Sabre, but coming perilously close to her. The soldiers closed in on him, their swords raised, and the cyber's fire struck again and again.

Others, too intent on capturing her, were scraped from their saddles by branches or rubbed off against tree trunks. Tassin's mare used her teeth and hooves to repel any horses that ventured too close. Those that came within striking distance were burnt down from behind by flashes of light so brilliant that dancing spots filled Tassin's eyes after each flare.

Without warning, the remaining riders vanished back into the woods, leaving them to gallop unmolested until Tassin slowed her mount to a walk. The horses panted, steam rolling up their heaving flanks.

She turned to Sabre. "Where did they go?"

"They have turned back, probably to return to the main force."

"A pox on Torrian! He will not give up!"

Sabre ejected a spent power pack from his wrist laser and inserted a fresh one. Tassin snorted in disgust at his arrogant unconcern. Her bruised leg throbbed and her scalp burnt where branches had scraped it and yanked her hair. Scratches oozed blood down Sabre's arms and chest, adding to his battered appearance. Tassin kept the pace to a walk to allow the horses to rest. She glanced back often, each time irritated by Sabre's blank, impassive expression.

In the afternoon, they crossed the stream and came upon a road, which they followed into a village nestled in the bosom of forested hills. Fields of dry, golden stubble surrounded it. As they drew nearer, the sounds of revelry and music reached them, and Tassin realised that it was a harvest festival, when people celebrated the end of the reaping. She guided her weary horse into the clutch of thatched stone houses and shops that faced dusty roads around a central green, where tents had been pitched and a fair was in full swing.

Brightly painted gypsy caravans mingled with drab traders' drays, and impromptu stalls sold all manner of wares, from cheap trinkets to hot food. Tassin inhaled the savoury odours, wishing she had some money. Her mouth watered and her stomach growled as she stopped to gaze at the food on offer. In the village there would be an inn with soft beds, a bath and stables for the horses. Now she wished she wore some jewellery she could sell. If Falcon had not been lame she would have sold one of the mares, but she needed them.

Tassin considered the possible sources of income available to her, and her gaze fell upon Sabre. Urging her mare forward, she entered the green, wending her way through the crowded paths between stalls and wagons. Beggars accosted them, hands outstretched, and whores eyed Sabre with interest, pouting at his lack of it. Traders bawled their wares and urchins ran squealing through the throng, purloining goods wherever they could. Almost at the centre of the green, she found what she sought. A clamouring crowd surrounded two grunting, heaving men locked in a lethargic wrestling match.

Tassin dismounted and hitched her horse to a wagon wheel, wrinkling her nose as the stench of unwashed bodies, cheap perfume and dung assailed it. Sabre tethered his horse beside hers before following her to the throng around the combatants. The crowd presented a solid wall of backs, barring her way. She tapped the nearest man on the shoulder, and he stepped aside, doffing his cap with surprising gallantry.

Smiling, she tried the next one, with the same result. By the time she had worked her way to the front of the crowd, she was delighted with the people's politeness. It seemed they knew a lady, if not a queen, when they saw one. Only then did she turn to find Sabre behind her, his eyes fixed on nothing. At once she realised that each man had glanced behind her before stepping aside, and Sabre was the real reason, not her ladylike, if somewhat bedraggled, appearance. Chagrined, she glared at him and turned back to watch the fighters.

Wrestling was not something she found particularly entertaining, although she had often watched her father's soldiers train and had found that interesting enough. Her training, undertaken with a great deal of diplomacy by her father's master-at-arms, had always ended as soon as she grew fatigued, and she had rarely broken a sweat. She had learnt the niceties of swordplay, its techniques and finer points, but even the lightweight sword that had been made for her soon made her wrist ache.

Mostly, she had to admit to herself, though certainly to no one else, she had watched the soldiers to admire their well-defined physiques, for they often stripped to the waist on hot days. Sabre, however, far outranked the best she had ever seen. The sight of the two brutish, hirsute men, splattered with mud and dripping pungent perspiration, turned her stomach. She pulled a face, wishing they would hurry up and finish the bout so she could put her plan into action. One slipped, spraying mud on her skirt, and she stepped back, bumping into something exceedingly solid. She turned to find herself nose to chin with Sabre and stepped away, her cheeks warming despite his lack of reaction.

Tassin waited for the match to end, scowling at several men who leered at her. Finally, one man half-drowned his opponent in the mud and dung, emerging triumphant. The defeated man was dragged away, and the hairy giant who had won grinned toothlessly at the cheering crowd. A runty man stepped into the centre of the circle and waved a jingling bag.

"Who'll challenge the mighty victor? Err... What's yer name?" The giant rumbled something, and the rat-faced man yelled, "Gorm! Our champion! A bag of gold to anyone who can defeat the mighty Gorm!"

Tassin stepped forward. "I challenge."

The ratty man turned to her, his thin lips stretching in a snaggle-toothed grin as his bold eyes raked her. "You?"

She snorted. "Not me, you moron." She stepped aside and pointed at Sabre. "Him."

The man's eyes narrowed as he studied the cyber. "No weapons!"

Tassin turned to Sabre. "Remove the harness."

The cyber unclipped it and handed it to her when she held out her hand. She was wary of his reaction, since the harness contained all his weapons, but he only turned his head to gaze through her in his annoying fashion. The runty man came over and inspected Sabre, his eyes lingering on the brow band and the bruises on Sabre's ribs and head. He seemed unimpressed, his lip curling in a sneer at Sabre's lack of stature. Finding no other weapons about the cyber's person, he returned to the centre of the muddy arena and addressed the crowd in a grandiose manner.

"We have a challenger! A new fight! Place your bets! I'll give two to one on Gorm, our champion!"

Tassin wished she had some gold to wager on Sabre. Money changed hands, most people betting on Gorm, for, although Sabre looked dangerous, he was far smaller than the hairy giant. Gorm strutted about, making the most of his hard-won glory. He was grossly overweight, his belly sagging over his belt, but his sheer size was daunting, and she hoped Sabre would not be injured further. When all the bets were laid, she turned to Sabre and pointed at Gorm.

"Sabre, defeat that man."

The cyber turned his head towards her and closed his eyes in a slow blink, the brow band flashing. She thought he would refuse, but then he faced Gorm. The hirsute man grinned and beckoned. Sabre walked around him, apparently relaxed. Tassin held her breath as Gorm's grin faded and a black, Neanderthal scowl replaced it. Sabre's head was turned towards him, but his eyes looked disconcertingly through the giant, making him appear blind. Tassin found that she was gripping Sabre's harness so hard that it dug into her palms and forced herself to relax. The tension within the ring mounted as Gorm shuffled to face the circling cyber.

Sabre spun in a blur and leapt; his foot hit the side of Gorm's head and sent him reeling into the crowd. The men thrust Gorm back into the ring, where he shook his head like a bee-stung bear, growling. Sabre stepped closer and buried his fists in Gorm's stomach, staggering him. With a roar,

the muddy giant charged Sabre, who sidestepped, turning to smash an elbow into Gorm's kidneys as he galloped past and ploughed into the crowd. Cries of outrage erupted, and Tassin realised how vulnerable she was, standing in the front row.

Gorm extricated himself from the spectators and rushed at Sabre again, arms swinging. Sabre ducked under the meaty fists and landed a full-leg kick in Gorm's enormous gut. The hairy man staggered back, heading straight for Tassin, who squeaked in horror and tried to burrow into the crowd. Sabre leapt forward, caught the reversing giant's wrist and yanked with all his might. He slipped in the mud and fell backwards, released Gorm and threw out his arms to catch himself. Gorm teetered, then flung himself at Sabre, clearly hoping to pin him. Sabre leapt aside with amazing agility, and Gorm crashed face-first into the mud. Swivelling, Sabre landed the final blow to the back of Gorm's head, stunning him. The giant quivered and went limp, and men came forward to drag him away.

Tassin breathed a sigh of relief, glad that it was over and she had escaped being flattened by the muddy behemoth. She glanced around for the ratty man, who reappeared in the ring. He eyed her askance when she confronted him, her hand out for the bag of gold.

"My winnings?"

He grinned. "The overall winner gets the gold, Missy, only when there are no more challengers."

Tassin groaned, shooting a guilty glance at Sabre, who stood indifferently in the ring. The bald man stepped around her and waved the bag once more.

"Who challenges our new champion? The mighty... what's yer name?" Sabre ignored him, and Tassin supplied his name.

"Sabre!" the man bellowed. "Who'll challenge Sabre, our new champion?"

Tassin watched Sabre dispatch the two beefy farm hands who challenged. Each time a man stepped forward, she had to point him out and order Sabre to fight him. Each time, she was awarded his slow blink. The muddy footing hampered the cyber, whose swift manoeuvres often caused him to slip in the mire, forcing him to resort to further acrobatics in order to recover and avoid his opponent at the same time. The third challenger, a huge, muscular drover, landed a couple of telling blows on Sabre's head when he lost his footing. By the time he defeated the drover, Tassin was worried about him. Sweat ran down him, mixing with the mud and the blood that oozed from his nose and the old cuts on his torso. He had not yet recovered from his fight with Torrian and his men, and his injuries clearly sapped his strength and slowed him.

After the drover, there was a long delay while the ratty man begged the muttering crowd for a new challenger. No one seemed eager to challenge the cyber, and Tassin hoped his ordeal was over. Her hopes were dashed when a rangy man stepped forward, unbuckling his sword. His well-trimmed beard and expensive black leather jacket, matching trousers and red silk shirt marked him as a wealthy man. His confident air and quality sword meant he was a fighter, perhaps a soldier or bandit.

The ratty man hopped about collecting bets as the crowd's enthusiasm revived.

Tassin pointed at the new challenger. "Sabre, defeat him."

Sabre turned his head and blinked slowly, an almost seductive expression that bespoke intense exhaustion. Almost half the lights on his brow band were red, and even one of the seven diagonal lights flashed red. She had the impression that those lights were more important than the others, since they were a little brighter. Also, whenever the brow band became splattered with mud, Sabre wiped it, and she wondered at the reason for this. She considered withdrawing him and spending the night in the woods, but this had to be the last fight. He had already defeated four opponents; it seemed stupid to waste all that effort now.

The bearded man was a good fighter, as Tassin had feared, and Sabre's exhaustion showed. Several times, he slipped whilst jumping back to avoid his opponent's attack, receiving some hefty blows. Still the bearded man could not defeat him, and the fight dragged on. Tassin wondered why Sabre did not use the brutal power with which he had defeated Torrian's men. His blows seemed far less effective, and he broke no bones, which was odd, considering that she knew he could crush a

man's skull with a punch even through a steel helm. It was almost as if he held back and suffered the consequences. The crowd grew restless, and Tassin glanced around. The sun set behind the trees, and, in the gathering dusk, mischief-makers were afoot.

Tassin yelled in shock as a short, wiry figure grabbed the harness and tried to yank it from her grasp. She hung on, and was dragged face-first into a farmer's smelly armpit. Still, she refused to relinquish her hold on Sabre's precious harness with its magical weapons, entering into an uneven tug of war with the thief. Digging in her heels, she attempted to wrench the harness back, buffeted by angry spectators. Without thinking that Sabre was otherwise engaged, she yelled for him to help.

The cyber turned and launched himself into the melee. A blow sent the short thief sprawling, but Tassin fell backwards into the mire as he released the harness. Landing in a plethora of taffeta petticoats, she opened her eyes to find Sabre's brow band mere hair-breadths away. The cyber had somehow ended up crouched over her, one knee raised, the other in the mud, his arms bracketing her head.

Tassin yelled as the dark shape of Sabre's opponent loomed over them and hit Sabre on the back of his neck. His head dipped, the brow band brushing her cheek, then he reared up and smashed his elbow into the bearded man's face. The man staggered back, clutching his broken nose as blood oozed from it. In a smooth motion, Sabre rose and hit him again, knocking him senseless into the muck. Tassin picked herself up, Sabre's harness still firmly in her grasp.

The bearded man was dragged out of the ring, and the ratty man reappeared to solicit the crowd, but the spectators dispersed, shaking their heads. When all but the supine body of Sabre's last opponent had left, the bald man faced Tassin. With a mirthless grin, he handed her the leather bag and turned to leave.

"Hold him," she said, and the cyber's hand flashed out to grip the man's collar.

Tassin opened the bag and peered inside. As she had suspected, the coins were mostly coppers, with one or two silver ones, worth little. She eyed the man, who struggled feebly, making choking sounds.

"Where is the gold we won?"

"That's it! I didn't make much, no one would bet against him!" he squeaked.

Tassin glared at him. "You made enough; put some gold in here."

He dug into the copious pockets of his filthy coat and produced several gold coins, dropping them into the bag. "That's all I've got! This is robbery!"

Tassin stepped closer and dug in his pockets, coming away with a handful of gold and still leaving his coat heavy with more. Satisfied, she nodded at Sabre. "Release him."

The man scurried away, muttering. Tassin turned to Sabre, who was little more than a shadow in the gloom. A band had struck up in the centre of the green, and people danced with gay abandon in a bright circle. The rest of the green was dark and empty now, the people having gravitated to the revelry and lights.

"Come on."

Tassin unhitched the horses, handing the reins to Sabre, and set off towards the houses that bordered the green. She soon found an inn under a peeling sign that named it the Black Queen. After stabling the horses with the ostler, she went to a merchant and purchased a pair of men's trousers, a shirt, boots and a warm coat, then trudged to the inn and rented a room. The rates were high and the inn almost full due to the festival, so she could only get one room. Sabre followed her up the creaking stairs to a scruffy room with a narrow bed. She had paid extra for a bath, which the landlord had assured her would be brought to the room.

Tassin sat on the bed and surveyed the battered cyber. Apart from his bloody nose, Sabre's most obvious injuries were a gash on the side of his head and the one on his flank, which bled afresh. After regarding him for several minutes, unsure of what to do, she rose and ordered him to sit on the bed. He did so, and she bent to inspect the new gash. The lights on the brow band glowed bright red, and she wondered if this meant that he was in pain.

Tassin found a pitcher of water and a rough towel, which she dampened and used to clean the

gash. While she worked, he blinked slowly several times, and she wondered what it meant, if anything. As she was putting the finishing touches to her ministrations, her bath arrived, and she found that she faced a new dilemma. Should she order Sabre to stand out in the hall while she bathed? After pondering the problem, she realised that she did not have the heart to make him wait outside. He was injured and plainly exhausted, besides which, he did whatever she said without question or deviation. She ordered him to lie down and close his eyes, then draped a towel over his head.

"Do not move."

Tassin stripped and stepped into the steaming tub, luxuriating in the hot water. She soaked until the water cooled, washed and got out, dressing in her new clothes. Sabre had not moved, and she pulled the towel away to gaze down at him. Mud and blood smeared him, and he stank of dung and sweat. A wave of pity washed over her, but she thrust it away. He was just a soldier. Nevertheless, she could not have him around smelling like he did.

"Sabre."

His eyes flicked open, and Tassin told him to stand by the wall, then poked her head into the hall and collared a passing maid, ordering another bath. While she sat on the bed and combed her hair, she studied him again.

"Sabre, what injuries do you have?"

"Minor cuts and abrasions, some bruising, and two broken ribs."

Tassin stopped in surprise. "Are you in a lot of pain?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"The cyber controls pain."

Tassin frowned. He was talking nonsense again. As she finished plaiting her hair, the second bath arrived. Two burly men staggered in with a steaming tub and removed the first one. She ordered Sabre to bathe, and watched him strip and step into the tub. He seemed oblivious to her scrutiny, washing himself before adding his trousers to the tub and scrubbing them too.

While he was occupied, she studied the harness. Several silver tubes were tucked into the webbing, and round metal things hung on hooks. A dagger nestled in a sheath, and a transparent pouch contained odd tubes and vials. Her gaze strayed to the contraption he had removed from his right wrist and placed beside the tub. The grooved metal band allowed the laser and grenade launcher to move around it into firing position, controlled by buttons on a curved pad beneath it. Curious, she rose and picked it up to examine it more closely.

Sabre turned his head towards her. "That is a weapon. It should be handled with extreme care."

Tassin almost dropped it, startled by his soft statement. Hastily she put it down and retreated to the bed. It was the first time he had said anything that was not an answer to a question or a warning of danger. This was more like advice. She gazed at him in confusion as he finished bathing and got out, averting her gaze while he dried himself.

When he was dressed once more in damp but clean trousers, she noticed that his knuckles were raw and bleeding. Borrowing his knife, she cut strips from her taffeta petticoats to bind them, telling him to sit on the bed again. As she was about to wrap his hands, she noticed the scars. A thin white line ran along the top of each finger and across the knuckle, following the tendons up to his wrists, where they joined into one line that continued up his arm. She studied them, then raised her eyes to his face.

"What are these scars?"

"They were caused by operations to strengthen the bones."

Her eyes widened. "How did they do that?"

"By implanting metal reinforcing along them."

Tassin stared at the scars. "You mean they cut you open and put metal inside your hands?"

"Yes."

"Who did this to you?"

"Cybercorp, which manufactures cyber units."

She sighed, exasperated by his terse replies. "Who are they?"

"A corporation that specialises in the design and manufacture cybers and other hi-tech equipment."

Tassin studied his impassive face. "You call yourself equipment?"

"Yes."

"But you are a man."

"No. A cyber."

She scowled at him. How dare he contradict her? Especially with such nonsense. She could see he was a man. Did he think she was as stupid as him? "That is your name."

"Correct."

"Then why do you keep calling yourself a sabre? That is your name, not what you are; you are a man."

"No. A cyber."

Tassin snorted in frustration, wrapping his hands in the makeshift bandages. Her attempts at conversation always ended up going around in circles, and when she pressed too much he claimed it was a secret. The man was a bit touched in the head, that was certain, but he was useful and obedient. If he wanted to think he was a sabre that was his problem. Perhaps it was that conviction that made him so invincible.

Instead of pursuing the useless questions, she studied him. Now that she knew what to look for, she found scars running up the sides of his neck, continuing as lines of white hair over his scalp before becoming pale scars again along his cheekbones. One ran down the centre of his forehead, ending halfway down his nose, and two traced the edge of his jaw to the centre of his chin, ending just under his lower lip. More scars ran up the centre of his chest and sides of his torso, disappearing under his trousers, where she assumed they continued down his legs. She wondered what sort of barbarians would cut open a healthy man to reinforce his bones. No wonder he was mad.

Chapter Five

The next day, they set off towards the Barrier Mountains once more, Tassin refreshed after a night on a soft bed and a hot meal. The brisk air, bright sunshine and scenic countryside made the journey pleasant, so long as she did not dwell on dark thoughts. The narrow trail they followed cut through tracts of cultivated orchards and occasional clumps of wild woodland, but for the most part it was open pasture. Rare parrot shrubs were in full bloom, their beak-like flowers chattering and clicking as the sun heated the hard petals. Snow trees shed drifting, gossamer seed-flakes that whitened the land for miles around. Mage bushes made soft pops and little flashes of light as the seed pods exploded in the warmth, releasing clouds of drifting winged seeds. Flocks of jewel birds flew up at their approach, filling the air with their glittering, iridescent-plumed forms and melodic cries. Sabre appeared oblivious to it all, and when she commented on the scenery in an attempt to start a conversation, he simply agreed with her, volunteering nothing. He was a dull companion, she decided. Rude and dull, but useful.

Tassin studied him again. His high brow indicated intelligence, unlike the close-set eyes and sloping brows of dull-witted peasants with their coarse features and wide, slack-lipped mouths. The magic he wielded required skill, yet he seemed wholly intent on some inner problem she could not fathom.

After that, they rode in silence, which Tassin found tiresome, since it allowed her to dwell on her future. She had resolved to find an ally in King Xavier, and any other, less pleasant prospect did not bear contemplation. King Xavier would protect her. With this firmly established as her future, she shrugged off any other possibilities. Her father had taught her the politics of ruling a kingdom, but he had not foreseen his sudden demise and its perilous result, so he had not prepared her for this eventuality. She did not doubt that the king of a poor kingdom like Olgara would be glad of an alliance with the largest and most powerful kingdom in the land, albeit that Arlin's military might was now somewhat weakened. Her father had planned that she should wed a noble of her choosing, and once that was achieved, she would no longer be prey to the three horrid kings.

The fact that Prince Victor had not offered suit and Xavier had not come to her aid did bother her, but the three more powerful kings had probably intimidated them. When she arrived at the palace in Olgara and offered Xavier an alliance, he could hardly refuse, since all trade with Olgara had to pass through Arlin. She would be in a powerful bargaining position, and, once she had found a suitable husband, all hostilities would cease. There was no other way out of this situation; Xavier was her only hope.

Just before midday, the trail veered away from the mountains and Tassin turned into a wide gully that sliced through a low rock ridge. Once a river must have run through it, but now only a stream meandered over the boulders of its bed. The horses were forced to pick their way through the rocky terrain, at times entering the stream. Tassin led the way over the treacherous ground, allowing her mare to lower her head and choose her path amid the stones.

The distinctive hiss of arrows and several meaty thuds made her whip around in alarm. Sabre sagged forward, five shafts protruding from his back. As she opened her mouth to shout in surprise and horror, dozens of soldiers erupted from the rocks. Many hands grabbed her mare's reins, and Tassin screamed the order to fight. The warhorse reared and chopped out at her attackers with iron-shod hooves, the slippery rocks hampering her. Swords flashed, and the mare gave a roar of agony, lashing out with hooves and teeth.

Many men fell with smashed bones, but the rest plunged their swords into the warhorse's flanks. The doomed mare sank to her knees, blood pumping from the wounds in her belly, and the soldiers dragged Tassin from the dying horse. She fought like a briar-cat, shouting for Sabre, but when she glanced around, a mob of struggling men surrounded her. Screams followed a bright flash, and blue smoke carried the sickening stench of burnt flesh to her, making her gag. Her captors

hauled her away from the melee, ignoring her struggles and screams of rage, then picked her up and carried her.

Once they were out of sight around a bend in the gorge, the men placed her on the ground and bound her wrists and ankles with soft rope. The five soldiers were solicitous and polite, used her title and enquired about the bindings' comfort. They ignored her shouted insults and threats as if they heard nothing, certainly not gutter talk from a queen. Tassin had picked up quite a few choice insults from spying on the soldiers of her father's garrison as a child, and she aired all of them, interspersed with shouting for Sabre and cursing him, too.

Torrian's soldiers glanced back up the gorge often, where the metallic clangs, crackling bangs and shouts of heated battle continued, clearly amazed that it still raged. As soon as Tassin was trussed to their satisfaction, they picked her up again, apologising for placing their hands upon her person, and bore her away. Tassin screamed for Sabre, threatening to have him hung, drawn and quartered, flayed and torn apart by wild horses if he failed to come to her aid. She also enumerated the many forms of torture the soldiers who had captured her would suffer if she became their queen.

The men looked pale and sick, their eyes taking on a hunted look that she knew meant Torrian had made the same threats if they failed. Evidently Torrian's threats had more effect, for they carried her out of the far end of the gully to a stand of scantily foliaged drifter trees, where their horses were picketed. Just beyond the trees, the land fell away in a sweeping valley, and the stream plummeted into a rocky pool from which it did not re-emerge. The soldiers placed her on a blanket that was spread on the shelving rock and debated whether they should wait for their comrades or take her to Torrian right away. They seemed confident that the soldiers who had attacked the cyber could deal with him, and opted to wait for them. Tassin wondered if they were right, for although she had been unable to count the number of men who had attacked Sabre, it had seemed like a lot, perhaps as many as two dozen.

Tense minutes passed, and the soldiers offered Tassin wine, water, sweetmeats, confections and pastries, all of which she declined ungraciously. Their uniforms told her that they were Torrian's best, part of a squadron of crack troops that served as his personal guard. It seemed that after all her efforts to escape, she was to wed Torrian after all. The thought brought a bitter taste to her mouth. The soldiers gave up trying to please her and gathered to mutter amongst themselves. Tassin concentrated on trying to work her hands free, tugging and twisting her wrists.

A bolt of light lanced past her and sliced into the soldiers' midst, cutting down three where they stood. The last two fled, only to be burnt down before they reached the shelter of the rocks. Tassin flinched at the brutal slaughter so close at hand and averted her eyes from the gruesome sight. Soft footsteps made her look up. Sabre limped towards her, his brow band blazing red. Blood poured down one thigh from a deep sword cut, and a gash crossed his forearm. Numerous cuts covered his chest and arms, and a stab wound oozed blood down his flank. He staggered, dragging his wounded leg.

Reaching her side, he fell to his knees, then sank back on his haunches. His breath came in rasping gasps, and his deathly pallor indicated massive blood loss. Moving slowly, he opened the pouch on his harness and extracted one of the strange ampoules. He pulled off the end, revealing a needle, which he pushed into his thigh above the sword cut. Extracting another ampoule, he repeated the process above the stab wound in his side. Tassin stared at him in awestruck horror. An ordinary man would be unconscious, bleeding to death, and Sabre appeared to be living on willpower alone. She wriggled closer to him and held out her bound hands.

"Untie me, Sabre."

The cyber's touch was cool and impersonal as he tugged at the knot. Broken arrow shafts protruded from his back, and red marks covered his chest, mingling with the older blue bruises in a horrible medley. As soon as her hands were free, she untied her ankles and knelt beside him. His head drooped, his eyes half shut, as if he was falling asleep. Tassin grasped his arm and shook him.

"Sabre, you must get on a horse. You have to get to a doctor!"

"This unit is no longer functional," he stated. "Accrued damage exceeds operational

parameters."

Tassin cursed. It sounded bad, even if it did not make much sense. "You must! I cannot get you onto a horse. Just mount, and I will take you to a doctor."

Sabre's head bowed further. "This unit is no longer operational. Bio-status is at thirty-five per cent; unit shutdown is imminent."

Tassin noticed that his wounds had stopped bleeding. Surely if he lost no more blood he would get no worse? Jumping up, she ran over to the picketed horses, selected two and led them back to him.

"Sabre, get on the horse! I order you!"

The cyber's head lifted, and he gazed through her, the brow band ablaze with red lights. "Blood loss incurred to the host will result in the shutdown of this unit for a period of seven days required for recovery. Shutdown will take place within the next four hours. Damage sustained is too great for further operation of this cyber unit -"

"Damn it, Sabre! Get on the bloody horse!" Tassin grabbed his arm and tried to haul him to his feet. Tears stung her eyes, and she wondered why.

The lights on his brow band flickered erratically, and three of the seven diagonal lights flashed red. Sabre rose to his knees, trembling. Tassin released him and pushed the horse closer so he could grasp a stirrup. Using this, he pulled himself upright, clinging to the animal. She gripped his arm, noting that his skin was cool and clammy, and helped him to put his foot into the stirrup. With her help, he climbed into the saddle, holding onto the pommel.

Tassin placed his other foot in the stirrup and mounted the second horse, taking his steed's reins. She rode back into the gully, aware that if Sabre failed to stay conscious and on the horse, she would not be able to get him back into the saddle. Her eyes grew moist as she passed the body of Tyron's warhorse, but she had no remorse for the soldiers sprawled beside the stream, some horribly burnt, others with their heads at strange angles. In those few minutes, she marvelled, Sabre had killed twenty-two men and walked away. Had he been healthy at the outset, it would still have been an incredible feat, but he had already been injured.

Tassin glanced back at his bowed head. He must not die; he was more useful than a troop of soldiers. Leaving the gully, she angled away from their previous path. More soldiers would be hunting them, and she needed a safe place to hide while Sabre recovered. The men who had ambushed them must have ridden all night to get ahead of them, then lain in wait in the most likely place that they would pass through. Torrian's officers had clearly divined her intention of travelling to Olgara and planned the ambush accordingly.

The sun sank behind a bank of golden cloud by the time she spied a hamlet ahead. Sabre slumped over the pommel, and at times swayed dangerously, so she dared go no faster than a walk. His blood stained his mount's grey flanks, and it rolled its eyes at the scent. On the hamlet's outskirts, she encountered a labourer on his way home from the fields, and the man eyed her, scowling at the sagging cyber. He was not at all amused when she rode into his path, blocking it.

Tassin forced a friendly smile. "Excuse me. I need to find a doctor; my friend is injured."

The peasant spat on the side of the road, shifting his cud. "Nearest thing ye'll find 'round 'ere be Mother Amy. Go on past the village, up the path to the right, an' you'll find 'er 'ut."

Tassin dug in her pocket and drew out a silver coin. "If soldiers come looking for us, we went on to the mountains, right?"

The man grinned as he took the coin, revealing teeth stained brown from chewing moltin, a mild herbal drug. "Sure thing, Missy."

Following the man's directions, she found a meandering trail leading up into a thickly wooded area overgrown with brambles and weeds. The coniferous trees presented a solid wall of dark verdure on either side of the path, and the thick bush between them prevented anyone from leaving it. The steep, rocky trail wound torturously, and Tassin glanced back often to make sure Sabre had not slipped from his saddle on the rough parts. His pallor had increased, and he appeared to be asleep, the brow band sparkling red. She shivered as a cool wind blew a dank, musty smell from the

dense forest, wondering why anyone would want to live in such an uninviting place. The hairs on the back of her neck rose with every rustle in the darkness beside the trail, and Sabre's presence, even though he was so badly wounded, was a great comfort.

At the end of the narrow track, a wooden hut stood in a clearing, smoke curling from the chimney. A woodpile was stacked against one wall, and the faint clucking of chickens came from behind it. Tassin dismounted and banged on the door, waiting impatiently for an answer. She had raised her fist to bang again when the door was yanked open and a wizened, toothless crone peered out, looking cross. A coarse homespun black dress hung from her bony shoulders, and she leant on a gnarled walking stick, her lank white hair straggling around a weather-beaten face. Quick black eyes flicked over Tassin and lingered on the cyber.

"Wounded, is he?" She wasted no time on niceties.

"Yes, could you -"

"Bring 'im in 'ere."

Tassin gaped at the crone as she turned away and shuffled back into the hut's gloom. No one had ever spoken to her like that before. Swallowing her anger, she ordered Sabre to dismount. His knees buckled as his feet hit the ground, and he sat back on his haunches, his eyes closed. The old crone reappeared in the doorway, clicked her tongue, and shouted over her shoulder.

"Bern!"

A huge, baby-faced man eased his bulk around the tiny woman, an idiot grin on his placid countenance. He shuffled over to Tassin and picked up the wounded cyber as if he weighed nothing at all. Tassin followed him into the hut, where he placed Sabre on a bed at the back of the hovel, near the fireplace where a warm blaze licked at the logs. He was careful to place Sabre on his side, so the arrow shafts protruding from his back were not driven further in, then retreated to sit in the corner and stare into the fire.

The wizened little crone faced Tassin, arms akimbo. "You got coin?"

Tassin took a gold coin from the pouch and held it up. Mother Amy nodded and went over to examine Sabre. Tassin, peering over her shoulder, stifled a cry of dismay. Sabre's brow band was completely black.

"Is - is he alive?"

The crone gave her a toothless smile. "Aye, he's alive, just barely. Go tend to yer horses and leave me to do my job. There's a paddock around the back where you can put 'em."

Tassin opened her mouth to tell the old woman that she did not tend horses, then shut it again. Shooting a glare at Bern, who did not notice, she stomped out.

When she returned, Mother Amy had stripped Sabre of his harness, wristband, trousers and boots, and he was clad only in his silken shorts. The old woman examined the brow band with keen interest, and looked up at Tassin's entry.

"Know you what be this?" She touched the brow band.

Tassin shook her head. "No, I have no idea."

"Tis magic. Bad magic," Mother Amy muttered, fingering it. "There's as little in 'is head as there be in Bern's."

She hobbled over to the fire and took off a pot of water, tested its temperature with her finger and nodded in satisfaction. Returning to Sabre's side, she knelt creakily, dipped a clean rag in it and washed off the blood.

"You mean he is an idiot, like Bern?" Tassin queried.

"Aye, poor Bern, 'e never stood a chance," Mother Amy chatted as she worked. "'Is mother died birthing 'im. She were but a child 'erself, only twelve years old or thereabouts. Some loutish drover must 'ave got her in the bushes. Anyways, she's dead, but the babe's still alive, so I get a big knife and cut her open. 'E were blue when I pulled 'im out, but 'e lived. Only he's touched in the 'ead because of it, ye see."

Tassin stared at the crone, whose wizened hands slid over Sabre's chest. "What do you mean, the brow band is magic?"

Mother Amy nodded, concentrating on her work. "Aye, it's magic all right. A right queer sort, but bad magic."

"What does it do? Why is it bad?"

"As to that I don't rightly know, but it's bad because it's fixed to 'im, see? He can't take it off, an' that's bad."

The old woman tugged at an arrow shaft, and, finding it firm, grunted and picked up a slender knife. Tassin noticed that none of the shafts protruded at right angles to Sabre's skin. It was as if they had been deflected somehow, but then, she recalled, the archers had been on either side of him. Sickened, she turned away as the woman cut and tugged until the barbed head came free, then flung it into the fire in a gesture of anger.

Tassin huddled beside the fire while Mother Amy removed the rest of the arrows, tired and hungry. She joined Bern in his vacant-eyed fire-staring, finding the mindlessness comforting. Mother Amy hummed in a tuneless, annoying whine, and several times Tassin opened her mouth to tell the crone to shut up, but stifled the impulse with an effort. Her stomach rumbled, and she glanced around to see if the old woman had finished. Surely Bern should be starting to make the supper by now? Bern, however, was absent-minded in a literal manner. She jumped as Mother Amy spoke.

"Well, now, lass, unless yer fixin' to live on air, you'd best fetch us some water in that there pot and put it on the fire."

"Me?" Tassin squeaked. "What about Bern?"

The idiot looked up and smiled at the sound of his name. Mother Amy shook her head and clicked her tongue. She sewed the skin of Sabre's thigh wound together as if it was torn cloth, and the sight sickened Tassin.

"Bern will peel the potatoes, that's 'is job. You fetch the water an' put in the onions and such. I'm busy."

Bern nodded and rose to fetch a bowl and several potatoes, which he peeled with intense concentration, tongue protruding. Tassin glared at the crone, then stomped out with the pot, making as much noise as possible. By the time she had put the pot on the fire and added the onions as instructed, Mother Amy was finished. Sabre lay on his back, his skin innocent of blood, but smeared and daubed with a vile-looking greyish paste. Tassin knelt beside him as Mother Amy went to make dinner. The brow band's crystals remained dead and black, and his skin was pale between the collection of bruises and the paste that was smeared on it. He looked dead, his breathing so slow that she could hardly make out the rise and fall of his chest. She frowned, worried. The brow band had not been dark since she had opened the casket.

Casting a furtive glance at Mother Amy, Tassin shook his shoulder and whispered, "Sabre! Sabre, wake up."

"Leave the lad alone, young lady," Mother Amy said from the fireside. "'E's not dead, nor will 'e die unless you shake 'im to death. When the body's healed, then we'll worry about the thing on 'is head."

"I just wanted to see if he was all right."

"'E's as right as 'e can be, considerin'!" The old woman chopped vegetables into the bubbling pot. "'E's lost enough blood to fill a bucket, he 'as, an' that's why he ain't sittin' here helpin' me with the cooking. Tomorrow Bern'll go into the village an' get me a bucket of ox blood, an' we'll get that into him. Blood for blood, I always says."

Tassin grimaced. "What you said about there being nothing in his mind is what worries me."

"Aye." The crone nodded. "It be worryin' me too. 'Course, I've seen people like that afore now. Old Geffo, now, he were one. Fell off the cow byre, he did, banged 'is 'ead real good, 'ad a lump the size of a korronegg on it. Weren't nothin' in his 'ead neither when I saw 'im. 'E lay there like a log for nigh on two weeks."

Tassin waited for the rest of the story, but the old woman remained silent. "And then what happened?"

"Well 'e died acourse. Body can't live without a mind."

"Is Sabre going to die?"

Mother Amy glanced around, her black eyes sparkling. "Nay, lass. Ain't nothin' wrong with 'is 'ead, except for that there contraption on it. But there ought to be somethin' going on in it, even so."

"How do you know that there's nothing in his head?"

"Ah, well, I just know, see? I know there's plenty in your pretty 'ead. Lots o' thoughts an' feelings, not all of 'em good, neither." She chuckled.

Tassin stared at her, realising that Mother Amy was not merely a medicine woman, but a witch. Her eyes slid to Sabre, hoping that he would wake soon, so they could be on their way. Mother Amy chuckled again. Tassin frowned, wondering if she should just pay the old crone and go on alone. Her scowl deepened. Without a sword, she would be helpless if Torrian's men found her, and she had no wish to be dragged ignominiously to his castle and forced to marry him. Now she was reliant on the man who lay comatose on the narrow cot, and that rankled. Somehow, she had to get a sword.

Sabre did not oblige her by waking that night, and, when they had consumed the stew with much lip-smacking from Bern, Tassin found that she was expected to sleep on the floor with the idiot man, who curled up like a puppy in front of the fire. Mother Amy produced a spare mattress for herself, and Tassin had to bunk down on the horse blankets. This she did with much huffing and grunting, which only evinced a dry chuckle from Mother Amy.

Chapter Six

Torrian eyed his fellow kings with disgust. Bardok munched on a cold joint of meat, while Grisson slurped his wine with relish and a benign smile. Bardok belched and tossed a bone to his wolfhounds, which sparred over it. Torrian's tent was close and smelly with the combined odours of dogs, wine, unwashed bodies, food and lamp smoke. The other two kings relaxed in Torrian's chairs, picking at the feast he had provided for this meeting. Two bodyguards and a grey-clad magician stood behind each monarch, arms folded and expressions aloof. Grisson's mage was a short, portly man with a florid face, pale blue eyes and a bushy white beard. A fresh-faced youth with wide brown eyes and curly blond hair stood behind Bardok. Torrian's temper drew near to breaking point as Grisson gurgled in his wine cup again, smacking toothless gums.

"Are you both content to let Queen Tassin slip away then?" he demanded.

Bardok wiped the grease from his mouth with the back of his hand. "The girl has given us all the slip, Torrian, face facts."

Torrian snorted. "She has not given me the slip yet." He rose and paced. "If not for the law, which states that no kingdom may conquer another, I would take her land and she could be damned. But if she gets away, that cousin of hers will inherit, and her uncle will stand as regent until he is of age. Unless she returns, of course. If she marries some barbarian noble, we lose any chance of gaining her kingdom through marriage."

Bardok shrugged and burped again. "We know that, but the man she travels with is a great magician, his spells are formidable. How many men have you lost already?"

"I have not counted. Who is he? Not her father's mage, who was barely able to light a fire. What say you, Gearn?" Torrian swung to face his mage, a tall, cadaverous fellow with a beaky nose and sunken, intense green eyes that seemed to glow in their dark sockets.

Gearn bowed. "A strange magic, Sire, like none I have ever seen before. Blue fire that burns, and great explosions of thunder. These things I can make illusions of, but that man makes them real. To defeat him would be no small feat, I fear."

"So what do we do?" Torrian demanded, longing to haul Grisson from his wine cup.

Bardok sighed. "I, for one, am going home. My dogs miss their kennels and the hunting, and I miss my soft bed and wench. Let the foolish girl go. She will not enjoy a life of anonymity, I will wager, and when she returns we will be waiting."

"Meanwhile, we are all out of pocket and our armies are weakened, for nothing. If she slips through our fingers now we have lost!"

Grisson banged down his empty cup and refilled it waveringly from the bottle, getting more on the table than in the cup. His mage stepped forward to steady his hand. Grisson gave a drunken cackle. "I say, get her with child! She'll have to marry the father!"

Torrian smiled at the pleasant vision that this conjured up. "An excellent idea, Grisson, but we have to catch her first."

Grisson glared myopically at Torrian. "Send a dog to catch a dog, I always say, or is it set a snare to catch a hare? Whatever."

Torrian frowned. "What do you mean? Send magicians after her?"

Grisson sucked at his wine, his pinched features growing more florid. "Soldiers are no good against magic, are they? Sorcery can only be fought with more sorcery."

Torrian nodded, turning to Gearn. "You have an excellent point, Grisson. What do you suggest, mage?"

Gearn's eyes brightened. "Sire, I have an idea that I have long wished to try, but it is.... unwholesome."

"What is it?"

"I could... enchant some animals, wolves say, and send them to do the job. They could track

the Queen and her magician, then kill the magician. Of course, men would have to follow them in order to capture the Queen, but the wolves would be more able to locate and kill the wizard than men."

Grisson's fat mage frowned. "How exactly would you enchant these wolves? I have heard of no such spell."

Gearn smiled. "It is an old spell, one that is rarely used. It involves using the souls of men to control the wolves, so they follow the orders given to them."

Bardok's young wizard stepped forward. "That is forbidden! The transfer of men's souls to animals is unethical. Sire, you must forbid this!"

Bardok looked unhappy. "I do, for what it is worth, but I have no control over King Torrian, Mull."

Torrian frowned at Gearn. "I do not like the sound of this, Gearn. What men will allow their souls to be put into animals?"

"Old men, Sire, old warriors who lie on their deathbeds, trapped in wasted bodies that give them nought but pain. They will leap at the chance to run and hunt again, even as wolves."

Torrian rubbed his chin. "Yes, I see what you mean. Then I will allow this, if you can find the warriors to do it."

Gearn bowed and left with an eager bounce in his stride. Bardok eyed Torrian. "It will take time to find these old warriors and bring them here. Tassin will be long gone when you do."

There was a resounding thud as Grisson keeled over, landing face down in his plate. His bodyguards hastily righted him, then carried him out at a gesture from his mage. Torrian turned to Bardok with a smile.

"But with wolves, my dear Bardok, it will not matter where she goes. They will find her. It will only need a couple of men to bring her back once the wolves have disposed of the magician. They can be disguised as bandits or such, so even if she crosses the mountains, she will still be vulnerable."

Bardok nodded. "It is a good plan, though I have not the stomach for it. Congratulations, Torrian, it seems you will soon have a bride."

Torrian looked smug. "Even though it sprang from Grisson's wine-soaked mind, my mage makes it possible and my warriors will perform it. I will have Arlin."

Tassin lazed in the apple orchard, enjoying the bright autumn sunshine's warmth. A week had passed since they had arrived at Mother Amy's hut. Sabre's wounds healed unusually fast, according to the old witch, yet still he lay unmoving, the brow band dark. Thankfully, Mother Amy attended to the unpleasant task of keeping her patient clean and fed. Bern made daily trips into the village for fresh blood, which the old woman force fed to Sabre, along with milk and broth. Tassin longed for him to wake up so they could move on. Mother Amy found far too many tasks for her to perform. For the moment, she had given the crone the slip and lounged against a tree, munching an apple.

A movement caught her eye, and she peered through the trees. Something moved there, a glimmer of grey. Tassin watched it, unsure of whether to hide in case it was Torrian's men, but then she gave a glad cry.

"Falcon!"

The stallion threw up his head at the sound of her voice and whinnied a greeting, trotting to meet her. Sabre's bay mare, still wearing the tattered remains of a saddle and bridle, followed him. Tassin stroked his muzzle, and he nudged her, snuffling her ear. A warhorse such as Falcon was trained to remain with his rider, and he had followed her trail. He had probably been in the vicinity for several days, but she had been so busy fetching and carrying for Mother Amy that she had not noticed him.

Warhorses were especially bred for their intelligence, loyalty and aggressiveness, and Falcon was a particularly well bred and highly trained animal. She recalled the months of bonding she had undergone with him when he had been a youngster, feeding, riding, training and lavishing affection

upon him every day. It had been worth it, for he was devoted to her now. Catching the mare, she led them to the paddock and put them in with the other horses, glad to have her stallion back. As she removed the mare's saddle and bridle, Mother Amy appeared beside her, making Tassin jump.

"More mouths to feed, water to carry, coats to be groomed and hooves to be cleaned for you, young lady."

"You can have the other two now that I have these."

The old woman cocked a grey eyebrow. "Ye think that makes a whit of difference? It still be yer job."

Tassin sighed and struggled for patience, biting her tongue to prevent herself from snapping at the woman. Mother Amy smiled, her black eyes twinkling.

"I be goin' to town now with Bern. The fire needs stokin', the supper needs startin' an' there's dishes to be washed."

Tassin glared at her as she walked away, allowing herself the childish pleasure of sticking her tongue out at the crone's back. The woman was insufferable, expecting her to do chores. If only she could tell her with whom she was really dealing. It would be so much fun to see her on her knees, begging for forgiveness. She marched to the hut, intent on leaving right away. Falcon would be her weapon; with him, she would win free across the mountains. As she entered the hut to gather her few belongings, her eyes fell on Sabre. She hesitated, torn by an inexplicable longing for the warrior to join her, and an equally strong wish to leave him behind. Deciding to leave it to fate, she gripped his arm and shook him.

"Sabre! Wake up! That is an order!" Tassin bellowed in his ear, something she had been unable to do before due to Mother Amy's constant presence. The brow band lighted in a flare of sparkling red, which dwindled to a more normal level, many of the lights turning green. His eyes flicked open, staring at the ceiling.

She scowled. "So, you have decided to wake up at last. Did you have a nice rest?"

"This unit is functional."

"Wonderful. While I have been acting as stand-in slave to the old biddy, you have been snoring your head off. I was about to leave this dump without you."

Tassin stepped back as he rose to his feet, and she glanced around for his trousers, which Mother Amy had cleaned and mended. Finding them on a dresser in the corner, she handed them to him. Sabre started to pull them on, but stopped when he encountered the stitches in his thigh, fingering them.

"These must be removed." He turned unerringly to where his harness was stored on a shelf and pulled it down. Digging in the pouch, he produced a tiny pair of scissors and cut the stitches, plucking them out. When he finished his thigh wound, he attended to the injury in his flank. The arrow wounds in his back presented a problem, and Tassin wondered what he would do. He held the scissors out to her.

"Will you assist?"

Tassin recoiled. "Can you not leave them in?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"They will fester."

Tassin took the scissors and studied the five stitched wounds in his back. "I just cut them and pull them out?"

"Correct."

Pulling a face, Tassin did as he asked. When she finished, Sabre replaced the scissors in his pouch and went outside. Tassin followed, curious. The cyber stripped to his shorts again and waded into the stream that ran past the back of the hut, bathing in the icy water. Tassin smiled as she thought of what Mother Amy would say if she found her newly awakened patient bathing in the icy stream. When he returned to the bank, he picked up his pouch, extracted a bottle and popped a tiny pill into his mouth. As he replaced the bottle, his cheeks swelled, and a minute later he spat out a

mouthful of white foam.

Tassin tapped her foot as the sun moved past noon and her chance of leaving slipped away. It would be too late by the time the horses were saddled and loaded now. Sabre donned his darned grey trousers, then re-entered the hunt and stood beside the fireplace, lapsing into his immobile state. Remembering the chores the crone had set her, Tassin ordered Sabre to do them.

When Mother Amy returned, the fire blazed, the dinner bubbled and the dishes were washed. Tassin relaxed in the chair and Sabre stood in a corner. At the old woman's entrance his head jerked up, his brow band sparkling. Bern sidled in and sat by the fire, staring at Sabre with open-mouthed idiocy. Mother Amy paused, her eyes bright, then closed the door and stood with her arms akimbo.

"I see our lad is awake."

"Yes." Tassin smiled. "He woke up just after you left."

"Uhuh. More like 'e was woken, an' he's been on the go ever since."

"What do you mean?"

The old woman shook her head. "Yer think I don't know? I weren't born yesterday, Missy."

"So he helped me, what of it?"

Mother Amy's eyes narrowed as she regarded Sabre. "Still as empty as a beggar's purse, too."

The witch approached Sabre, who stared through her. She reached up and touched the brow band, then snatched her hand away as if burnt.

"Eh, that's a nasty bit o' magic that. Who did that to you, lad?"

Sabre ignored her, and Tassin smiled. "Answer the question, Sabre."

He turned his head towards her. "Technicians fitted the cyber."

"An' did these here tech-nicians 'ave a reason for doin' it?" Mother Amy asked.

"For control."

"Ah. So's when yer told to do something, ye do it, no questions asked." Mother Amy studied Sabre's blank countenance.

"Correct. A cyber unit must obey orders."

Tassin stood up and approached him. "But you will not obey just anybody, will you?"

"No. A voice recognition imprint was installed prior to activation."

Tassin glanced at Mother Amy. "Do you understand what he means?"

The old woman shook her head, not taking her eyes off Sabre's face. "Nay lass, 'tis gobbledygook to me."

Tassin returned her attention to Sabre. "You only obey me, right?"

"And the alpha male designated Pervor."

Mother Amy shook her head again, made a sound of disgust and moved away to sink into the chair Tassin had vacated. "'Tis evil, that's what it be."

"Why evil?" Tassin frowned.

"'Cos 'e has no will of 'is own. 'E has to do what yer tell 'im, no matter what. No complainin', no questionin' and no reward. 'E's a tool, nothin' more, like an axe or a broom... or a sword. Yet 'e's not made of wood nor iron. He's flesh an' blood like you an' me, but 'e's got no life."

Mother Amy looked up, her weathered face creased with pity. "That thing on 'is 'ead thinks for him, like a rider tells a horse where to go. Yet even a horse can buck 'is rider off, an' 'e can still snort an' swat flies, look around, have feelings, talk to other horses. Yer Sabre can't, lass, that thing on his 'ead is just usin' 'is body."

"Can you help him?"

Mother Amy shook her head with a rueful smile, as if the suggestion was absurd. "Nay, I know nothin' about that kind o' magic."

Tassin stared at Sabre, brooding. She did not really understand how it was done, but she grasped the gist of Mother Amy's explanation. Manutim had given her a magic warrior who had indeed saved her, but now it seemed that he was enchanted as well, spellbound to do her bidding. This did not please her. She had thought he obeyed her because of fealty to her kingdom and the honour of serving a queen. Now it seemed he had no choice in the matter; a spell controlled him,

forcing him to obey. Then again, he had been originally intended to destroy the Death Zone, since no man in his right mind would venture in there. She knew little about the Death Zone, other than it was extremely dangerous to go into it and horrible creatures sometimes came out of it to terrorise villages. A thought struck her, and she turned to the old woman.

"What if we took that thing off his head?"

Mother Amy sucked her gums, watching the fire. "It won't come off, lass. I tried; them things go right into 'is 'ead."

"What if we broke it?"

"I doubt 'e'd let ye do that."

Tassin sighed. She did not think he would, either.

"Sides," the witch continued after a pause. "You need 'im as he is. If ye break that thing, 'e could just up an' leave. There'd be no reason for 'im to go on obeyin' you, no indeed. Without 'im, you'd be in a right pickle, wouldn't you, Yer Majesty?"

Tassin gasped. "You know who I am?"

"Course I does, I ain't stupid."

"But you have been treating me like a commoner all this time."

Mother Amy chuckled, her eyes glinting. "I ain't got no time for airs an' graces, lass. You needed my 'elp an' I've 'elped you, but I ain't bowin' an' scrapin' just 'cos you got a fancy title."

Tassin seethed, her hands clenching. Mother Amy looked up at her, black eyes twinkling in their web of wrinkles. "What'll you do, order yer warrior to box me ears?"

"I could."

The old woman laughed. "Sure, an' you'd love to, but 'member, I be a witch."

Tassin stifled her anger. "I am grateful for your help. I would not hurt you."

Mother Amy nodded, looking satisfied. "Aye, now yer thinkin'. Ye may even make a good queen one day."

Tassin snorted. "Not as long as those repulsive kings hound me."

"Aye, they're a problem an' no mistake. What do ye plan to do?"

"I am going to go to King Xavier. He will help me, I know he will."

Mother Amy clicked her tongue. "See sense, lass. Do ye really think a foreign king'll 'elp you?"

"Why not? I am a queen; he will respect royal blood."

"Will 'e now? An' what if he don't?"

Tassin moved closer to the fire. "Then I shall go into the Death Zone."

The old woman's eyes widened. "Are ye mad, girl? The only thing ye'll find in the Death Zone be death."

"I would have died honourably at the battle for my castle, if not for him." Tassin indicated Sabre with an angry flick of her hand. "He was meant to destroy the Death Zone. If he can do that, he can take me with him and protect me."

"Well, seems to me ye've got a lot to thank that man for, yet ye treat 'im like a skivvy. Ye owe 'im yer life, girl."

Tassin's lip curled. "I do not owe him anything! I was ready to die and deny Torrian the satisfaction of forcing me into marriage, now I am a fugitive."

"Oh aye, an' ye'd rather be dead." Mother Amy snorted. "What a foolish girl ye are! Yer too young an' stupid to know 'ow precious life is, an' yer ready to throw it away at the drop of a hat!"

She settled deeper into her chair, her voice dropping. "Anyways, Torrian's men wouldn't 'ave killed yer no matter what ye'd done. They'd 'ave disarmed ye, trussed ye like a chicken and made a gift of ye to Torrian."

"I know how to use a sword! I am a warrior queen!"

The crone rolled her eyes. "What a babe ye are! D'ye think yer could 'ave taken on the whole army?" Amy wagged a gnarled finger at her. "Listen, madam, yer forget 'bout goin' into that there Death Zone, ye hear?" She pointed at Sabre. "That one can probably survive the Zone, but with yer in tow 'e'll die trying to save yer sorry buns, an' ye won't last a minute longer. Mark my words, young

lady, the Zone's no place for a gentle bred little snot like you."

Tassin's hands curled into fists at the woman's disrespectful tone. "How dare you speak to me like that? What do you know of the Death Zone, you old witch?"

Mother Amy's eyes glittered. "I've a mind to take a switch to that there lily white butt of yours, wetling, queen or no! I know what the Zone is, 'tis magic, evil magic! It'll swaller ye up an' spit out yer bones, not even burp in satisfaction."

The old woman leant forward, her voice a growl, the fire lighting her haggard features with its lurid glow. "The Zone's apt named. It be death, pure an' simple, but an uglier death than ye can ever imagine. There be monsters in there that'd rip yer heart out an' eat it while it's still a-beatin'."

Curiosity overcame Tassin's anger. "What is the Death Zone?"

Mother Amy settled back in her chair, her eyes seeking the soothing ripple of flames in the hearth. "Like I said, 'tis magic. The Founders created it, so I 'eard, same time as they broke the world. Laid the land to waste, they did, spread a sickness that killed most, made others mad. Them as survived, they made a life where the evil 'adn't touched, but the Zone, that's where it stays, all that evil magic.

"An' them things what stagger out of it from time to time, they be its children. Monsters they be, no two alike, full o' teeth an' claws an' spines, mad with hate. They jus' kill until they're killed, an' it takes a powerful many men to kill 'em." Her chin sank onto her chest, her eyes growing distant. "Many's the brave, foolish men that 'ave ventured in there to try an' put an end to it. None ever came out."

Tassin bit her lip. "Then what should I do?"

"Ah, lass, don't despair. All you 'ave to do is get hitched."

"No! I will not marry any of those horrible kings!"

Mother Amy shook her head. "Nay lass, find someone ye like an' marry 'im."

"But he must be of noble blood, it is the law."

Mother Amy laughed, revealing toothless gums. "Stuff and nonsense! Noble blood my foot! All people's blood be the same. An' as to the law, what's it goin' to do? Once yer married, yer married, ain't nothin' the law can do 'bout it then, so long as the marriage is consummated. Marry 'im, 'e won't give ye no trouble." The old woman gestured at Sabre. "'E'll make a perfect 'usband, do exactly what ye say, no back chat, no arguments, just what ye need, lass."

Tassin's cheeks warmed and she glanced at Sabre. "I could not marry him, but your idea has merit. Perhaps I will find a handsome barbarian prince over the mountains."

Mother Amy made a rude noise, her brows meeting in a mass of wrinkles. "'Andsome! You don't 'ave to look any further than yer nose for 'andsome! That Sabre, 'e's got looks."

Tassin glanced at Sabre again. The old woman was right, but the idea did not appeal to her. "I must marry someone of my station, do you not see? I cannot put some yokel on the throne. By marrying him, I will make him a prince consort. He must have manners and etiquette; he must be able to act like a prince."

"Ah, lass." Mother Amy sighed, shaking her head. "It's what's in a man's 'eart that matters, not 'ow 'e acts. But if ye want to find a prince, well, that's up to ye, an' I wish ye luck. But if Torrian catches ye 'afore ye manage to find 'im, yer in trouble."

Tassin pondered this. "Torrian will not catch me; Sabre will make sure of that. He has powerful magic, very powerful."

Mother Amy stood up to stir the stew. "No man's invincible, lass."

Chapter Seven

The next day, Tassin took her leave of Mother Amy and Bern. The witch packed a parcel of dried food, and filled the water skins with fresh spring water. Tassin thanked her, and pressed two silver coins into her withered hand. The old woman nodded and smiled, her black eyes glinting with some unidentifiable emotion. Tassin was glad to ride Falcon again, the warhorse now recovered from his injuries. Sabre rode the mare as before, and they left the stolen horses behind.

Back on the trail, Tassin found herself glancing around often, wary of pursuit. She had been safe at the witch's hut, but now she was exposed again, and almost regretted the need to leave. Torrian's soldiers must have lost her trail when she had doubled back through the gorge, since she and Sabre had been riding different mounts. That fact had ensured her safety while Sabre had recovered, but now that they were mounted once more on the same warhorses, they would leave a recognisable trail. Even so, the time they had spent in seclusion made it unlikely that the soldiers would be searching in the right area. Evidently they had not found Falcon's trail when he had followed her either, or perhaps Torrian had given up at last.

Sabre rode behind her, and Tassin's eyes were drawn to him often. Eventually she grew tired of twisting her neck and ordered him to ride beside her. They followed a wide road, so there was no need for him to ride behind. When he obeyed, Tassin studied him.

"Sabre, when did those... technicians put that thing on your head?"

Sabre turned his head towards her. "The control unit was attached when the host body was one year old."

"One year! You were just a baby. Why so young?"

"It was necessary for the host body to adjust."

Tassin digested this, frowning. "What would happen if it was removed?"

"This unit would become non-functional."

"Does that mean you would die?"

"No, control would return to host brain."

Tassin watched Falcon's ears twitching in response to her voice. "Can that thing be removed?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Removal would cause brain damage."

Tassin wished that he would simply explain it to her instead of making her dig it out of him bit by bit. His answers almost seemed to contradict each other, and she was forced to sift through them. So if the brow band was removed, the man it controlled would wake up, but the removal of the band would cause damage, so he would be an idiot, like Bern. Therefore the brow band could not be removed. Tassin spurred Falcon into a canter. The sooner this journey was over, the sooner she could get rid of this annoying man who could not even hold a conversation.

For two days, they moved unimpeded through the countryside, stopping at villages to eat and sleep in inns, using the money Sabre had won. Tassin did not enter a village until she had ascertained that no soldiers lurked in it, which was easy enough to find out from peasants they encountered on the outskirts. Once darkness fell, there was no chance of soldiers arriving, since they too had to stop to rest and feed their mounts. Even if they had picked up her trail, they could not follow it at night. They might continue to follow the road, if they assumed that their quarry had stayed on it, but they risked exhausting their horses and losing the trail.

Tassin relaxed, hoping Torrian had given up the chase. The woodlands turned red and gold as autumn took hold, and floxwood trees filled the air with humming seeds that gyrated like maddened insects, tempting birds to eat them. The seeds were poison, and the rotting corpses of their victims provided compost for the seedlings. If a scavenger ate the dead bird, it merely provided more compost for the young tree.

On the third night, they camped in the woods beside a stream, unable to find a village. It was not such a hardship, however, since Tassin had purchased bedrolls. Sabre was cooking a rabbit when his head jerked up, the lights on his brow band sparkling. Tassin watched his head turn slowly, his torso twisting when it became necessary.

"What is it, Sabre?"

"Something is following."

A chill went through her. "What? Men? Torrian's soldiers?"

"A mixture of man and animal."

"Men on horses?"

"No, wolves and men."

Tassin relaxed with a sigh. "It is some villagers hunting wolves. They do that sometimes when the wolves worry their stock."

"No. It is best to leave." Sabre rose, dropping the rabbit into the fire.

She rescued her supper, annoyed. "In the dark? I do not think so. It is just some hunters."

Sabre strode into the darkness and returned a few minutes later leading the horses, saddled. He gathered up the bedrolls and food, packing them into the saddlebags. Tassin continued to roast her rabbit, ignoring him until he stamped out the fire, then she looked up with a cry of anger.

"What are you doing? There is no need to leave. Unsaddle the horses at once!"

"It is imperative to leave now."

"Hey! You - let me go!" Tassin yelled as he gripped her arm and yanked her to her feet. "I order you to release me!"

Sabre dragged her to the horses. "Orders are to protect and save you."

Tassin tried to free her arm from his iron grip, and, failing that, she punched him, hurting her hand. "You moron! Torrian's soldiers do not use wolves! It is just some hunters, nothing more. Let go of me!"

"You are in danger."

"No I am not! Damn you! Let go this instant!"

Sabre swept her up and almost flung her onto Falcon's back, then vaulted aboard the mare and kicked her into a trot. Tassin could not prevent Falcon from following, besides which, she did not wish to be left behind in the dark. Then again, she thought bitterly, Sabre would not leave her behind. She glared at his back, ducked branches and avoided trees as he led the way through the undergrowth. The larger moon was full, turning the forest into a wonderland of deep shadows and bright dapples. The silver light leached away the colour, leaving the landscape stark with shades of grey.

They left the stream bank and headed uphill, deeper into the forest, and Tassin wondered if Sabre knew where he was going. Surely he would realise his mistake when they left the wolves behind? He glanced back, the lights on his brow band a splash of alien colour in the darkness. Instead of slowing, as she expected, he urged the mare into a canter. Tassin wanted to shout at him to slow down; it was too dangerous to travel at this speed in a forest at night. As she opened her mouth, a bunch of leaves slapped her in the face, making her splutter and spit out dust. She wiped away the cobwebs that stuck to her face, hoping no spiders were busy making their way into her clothing as she vowed to punish Sabre for this indignity.

Tassin glanced back, and her heart seemed to leap into her throat. A sleek grey shape slipped through the shadows behind her, a low, running form that moved with silent ease. Tassin yelled in alarm and kicked Falcon into a gallop. The warhorse surged ahead, his ears flattened, and Sabre slowed his mare, allowing her to pass. He raised his arm, aiming back down the trail, and a bolt of blue brilliance lighted the forest behind them, just missing a lupine shape that flitted between the trees.

Sabre stayed close to her, his mare's shoulder almost pressed to Falcon's rump as the stallion chose a path between the looming trunks. Another flash illuminated the forest like lightning, a brief flare of incinerated foliage adding a garish orange glow. Tassin clung to her saddle as branches

whipped past, tearing at her hair. Falcon thundered up the slope, his ears flicking. A soft pop preceded a terrific explosion behind them, and a lupine yelp of pain rent the air. Tassin risked a glance back, and a branch almost swept her from her saddle as she glimpsed receding flames. Her grip on her pommel saved her, but her shoulder burnt from the scrape.

The wood ended, and Tassin urged Falcon up a grassy slope dotted with grey boulders and clumps of scrubby trees. The moonlight silvered rolling hills of waving grass. They had reached the foothills of the great mountain range, its distant snow-capped peaks serene. Tassin turned to look back at the forest, catching a glimpse of a grey shape flitting along the edge of it, but the wolves did not venture into the open, to her relief.

After a few more miles of cantering uphill, Tassin slowed Falcon, and Sabre allowed her to stop and slide from the saddle. He unsaddled and tethered the horses while she sat on a rock, willing her limbs to stop shaking. Only when he had built a fresh fire and heated water for tea did she stop watching the distant black smudge of the forest and relax. She slid down the rock and leant against it, holding her hands out to the blaze.

"That was strange, for a small pack of wolves to attack people on horseback," she commented, accepting a steaming cup from him.

"Those were not wolves."

She glanced up, startled. "They looked like wolves to me. What were they then?"

"Men in wolf shape."

Tassin frowned, sipping her tea. "What makes you say that?"

"The scanners differentiate between life forms. Humans have different brain patterns to wolves; each animal has a unique pattern."

Tassin's brows rose at this unusually long speech and strange revelation. "So these scanners of yours can tell you the location and type of every creature around us?"

"Yes, and the numbers."

"What animals are nearby now?"

The brow band flashed. "Two horses, three metres away, twenty-seven rabbits at varying distances and directions, eighteen ground nesting birds, five deer, two kilometres away, seven unidentified indigenous animals at varying distances and directions, fourteen sheep, one and a half kilometres away, four -"

"Okay. I get the picture. You can detect things up to two kilometres away?"

"Yes."

Tassin sipped her tea. "Then why were those men in the gully able to ambush us?"

"They were hidden behind the rocks. The scanners cannot penetrate stone. One was detected, then vanished. It was not considered a threat."

Tassin stared into the fire. "How can those wolves be men?"

"Unknown. They have the brain patterns of humans and wolves combined."

"Magic," she mused. "Clever Torrian; he has finally realised that he must fight magic with magic. How many are there?"

"Five of the combined man-wolf creatures, and two humans in close proximity with horses."

Tassin nodded. "Two riders to take me back when you're dead. Can you deal with the wolves?"

"They are small targets and fast moving, but they can be killed."

"Just when I thought that he had given up." She glared at the fire.

"Ammunition is running low," Sabre stated. "Less than half the original armaments remain."

"What ammunition?"

"Laser power packs and grenades."

She thought about that, not wanting to appear ignorant. "The blue light and the big bangs, you need ammunition for these magics?"

"Yes."

"Where can we get some more?"

"Unknown. This is a primitive planet. High-tech weapons are not available."

Tassin stared at her steaming tea, mulling over Sabre's words. She was beginning to think that he was not talking gibberish, but spoke of strange things she did not understand, assuming that she did. There were legends about old magics that were similar to the ones Sabre wielded. That kind of magic had been forbidden, because it was too dangerous. It was magic that had made the badlands on the other side of the mountains, and the Death Zone. People who ventured too far into the barren sandy area, spotted with tracts of glassy rock, often died afterwards from a strange sickness. Some said that the land was cursed, and any who ventured there without the protection of the right gods would fall afoul of it.

Tassin sipped her tea and wondered about Sabre anew. Certainly he used strange and powerful magic, but he often spoke as if he did not belong in this land. Where had Manutim found him? For that matter, where was Manutim from? Did they perhaps come from the fabled land beyond the Sun Sea? Or the mythical paradise that lay beyond the Death Zone? Sabre had told her he was from Myontwo, wherever that was. She turned to him, wondering if she could pry some more information from him.

"Sabre, where is Myontwo?"

"Star cluster GZ482."

"Which direction? East? West?"

His brow band flashed. "Not on this planet." Sabre's head tilted upwards, and, to her surprise, he pointed at the stars that sprinkled the night sky. "Myon Two is in that constellation, a cluster of bright stars."

Tassin gaped at him, then burst out laughing. "A good jest, Sabre. I did not think you had humour. The gods live in the stars, not men."

Sabre stared through her, and she shook her head, abandoning that line of questioning, since he clearly did not wish to tell her where he was from. Instead she asked, "What will happen when your ammunition runs out?"

"Primitive weapons may be substituted, but a loss of efficiency will result."

"So you will need a sword? Can you use one?"

"Yes. Cybers are trained in all weapons."

Tassin nodded, digging in the packs for some dried meat, since her rabbit had been lost. "Are those wolves still in the forest?"

"No. They have circled to the east."

She shot him a nervous glance. "Are they coming closer?"

"They are now out of scanner range."

"They are moving ahead of us, probably for an ambush. The pass through the mountains is to the east."

"Then another route should be taken." He took a piece of meat and tore at it.

"The only other pass through the mountains is to the west, and too steep for horses. It is called Devil's Run, and no one uses it. If we go that way, we will have to leave the horses behind. Then we will be on foot, and it is a long way to the nearest town on the other side. From the pass, you have to travel west along the edge of the mountains for about a hundred kilometres, I think. I thought you could deal with the wolves?"

"Some damage may result."

"Oh." She swallowed the last of her meat and reached for the water skin. "But I do not want to walk a hundred kilometres."

Tassin scowled, remembering what Mother Amy had said. He was not even a real man, yet he was presuming to give her advice? Okay, he had been right about the wolves, but she was not going to walk that distance just because he was afraid of getting hurt. She was a queen, and he would do as she said.

"We will go through the main pass."

Sabre continued to eat, and she smiled, recalling Mother Amy's comment about him making a

good husband. Well, he certainly did not argue, yet somehow the blind obedience also irritated her. There were times when she wished that he would argue, even if just to liven up the conversation.

In the morning, they set off for the main pass, moving along the mountain range until they came across the busy road that led to it and joined the stream of traffic. Tassin set a brisk pace, overtaking ox carts and heavy wagons laden with produce on its way to market in Olgara. Fewer carts journeyed into Arlin, carrying spices, rich cloth and the pungent cheeses that were made in the borderland kingdom. Cheerful drovers waved to them as they passed, and the gypsies who camped beside the road in their brightly painted wagons sold food and drink from makeshift stalls. Tassin enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere of the broad road and its people, who shared the affinity of travellers. They made good progress until Sabre stopped at midday, forcing Tassin to do the same, and she frowned at him.

"What is wrong now?"

"There is an ambush two kilometres ahead, the wolves are there."

"They are going to ambush us on the road, in broad daylight?"

"Yes."

"But there are people around, and wagons," she said.

"That makes no difference. They will not help."

"So what are you going to do?"

He turned his head and closed his eyes in a slow blink, something he did, she realised, when she gave him stupid orders, or asked foolish questions. "Go around."

Sabre guided his horse off the road, and Falcon followed. They rode through farmlands for almost two hours, crossed a wooded stream and surprised a few farmers in their fields. When they rejoined the road, Sabre assured her that they were beyond the ambush. Half an hour later, the urgent clatter of a galloping horse behind them startled Tassin, who looked around. Sabre turned his head, and the brow band flashed. A long-legged, speedy-looking chestnut horse overhauled them, pulling up alongside. The freckle-faced, red-haired young man who rode it smiled and called a greeting, which Tassin returned with rather less enthusiasm. The youth laughed and swept off his plumed hat in an extravagant courtly gesture.

"My apologies, My Lady! I did not mean to startle you. My horse is in need of a rest, and I thought to entertain myself with some idle chatter while he does so. I hope you don't mind if I ride with you for a little while?"

Tassin smiled and relaxed, charmed by his good manners and evident breeding. He seemed to be neither a soldier nor a rogue, and if he was, Sabre would deal with him. His merry brown eyes sparkled with jollity, and his cheerful demeanour was a refreshing change after days of Sabre's dour company.

"Indeed, good sir, do join us. The road is long and quiet."

"Oh yes, dead boring! Allow me to introduce myself. I am Algar Bonning, son of Lord Bonning of Bryon's Way."

"Well met, Sir Bonning. I am Lady Dallon of Miller's Rest," Tassin fabricated. "This is my man-at-arms, Sabre."

Algar saluted Sabre, grinning. "Pleased to meet you, Lady Dallon, Goodman Sabre."

Sabre ignored him, and Tassin smiled. "Sabre is a man of few words."

"So I hear!" Algar laughed. "A fine pair of horses you have. Particularly yours, My Lady. A stallion, is it not?"

"Indeed it is. He is very well trained." Tassin was well aware that ladies did not usually ride spirited stallions, especially astride, as she did.

"A courageous lady you must be, to ride a stallion."

Tassin laughed at the bold flattery, liking the young lordling. "I enjoy a spirited horse, Sir Algar."

Algar studied the animals, obviously a connoisseur of horseflesh. "Is that not the breed they use as warhorses, My Lady?"

"That is right, a useful breed, though not cut out for speed as yours is. He is a handsome animal."

Algar swelled with pride and stroked his mount's arched, sweaty neck. "Ah, yes, a wonderful horse. A gelding, regrettably. My father breeds them for speed you know, and he is justly proud of his stock. They are used for racing all over the country, and in great demand."

Tassin smiled. "I can see that he is fast, does he also have stamina?"

"Oh yes, I can travel from Bryon's Way to the pass in one day, and from there to Olgara in another."

"Impressive indeed. Perhaps I will buy some of your father's horses someday. Tell me, are you going to Olgara?"

"I am, My Lady. I ride upon my father's business. He is negotiating to sell horses to a man in Olgara. In fact, one of the reasons for my trip is to prove to the buyer the speed and stamina of these horses. You see, I came from Olgara two days ago, and now I return after only one day's rest, so he may see that my horse can do it."

The young lordling's smile faded somewhat. "I just hope those damn ... I beg your pardon, My Lady. King Torrian's soldiers are blockading the pass. They are searching every wagon and carriage for Queen Tassin, whom he wishes to capture. It causes a terrible delay, and I spent many hours waiting in the line. I hope they have gone now."

Tassin looked away, as if studying the passing scenery, to hide her dismay. Algar apparently deduced that she was bored with the conversation, for he said, "Well, my horse has rested, so I shall take my leave, Lady Dallon."

Tassin bestowed a weak smile upon him as he swept off his hat and spurred his horse on. As soon as he had vanished around the next bend, she reined Falcon in.

"We cannot go through the pass, Sabre."

"No."

Tassin gazed after Algar, listening to the fading sound of his horse's hoof beats as they came faintly on the wind. If only she could ride through as easily as he. Damn Torrian! A disguise would not work, the soldiers would be doubly suspicious of a man and a woman riding together, and the horses were a dead give-away. They could sell the warhorses and buy others, even ride through the pass separately, but it would be difficult to hide her looks. Her dark blue eyes were unusual and distinctive, and her black hair could not be dyed, since there was no darker colour and she had no way of bleaching it. Even if Sabre wore a hood to cover the brow band, it could easily be discovered. If the troops were being as thorough as Algar said, there was a good chance of detection.

Tassin turned off the road and headed west along the mountain range. They would have to use Devil's Run. Sabre rode beside her, and Tassin was glad that he was not likely to gloat over her mistake. The prospect of using the dangerous pass frightened her, and she hoped it was not as bad as she had heard.

Chapter Eight

For four days, they rode along the foothills of the Barrier Mountains. Sabre hunted every afternoon, shooting rabbits for their supper, although he once said that it was a waste of ammunition. Tassin shrugged it off, she enjoyed the fresh meat. Once they came across a shepherd's hut, and spent the night under a roof, but mostly they slept in the scrubby clumps of stunted horse-tail trees that dotted the slopes. Tassin relaxed again, thinking that they had given her pursuers the slip, but Sabre remained vigilant, and she enjoyed the journey a little. Certainly the scenery was spectacular. The mountains towered over them, their snow-clad peaks often clothed in wind-torn clouds like flags of cotton wool. Sunshine bathed the verdant foothills, although the air was chilly as autumn gave way to winter.

On the fifth afternoon, they reached the entrance to a deep, sheer-walled canyon that cut into the mountain range, and Tassin recognised it from the drawings that she had seen on maps. The horses could go no further, and the prospect of saying goodbye to Falcon tore her heart. There was one final command she could give him, which would ensure his freedom and prevent him from trying to follow her, and one day she might return to reclaim him. She unsaddled him and stroked his muzzle when he butted her, impatient to graze the lush grass. At least he and the mare would not go hungry, for even in winter there was grass here. A year or so from now, there would be three of them.

As she slipped off the bridle, Tassin murmured, "Ware, Falcon."

Falcon pricked his ears and stared at her. The command meant that he must let no stranger approach him, and remain behind when she left. It was designed to prevent enemies from injuring picketed warhorses, and he had not been given that command since he had been in training ten years before. He tossed his head and trotted away, soon stopping to graze beside the mare. He would protect the mare too, she was sure.

Tassin plodded to the sheltering rocks, where Sabre built a fire. The prospect of the long walk on the far side of the mountains depressed her, and she wished they could ride through Devil's Run. Flopping down beside the fledgling fire, she watched Sabre set up camp with his unflagging efficiency. Although he was a dour companion, she was becoming accustomed to his terse ways. He had killed two rabbits that afternoon, and cleaned and skinned them.

Sabre's half fierce, half gentle looks fascinated her. His hair had grown a little, which improved his appearance and made the white hair that grew from the thin scars on his scalp more prominent. His face was unlined for a man in his mid-twenties, but then, he lacked any expression that would cause them. His skin had darkened in the sun, and glowed with health. The harness and trousers were a bit worn now, but in surprisingly good condition, considering. She wore a warm coat in the growing chill, and there was another in the packs for him, purchased in the last village for the journey over the mountains. Even the main pass, where the road zigzagged up the mountain in a series of torturous switchbacks, it became extremely cold at the top, and Devil's Run would be worse.

The Queen let her gaze drift to the green slopes, which darkened as night fell, and pondered her situation. She was about to embark on a dangerous journey through this ill-fated pass, into an unknown land, disguised as a commoner. A magical warrior accompanied her, and enchanted wolves pursued her. Someday, she thought wryly, she would have some good tales to tell her children as she dandled them on her knee before the fire. Her husband, an obscure figure in her dream, would sit and listen too, while Sabre stood in the corner. The smell of roasting rabbit drew her from her reverie, and she sat up to watch him turn the spits.

"Sabre, have you ever thought about having children?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Cybers do not have children."

Tassin plucked a blade of grass and chewed it. "Your parents had you, were they not warriors too?"

"No."

"What happens when you grow too old to be a warrior?"

"The control unit is transferred to a new host body."

Her brows rose. "What happens to the old body?"

"It is destroyed."

Tassin spat out the grass. "How many ... err, bodies, have you had?"

"Unknown."

"Do you not remember?"

"Memories are stored in the biological brain, therefore the cyber has no memory of prior hosts."

Tassin listened to the distant snorts of the grazing horses, pondering his strange words. An eerie quiet hung in the still air, and not even the wind sighed through the canyon. The movement of Sabre's brow band caught her attention, a sparkle of light in the gathering darkness. His head jerked up, and he turned to stare down the slope. Her neck hairs rose.

"They come." He stood up.

Tassin leapt to her feet. "We will have to catch the horses!"

"No. Up the mountain."

Sabre picked up the cloth sack containing the salted meat and tossed in the half-cooked rabbits. Swiftly he gathered up their equipment and stuffed it into the two bags, which he tied to his harness and slung over his shoulders. Tassin stared down slope, straining to see something in the gloom. Sabre stamped out the fire and grabbed her arm, yanked her around and dragged her towards the mountain.

"Let me go! There is no need to grab me all the time, I can keep up, Sabre!" she tried to free herself.

Sabre clambered over the first rocks, ignoring her struggles. The canyon walls loomed over them, growing higher as they moved deeper into it. Tassin tripped and would have fallen, but for Sabre's grip on her arm. He jerked her upright, and she realised that her struggles were only hampering him, so she concentrated on keeping up instead. The canyon narrowed, steep slabs of rock hemming them in. The only way was up, and she had no doubt that the wolves had reached the entrance by now.

An hour passed in a blur of panting, scrabbling desperation as she struggled over jagged rocks, barking shins, hands and elbows, stubbing toes and tearing fingernails. Her lungs burnt as she gasped the cold air, for the temperature dropped as they climbed higher. Sabre hauled her along, his grip bruising her arm, but her legs burnt and her muscles had lost their strength.

"Sabre, stop!" she gasped. "I have to rest, stop!"

Sabre turned to her, the brow band flickering. Releasing her arm, he stepped around her to face down the canyon. Grey shapes ran over the rocks towards them in the moonlight. He raised his arm, and a brilliant streak of light sliced through the darkness, momentarily illuminating the canyon and the wolves. The laser bolt hit the rocks close to one of the animals with a crack and flash, causing it to veer. Sabre fired twice more, once rewarded by a howl of pain, but the elusive wolves moved too fast, and dodged amongst the rocks, their claws scrabbling on the stone.

Sabre wedged himself into the rocks down slope and waited. The lead wolf appeared from behind a rock and leapt at Sabre's throat. He fired point blank, slicing the animal in two. A second wolf attacked and died. The other three hung back amongst the rocks, waiting for him to turn his back. Sabre picked up loose rocks and hurled them into the shadows, and a yelp of pain and the scrape of claws rewarded his efforts as the wolves retreated. He turned to climb again, grasped her arm and pulled her after him.

The wolves gave chase, whining with eagerness, and Sabre towed Tassin along so fast her feet

barely seemed to touch the rocks. If he hoped the slope would become too steep for the wolves to follow, he was disappointed, for it continued to be just gentle enough for them. Tassin slipped and stumbled beside him, propelled by his grip. Every so often, he stopped and turned to fire at the wolves, forcing them to take cover and gaining a few precious metres each time.

It seemed like hours later that he stopped and turned to face back down the trail, listening. Only the soft sighing of the wind broke the stillness. Sabre relaxed against the rocks, and Tassin allowed her legs to fold and sat down, gasping, her throat and lungs burning. Sweat trickled down her face, chilling her skin as it cooled.

"What has happened to them?" she panted.

"They have fallen back. They will stalk us now."

"But you can detect them."

"They do not know that."

Tassin nodded, concentrating on satisfying her lungs' craving for oxygen. While she recovered, Sabre spread her bedroll and blankets on a flat spot. She lay down, her muscles jumping with fatigue. Sabre sat beside her, his eyes closed.

"Are you not going to sleep too?" she asked, surprised.

"No. Cybers do not need sleep."

Tassin sighed. "Where are the wolves?"

"They have stopped further down."

"You are going to watch them all night?"

"Yes."

Tassin closed her eyes, but her burning throat and the jumping of her tired muscles kept sleep at bay for a while.

It seemed like only moments later that Sabre shook her awake again. The sky blushed pink with the pearly light of dawn, and a bitter cold nipped her. Her breath steamed as she sat up with a groan, rubbing her aching legs.

"They approach," Sabre stated.

Tassin's teeth chattered as he pulled off her blankets and stuffed them into a bag. He had finally donned a warm coat, she noticed.

"Where are they?" she asked.

"They move towards this position, probably hoping for the element of surprise while their targets are asleep."

"No chance of that," she grumbled, rubbing her eyes.

Sabre took her arm and towed her up the mountain again, supporting her when her stiff legs refused to move speedily. Tassin groaned with every step, her stomach rumbling with hunger and her throat parched and aching. She wondered if it was all worth it. Perhaps she should have married the toothless Grisson, then kept him out of her bedchamber with a sharp knife until he died. She longed for the comforts of her home, where a small army of servants was at her beck and call, fires warmed every room and her bed welcomed her into its soft embrace each night.

It seemed like an eternity since she had enjoyed a walk in the sun-drenched gardens, or a leisurely afternoon of book reading and sloth. Anything would be better than toiling up an icy mountain at dawn, dragged along by a ruthless magical warrior and pursued by enchanted wolves. She tripped, and Sabre's iron grip saved her from smashing her face into the rock, swinging around to crash into his chest. She gazed up at him with despairing eyes. Her lungs ached and her skin tingled, her head pounded as if it would burst.

Sabre stared through her, then released her arm and bent before her as if performing a deep bow, hoisting her over his shoulder with the rest of the baggage. Tassin wanted to shout at him to put her down. The indignity was immense, but she was too tired. Tears of frustration and bitterness leaked from her eyes, dripping onto the rock that passed beneath her. Her head pounded even more as the blood rushed into it, and she closed her eyes as Sabre strode up the mountain, apparently unaffected by her weight.

From time to time, she raised her head to look back down the trail, searching for signs of the wolves. The sun warmed her back and Sabre warmed her front, making her almost cosy. She marvelled at his strength. No ordinary man could carry a fifty-kilogram woman, plus twenty kilos of baggage, up a steep slope for hours, as he was doing. He breathed deeply, but he did not flag.

The sun blazed overhead when he put her down, and only then did she notice the toll the effort had taken on him. His features were gaunt and pale, sweat beaded his brow and made tracks down his cheeks. He eased the baggage off his shoulders and squatted, head hanging, the brow band flickering with a lot of red.

"Sustenance is required. The wolves have stopped," he said.

They drank water and shared the cold rabbit. Afterwards, she relaxed against the sun-warmed rock, until he repacked the bags and stood.

"Can you walk?"

Tassin nodded and climbed to her feet. This time he did not drag her along; the sense of urgency had gone, and he seemed content to move slowly, gripping her arm to steady her. She gasped in the thin air as they ascended to the snow line, where patches of snow nestled in shadowy clefts, and the raw wind stung her cheeks. She concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other, and not slipping, as they toiled up the mountain.

When next she took stock of her surroundings, the sun sank towards the horizon, and they were nearly at the top of the pass. Snow covered much of the rock, and ice hid beneath it, ready for the unwary. Twice she slipped, saved by Sabre's hold on her arm. Once he slipped, and released her lest he pull her down too.

Finally he stopped, and she rested while he scouted around, then returned to guide her to a cave. As soon as the blankets were spread, Tassin wrapped herself in them. When Sabre offered her some cold rabbit, she shook her head, her appetite gone. She drank a little water and lay down. Sabre settled close to the entrance and closed his eyes, his back against the wall. Tassin knew he was going to keep watch. Sabres did not need sleep. Humans, on the other hand, she thought bitterly, did, and closed her eyes.

A sizzling crack woke Tassin, and a lupine howl of agony followed it. She sat up, disorientated. The howling went on and on, then dwindled to a whimper. Three down, two to go. Tassin listened to the agonised whimpering, stifling the pity that welled up in her. That was not an animal, she reminded herself, but a man in a wolf shape. The whimpering faded, and a faint scraping of claws told her that the injured wolf crawled away. She hoped it would put the others off.

Tassin became aware that her fingers were numb and her feet had turned into blocks of ice. Shivers racked her, making her gut ache, and she chafed her hands, but it did no good. Dragging her blankets, she crawled towards Sabre. He still sat against the wall, facing the cave entrance.

"Sabre!" she whispered. "I am freezing!"

His head turned towards her, the brow band bright in the gloom. Her teeth chattered like castanets, and he stretched out his legs and pulled her onto his lap. Tassin stiffened, but he merely grasped her hands and rubbed them. His touch warmed her; he seemed to radiate warmth in a delicious glow.

"Why are you not cold?" she demanded.

"The cyber regulates body temperature."

"Is there any damn thing that the bloody sabre cannot do?"

"Yes."

Tassin sighed as he enfolded her in his coat. He seemed oblivious to her tension, and she pressed her icy hands to his chest, surprised when he did not protest. The embarrassment of being so intimate with a relative stranger soon faded as she warmed up. She risked a look up at his face, but his head was turned towards the entrance once more, his eyes closed.

Tassin had always found men to be rough, hairy and smelly, but Sabre was not; even his slight body odour lacked the pungency of other men, perhaps because he washed more often. Her father's hugs had almost cracked her ribs and his beard had scratched her cheek, but Sabre's gentle hold

imparted security without the sense of entrapment. He also lacked the body hair other men possessed, and even his breath did not smell, she marvelled. With a sigh, she snuggled closer, listening to the strong steady beat of his heart, and sleep claimed her in a swift inky rush.

Chapter Nine

Tassin woke cosy and comfortable, and snuggled closer to the warmth, her hands sliding over smooth skin. Startled, she opened her eyes. Her cheek rested on a hard male chest, and her arms almost embraced him. She jerked away, embarrassed and confused. Sabre turned his head and opened his eyes. Tassin's cheeks grew hot as she moved away, pulling her coat around her as the cold bit her skin. He turned back to the entrance, ignoring her embarrassment. For once, she was glad he had no feelings, for he seemed unaware of her mortification. She helped herself to some water and food, noticing that the sun shone outside.

"Where are the wolves?" she enquired.

"Out of scanner range."

"You mean you do not know?"

"Correct."

Tassin scowled at him. "Are they above or below us?"

"They were one kilometre below this position when they disappeared."

"So they are hiding in the rocks. They could be anywhere."

"Yes."

Tassin tore at the salted meat, and Sabre sat up to take a piece. Although he did not show it, she knew that he must be stiff from lying so still all night.

"So what do we do now?" she demanded. "Stay here and freeze?"

"No. Continue."

"What if they are waiting in ambush?"

"This unit will fight them."

She raised her brows. "I am quite capable of fighting too, if you loan me your knife."

"You will not fight."

Tassin wished she had a sword so she could prove that she was also a warrior. It puzzled her that he never referred to himself in the first person, and she wondered if his strange pronunciation of 'sabre' might perhaps have a different meaning. There was no word she knew of that resembled the one he used, so it might be a foreign tongue, although the rest of his speech was not heavily accented. The strange word, combined with his habit of referring to himself as 'this unit', made her wonder about the depths of his madness. As soon as he had eaten, Sabre packed the bedrolls and crawled out of the cave, pausing to stretch, joints cracking. She followed his example, groaning as her stiff muscles protested their abuse.

Sabre led the way up the pass, which continued to slope gently, and she wondered why horses could not use it. So far, apart from being rocky and slippery in places, she saw no reason why they could not have ridden.

By mid-afternoon, her legs ached again and her head pounded as she panted in the frigid air. Sabre stopped, and when she reached his side she swayed and grabbed his arm with a gasp. The mountain fell away in a sheer cliff that levelled out far below in a series of snow-covered shelves.

"We have to climb down that?" Tassin asked, horrified.

Sabre's head turned as he scanned the cliff, the lights on the brow band flashing. "There is a trail over there." He pointed to one side, where a narrow shelf started just below the summit and meandered down in a jagged, dizzying path. In some places, the shelf almost disappeared, in others sheer drops had to be negotiated. Her heart quailed at the prospect of climbing down it.

"Is that the only way?"

He scanned the cliff for a few more moments. "Yes." Turning away, he walked over to the path, which a tall ridge overhung on one side. "Follow closely, hold on, and do not look down."

Tassin approached the edge and peered over it. The world spun and her bile rose. She stumbled back, sickened and afraid. "I cannot climb down that. I will fall."

Sabre turned. "Do not look down, you will get dizzy."

"I know, but I -"

Sabre whipped around as a grey shape launched itself from a crag above him. His arm snapped up, but the wolf struck him in the chest, its forepaws outstretched, its jaws reaching for his throat. Sabre stepped back to absorb the shock of the impact. For a second he teetered on the edge, then, as if in slow motion, he fell.

"Sabre!"

Tassin's scream echoed around the mountains like the shriek of a hunting eagle. Running to the edge, she dropped to her knees and clung to the rocks as she peered down. Far below, two still forms lay in the snow. She screamed his name again as loudly as she could, hoping for a movement, some sign that he was alive. The icy wind tugged at her tangled hair, sweeping her cry away to echo and re-echo around the mountains. The two forms below remained unmoving and oddly twisted, stark against the virgin snow.

Tassin thought there was a bright splash of blood, but she was not sure. She was intensely alone all of a sudden. Only icy wastes and the soft moaning of the wind in the crevasses surrounded her. Sabre was gone. Her only companion, her fellow warrior and provider; her friend. Hot tears flooded her eyes, blurring the sight of his twisted body. She had never had a friend before. The daughters of nobles had either been in awe or envious of her, and those who had offered friendship had inevitably turned out to be trying to curry favour for their own ends while whispering nastiness behind her back.

Tassin gripped the icy rock and wept bitter tears. How could she carry on without Sabre? She needed him! Worst of all, his death was her fault. The wolves had been sent to kill him because of her. He had turned back from the edge because of her. Had she been close to him, the wolf would not have dared to attack for fear of killing her too. It had been a suicide leap; the beast had deliberately sent them plummeting to their deaths. They had come so far! Once on the other side of the pass, they would have been safe from Torrian, she was sure.

Tassin banged her fists on the rock and cursed him. He had ruined her life, and now he had killed Sabre. Tears trickled down her cheeks like threads of ice as she recalled Sabre's devotion to her well-being, keeping her warm and fed, protecting her from her enemies. Once her fury at his unwelcome rescue had abated, she had grown to depend upon him, and was now glad he had saved her. Her last shred of hope dwindled to nothing as Sabre's distant shape remained still.

A low growl made her sit up, the hair on her nape rising. She turned to face the last wolf, which stood not four metres away, its yellow eyes fixed on her. Cold tendrils of fear coiled in her gut as it pulled back ice-rimmed lips, baring long fangs. Tassin's eyes locked with the beast's, and the wind whipped away her steaming breath as she waited for it to leap. When it remained where it was, her fear receded, and she realised that it would not harm her. It was a warrior turned into a wolf and sent to bring her back. Her fear turned to rage, and she scowled at it.

"Murderer!" she shouted. "Murdering scum! What dirty slime are you? A coward's way, to sneak up on your enemy and push him over the edge. You are supposed to be a warrior! Hah!"

The wolf snarled and stepped forward, its eyes alight. She quailed, but common sense told her that it was bluffing, and she groped for a loose rock. Finding a fist-sized stone, she hurled it at the wolf with all her might, forcing the animal to dodge. It snapped at her, its teeth bared as it advanced again, and Tassin glared at it.

"You will not harm me. I know it was magic that turned you into a wolf, and that Torrian sent you. My magic warrior told me what you are, so do not expect me to fear you. If I had a sword, you would be dead already!" She reached for another rock.

The wolf pricked its ears, and Tassin hurled the rock, hitting it on the paw. It yelped and retreated a few steps, whining. She groped for another rock, but the wolf moved out of range, lifted its muzzle and howled, the mournful sound echoing through the mountains. It called the men to come and get her now that she was unprotected.

"Damn you!" she yelled. "I hope you get rabies! I hope a plague of fleas descends on you and

drives you mad! As a wedding gift, I will demand your pelt to wipe my feet on!"

The wolf whined, its ears laid back and its eyes cowed. Tassin glanced around. "If you think I am going to sit here and wait for your friends to come and get me, you can think again, you flea-bitten bastard!"

Tassin edged towards the rocky path, filled with reckless courage, her heart pounding and her mind cold with determination. The wolf gave a yelp and bounded towards her. She threw another rock, but it dodged and darted close to grip her coat in its jaws, trying to drag her away from the edge. She punched it, but it closed its eyes and hung on, tugging and pulling. Grabbing a rock, she smashed it against the wolf's head. It released her and staggered away, stunned.

Tassin eased herself down onto the shelf, clinging to the rock with icy fingers. She would escape Torrian, even without Sabre. The wolf reappeared and gazed down at her as she crept along the narrow ledge. It whined, but she was out of reach. It vanished, and its howl rang out again, more urgently. She tried to speed up her descent, keeping her eyes on the stone in front of her while she slid her feet along the shelf, testing each foothold before putting her weight on it. Remembering Sabre's warning, she fought the urge to look down. The wolf reappeared again, whined and tried to step down onto the path, but retreated. With no hands to cling with, it could not follow her.

Tassin bellowed, "Tough luck, bilge breath! You are a wolf now, not a man! It has other disadvantages, besides not being able to talk."

The wolf growled and retreated. She concentrated on climbing down the steep, narrow path, longing for Sabre's reassuring presence. Without him, her terror made her mouth dry and her heart pound. Unable to look down, she did not know how far it was to the first ledge, where Sabre's body lay. The wolf reappeared and stood silhouetted against the sky, staring down. She had descended several metres already, but at any moment she expected the men to arrive, which would really complicate matters.

Time seemed to slow as she concentrated on moving her feet carefully, testing each step and groping for handholds. Sweat dewed her brow, and several times she stopped to rest, clinging to the icy rock. When she reached one of the sheer drops, she crawled down it with her heart in her throat, her stomach a painful knot. Once, a piece of rock broke off in her hand, causing a moment of gut-wrenching panic followed by a freezing tide of terror. Tassin wanted to stop and scream until someone came to rescue her. Her fingers bled, her back ached terribly and her neck was stiff with tension.

Shouts drew her attention upwards. Two men climbed down after her, and she cursed. She had not gone through all this just to be dragged back now. From the distance to the top, she calculated that she must be more than halfway down. The sun had moved closer to the horizon, so several hours had passed. Her foot found another gap, and she eased herself down until she found rock under her foot again. As she put her weight on it, it crumbled away and her fingers slipped, making her yelp with terror, pressing herself to the rock. One foot now bore almost all of her weight, her knee bent at an awkward angle. She clawed for fresh handholds, a scream clogging her throat.

Shouts came from the men above her. "Hold on, Majesty! We'll save you! Don't move!"

This spurred Tassin on, and her aching fingers found cracks and crawled in, securing her. She lowered herself more, hanging by her hands as her foothold passed the point of no return. Her other foot found the path, and she eased her weight onto it. It held, and she breathed a sigh of relief as the ledge widened. Aware of the men above her, she moved faster.

At last she dared to look down, and found that she was only a few metres above the snow-covered ledge. Throwing caution to the winds, she scrambled onto it. She stood gasping and shaking with relief, then looked up. Torrian's men were halfway down. Turning away, she crunched through the snow to the edge of the ledge and looked down. Another dizzying drop greeted her, and she recoiled in horror. She was not ready to face another terrifying descent.

Tassin looked at Sabre's sprawled form, wondering if she could use his magic. She shuddered at the thought of touching his corpse, but desperation made her walk over to it. He lay face down, his head twisted to the side, and he was half buried in the snow, sunken from the impact. She knelt

beside him, fresh tears burning her eyes. One leg was bent awkwardly under the other, and his arms were outstretched as if to embrace the snow.

"I am so sorry, Sabre," she whispered, her throat raw and dry.

Blinking away her tears, she reached out to stroke his cheek in a gesture of affection and farewell. She jerked her hand away in surprise when her fingers encountered warm skin. Hope flared in her, but she squashed it. His body had not cooled yet, that was all; no one could survive that fall. Still, she could not stop her hand from creeping to his throat. After a brief search she found a pulse, and her heart leapt. Gladness rushed through her, bringing with it warmth and hope. He was alive. She had not lost him after all. Glancing up, she found that Torrian's men were on the last steep stretch.

Digging Sabre's right arm out of the snow, she examined the wrist laser and launcher. She had seen him use it many times, and when he did he curled his hand down. Her groping fingers found two raised buttons on a curved pad under the band. Lifting his arm, she pointing it at the men and pressed one of the buttons. There was a soft whirring noise as the two tubes spun around the band, the larger one moving to the top, then a sharp pop. Sabre's arm jerked, and an explosion tore into the cliff face above the men. They stopped and shouted, then scrambled down faster.

Aiming Sabre's arm more carefully, she pressed the other button. The tubes spun again with a whir, and blue fire cracked into the cliff to the right of the men. Elated, Tassin moved Sabre's arm to the left and fired again. The laser beam hit the upper man in the back, and he toppled away from the cliff, dead before he let go. The other man shouted for mercy, but Tassin was not in a merciful mood. It took three shots before she hit him, and he died as silently as the first. High above, the wolf stood silhouetted. Raising Sabre's arm, she fired at it. The shot missed, but the wolf vanished.

Tassin turned her attention to Sabre. He breathed in shallow, laboured gasps, his lips tinged with blue. Tassin struggled to roll him onto his back, for he was surprisingly heavy. He flopped limply, his legs twisted and his mouth slightly open. The brow band was black and dead. She unhooked the bags from his harness and dug out a blanket, spreading it over him. His hands were ice cold, and the front of his clothes was soaked. A splash of red in the snow caught her attention, and she peered at it.

There was a rock just beneath the surface, covered with frozen blood. Alarmed, Tassin examined Sabre's head more closely, and, after some frantic scrutiny, noticed that a vertical crack ran through the brow band's crystals, and two struts were bent. Evidently it had taken the brunt of the impact. Blood had seeped from around the struts and run down them to freeze on the brow band. The band had saved his skull from fracture, but at what cost? If the brow band was broken, did that mean he would wake up an idiot? Maybe he would not wake up at all.

Tassin rocked miserably on her haunches, caught between grief and pure terror. What should she do? She wiped the melting snow from his face with trembling hands. Grimacing, she tried to straighten the band, but the metal was far too strong. Her efforts caused fresh blood to ooze out and drip onto the snow. Tassin wiped it away, glad when it stopped. She glanced around for some sort of shelter. The sun sank towards the desert horizon in a glory of red and gold, and she knew she must get him out of the snow.

Rising, she stumbled towards the cliff. Snow formed banks along its base, and, without really knowing why, she traversed its perimeter. Floundering through the deep drifts, she found the bodies of Torrian's men, twisted like broken dolls. She stripped them of their supplies and blankets, averting her eyes from their frozen expressions of horror. Burdened with their packs, she continued to search the base of the cliff for some sort of shelter, a spur of rock or an overhanging shelf.

The snow caved in under her, and she tumbled into a cave with a yell of surprise. Delighted, Tassin stood and brushed snow from her clothes. The cave was little more than a crack, but snug and dry. It narrowed rapidly, only about two metres deep and one and a half metres wide at its entrance. Dry twigs and animal fur covered the floor, indicating that once it had been a den. Bones testified to the predatory nature of the beast, but she did not pause to ponder the prospect that it might return.

Tassin scraped the sticks into a pile, and then cleared some of the snow from the entrance,

careful not to widen it too much. That done, she returned to the cyber, who lay quite far from the cave. Hooking her hands under his armpits, she tried to lift him, but her back protested at his weight, and she released him. Digging in a pack, she extracted another blanket and used his knife to cut two strips from it, which she tied around his shoulders. Gripping the ends, she leant into the makeshift harness. At first he did not move, then, with a jerk, he slid over the snow.

Struggling wilfully, Tassin dragged him to the cave, slipping, straining and cursing his weight. For all that he was not a particularly big man, he was extremely heavy. Once she reached the cave, getting him into it was easy, and she pulled him as far back as she could, then sat down to rest her aching back and burning legs. She checked on him again, distressed to find his hands freezing cold. He had lain in the snow for a long time. Searching through the dead men's packs, Tassin found a treasure trove of wood.

The soldiers carried bows, arrows and two axes with wooden handles. She added them to the pile of twigs and set fire to it with her tinderbox. The seasoned wood burnt well, producing hot coals. The cave grew warm, and a little colour returned to Sabre's skin. She used all the blankets to cover him, then huddled close to the fire to soak up the heat. Soon it grew dark outside, and she chewed on some tough dried meat. The exertion and tension had sapped her, and she lay down beside Sabre and shared his blankets, cuddling up to his warmth. Even though he was unconscious, and unlikely to awake for quite some time, his presence was comforting.

Chapter Ten

For two days, Sabre lay unmoving. Tassin found that there was something oddly endearing about being around him in his helpless state, even though she longed for him to wake. The wood had all been burnt, and she lived on dry meat and water. She spent most of her time sitting beside him, stroking his face and willing him to get better. Sometimes she talked, telling him of her past experiences and future plans. Sabre's colour improved, and he grew a soft beard, but she did not dare to try to shave him with the razor-sharp knife he always used. At night, she slept beside him, the steady beat of his heart reassuring her.

On the third day, she calculated that there was only enough food for another four days. Often she walked to the edge of the cliff and gazed down at the warmer climes below, wishing she could get him down to them. The thought of leaving him did cross her mind. She might be able to reach Olgara in time to find men and come back for him before he died of dehydration, but she was unwilling to take the chance that she might not make it back in time. He had become precious.

Tassin was sitting beside him with her knees drawn up, her chin resting on them as she contemplated the snowy scene outside, when bedlam erupted. The only warning was a flash of red that caught her eye and made her look down at Sabre in surprise. Erratic red lights flickered to and fro along the length of the brow band, and her breath caught in excitement. His eyes flicked open, his brow furrowed in a deep frown, and his hands flashed up and gripped the brow band. With a cry of dismay, Tassin grabbed his arms and tried to stop him from pulling at the band. His eyes were wild and white-ringed, his lips drawn back in a silent snarl. She pried at his fingers, trying to release them from the band.

"Sabre! Stop it! Stop! Leave it, Sabre!"

Sabre lashed out, hit her in the chest and knocked her back against the cave wall, cracking her head on it. His sudden violence and the blow to her head stunned her, and she watched in horror as he continued his silent battle. His fingers were white with strain as he strived to pull the band from his head, and he gasped harshly through clenched teeth.

"Sabre! Stop it, you can't get it off!"

The futile struggle continued for another few seconds, then his eyes rolled back and closed, and he slumped. Worried, she moved closer to inspect the band. Fresh blood seeped from around the struts, and his tugging had straightened the bent ones. The crack in the crystals was closed, but the band was black once more. Tassin studied his peaceful face and rubbed her aching head. Finding a cloth in one of the bags, she wiped away the blood, then used the strips of blanket that she had employed to drag him here to tie his hands, threading it behind his back so he could not reach the brow band.

Tassin sat back and thought about what had just happened. It seemed as if the real man was awakening, the brain so long controlled by the magic in the brow band, and he was entering into a mammoth struggle with his controller. Unanswerable questions plagued her. What if he became more violent? What if he injured himself in his struggle to rip the brow band from his forehead? Was he brain damaged? Why did he fight to rid himself of the brow band? Did it hurt him? She shivered, remembering the savage blow that had knocked her aside. Would he hurt her? At least she had secured his hands now, but, even so, she was nervous.

That night, she decided not to sleep beside him, and curled up as far away as she could. She woke several times shivering, while Sabre lay under most of the blankets. She longed to share his warmth, but the fear of further violence kept her away.

A sound woke her at dawn. She shivered and rubbed her hands to try to warm them, then stopped as the sound came again. Sabre groaned softly, and sporadic red flashes lighted the brow band every now and then. She crept closer to peer at his face. His eyes were closed, and he twitched, his hands clenching and opening. His soft groans were husky and deep; a sound of pain. Tassin bit

her lip, wondering if she should do anything. After a few minutes, the brow band darkened, and he fell silent. Relieved, she crawled out of the cave to stretch in the early morning sun.

All that day she watched him, waiting for the next bout. Late in the afternoon, she became aware of a change in the tempo of his breathing and studied him. His eyelids fluttered, then his eyes opened slowly. Tassin held her breath, but the brow band remained unlighted. He gazed at the rock above him, then turned his head to look at her. Tassin gasped as his eyes focussed on her face. He frowned and licked his lips. His gaze drifted to the cave mouth, and he raised his head a little, then let it fall back as if too weak to hold it up. To her surprise, his eyes glittered with tears, which overflowed and ran down the side of his head into his hair. He swallowed and blinked.

"I..." A startled expression crossed his face, as if the sound of his voice surprised him. He swallowed again. "I'm free," he whispered, his voice filled with anguish. A slight smile curved his lips, and he gazed at the roof with a bemused, wondering expression.

"I'm... free," he whispered again, as if he could not believe it. He tried to raise an arm, discovered that he was bound and turned his head to look at her. For several seconds he studied her, his expression a mixture of puzzlement and wariness, as if he tried to decide who and what she was. Tassin found that she held her breath again and let it out. He looked down at the strip of blanket that bound his wrist, then his eyes flicked back to her. Suspicion, caution and puzzlement warred for supremacy in his expression. He licked his lips and turned his head to stare at the roof again. She sensed that his situation perplexed him deeply, and he struggled to accept it. This was not the same person she had come to know; he was a stranger. Was she also a stranger to him? Was this the real man? Did he remember her?

"This is a dream," he whispered.

Tassin longed to contradict him, but the words stuck in her throat. How would he react if she spoke to him? He seemed almost afraid of her, and she chewed her lip as he turned his head to look at her again.

"I'm not going to hurt you."

The inflection was unfamiliar, for he spoke in a reassuring tone. He had referred to himself in the first person! It took her a moment to recover from her surprise, and she gulped, unable to keep silent any longer.

"I am not... you were hurting yourself."

"Tassin." He spoke her name as if remembering it.

"Yes."

His eyes closed, and tears ran down the side of his head. A faint smile tugged at his lips again. His voice strengthened. "I'm not dreaming. I'm free. The cyber's lost control."

Tassin stared at him, fascinated by his smile, then crawled closer. "You will not try to hurt yourself?"

He shook his head. "The cyber's off."

Excited, she untied his hands. This was the real man who spoke, not the evil magic of the brow band, which remained black. With the excitement came a frisson of fear, for he was a stranger, and she was alone with him in the cramped confines of a cave, kilometres from anywhere. Several questions sprang to mind as she fumbled with the knotted blankets. Why had he been made a slave to the strange head band? Was he a criminal? A killer condemned to slavery for his crimes? She thrust the thought away, unwilling to entertain such frightening ideas. The gentle cast to his features belied that probability, and the tears he wept for his freedom indicated a man with feelings. The knots fell away, and she shrank from him as he pulled his hands free. Two things she knew for certain, he was incredibly strong, and lethal when he chose.

Sabre raised his head again, and struggled up onto his elbows. His eyes roved the cave, filled with a strange wonder, as if he had been blind all his life.

"I can see. I'm truly free." He raised a hand to stare at it, flexing his fingers. "I'm in control." His face twisted as he fought the emotions that threatened to overwhelm him, and muscles rippled along his jaw as he struggled with his inner turmoil. He lay back and traced the thin scars on the back

of his hand with trembling fingers.

"Those bastards..." Tears leaked down the sides of his head, and he squeezed his eyes shut, raising his hands to cover his face as he stifled a sob.

Tassin's eyes stung in sympathy. She had no idea what to say; no words of comfort sprang to mind to ease his emotional turmoil. His hands encountered the brow band, and his fingers curled around it, whitening as if he would try once more to wrench the hated thing from his head. Tassin held her breath as he struggled to remain calm. He released it and ground his hands into his eyes, turning his head away to hide the storm of emotions that tore through him.

Driven by pity and an intense need to comfort him, she reached out and stroked his hair. He shuddered, rejecting her comfort with a shrug. Tassin sat back. His rebuff did not offend her, but his weeping alarmed her. She had never seen a man cry before, and Sabre's tears were all the more incongruous because he was a warrior who killed men with such ease. How could she know what he had suffered, though?

Years of pent-up emotions and suffering clearly demanded release, and his shoulders shook with silent sobs. She had seen the gentleness in him, and now his ability to vent his sorrow and pain in tears bore it out. A hard man would have rejoiced at his freedom and had only bitterness and hatred for his torturers, but Sabre's emotions went far deeper than that. It seemed that he mourned his lost years and the suffering he had endured. For a long time, he lay with his back to her, and she waited for him to purge his grief.

Sabre rolled onto his back again and rubbed his eyes. "Have you got any water?" His voice was husky.

"Yes, of course." She handed him a water skin and he drank from it, his hands shaking. "Are you hurt? Are you in pain?" she asked.

Sabre lowered the skin, looking thoughtful. "My head, and a few bruises." He shifted and winced. "Quite a lot of bruises."

His apparent weakness reassured her, but she remembered his ability to overcome pain and continued to regard him warily. "You fell a long way. It is amazing you did not break any bones."

His eyes filled with sadness, and his expression became forlorn. He shot her an almost shy look and pulled a face. "Reinforcing. Cybers are designed to be almost indestructible."

"You remember what happened to you? The wolf's attack?"

He nodded. "Is there any food?"

Tassin handed him some dried meat, which he chewed while he studied the rock above him with a deep fascination, as if he had never seen anything so beautiful before. He seemed to have recovered from his initial shock, and his expression had become guarded, but his shadowed eyes still revealed a little of his pain.

Tassin remarked, "The brow band is broken, and now you are awake. Does that mean it can no longer control you?"

Sabre glanced at her before returning to his study of the cave roof, then he swallowed and scrutinised the meat in his hand. "I hope so, but we haven't resolved that yet. For the moment, I'm in control. It's damaged, but it still tries to take over."

"Like yesterday and this morning?"

"Yes." He frowned at the inoffensive meat. "It hurts like hell, and I don't want to be pushed into the background again."

"What is your name?"

"I don't have one." He paused. "You've called me Sabre, that'll do."

Tassin tried to hide her surprise, but the question burst from her unbidden. "Surely your parents gave you a name?"

He sighed. "I'm really tired right now." The words were a little slurred, and his eyes closed after a brief struggle. He was probably afraid that he would awaken under the cyber's control again, she guessed. He lost the battle, and she re-tied his hands, just in case.

Tassin waited for him to wake up again, her questions multiplying. He seemed too weak to be

a threat, and somehow she was sure he would not hurt her. She hoped the brow band's magic would stay off, and no more violent episodes would occur. When she lay down for the night, he was still in a deep sleep.

A grating sound and sense of movement jerked Tassin awake, and she opened her eyes to find early morning light streaming in through the cave entrance. Sabre's back was arched in a violent spasm, the brow band sparkling with erratic red lights. His hands strained at the bonds, and she cowered as he thrashed. His face was twisted with pain, his breath rasped between clenched teeth, and veins stood out on his neck. A low groan escaped him, and he muttered in an alien language.

The seizure lasted about half an hour, and during it he twisted his head from side to side as if trying to smash the band on his forehead. She shifted closer and held his head still, afraid that he would hurt himself. His eyes remained closed, and he grimaced as if locked in an immense internal struggle.

The lights on the brow band went off, and Sabre opened his eyes. He tried to sit up, discovering that he was bound again. She untied him, and he sat up and clasped his head, frowning.

"Does it hurt?" she enquired, concerned.

"Like hell."

"Perhaps there is something in your pouch for pain?"

Sabre drew out the pouch and rummaged through it, extracting a bottle. He shook some little white things into his hand and popped them into his mouth, then drank from the water skin. After that he sat unmoving for several minutes, his chin sunk onto his chest, clutching his head. When at last he looked up, his face was drawn and haggard. He had lost weight while he had been unconscious, and he looked gaunt and sick, stubble blurring his chin.

"Is it better now?" Tassin asked.

Sabre nodded and drank more water, then helped himself to some meat. After he had eaten, he crawled from the cave, swaying when he stood up outside to blink in the sunlight. He scanned the panoramic view from the ledge.

"Hell, are we still up here?"

Tassin giggled. "Did you think I could carry you down the mountain? You weigh a tonne."

He grimaced. "Twelve kilos of barrinium reinforcing, welded to my bones."

"They did terrible things to you, did they not?"

His gave a harsh bark of laughter. "That's the understatement of the century."

Sabre's husky laughter surprised and delighted her; his smile revealed perfectly even white teeth and lighted his face. It vanished as quickly as it had appeared, and he walked, staggering a little, to the frozen bodies of Torrian's men. He examined the laser burns on the corpses with a puzzled frown.

"I didn't kill these."

"No, I did. After I climbed down here and found that you were still alive, they were coming down after me, so I aimed your magic weapon at them and pushed the buttons."

Sabre glanced at her. "Clever girl. Then you dragged me into the cave and stayed there with me. For how long?"

"Four days." Tassin disliked being called 'girl', but quelled the urge to rebuke him for it. Sabre went back to the cave and lay down again, looking exhausted, and she settled beside him.

"What happened to you?" The question burst from her, driven by her curiosity.

"When?"

"On Myontwo."

"Ah." He smiled. "The cyber didn't tell you much, did it?"

"Cyber," she repeated it the way he had pronounced it. "What does that mean?"

"This is the cyber." He tapped the brow band.

"Not sabre."

"No. Cyber."

"It told me little that I could understand."

"It's not something I like to remember." He sighed, and his eyes wandered to the cave entrance as he related his tale in a flat, emotionless voice.

Chapter Eleven

"I'm a genetically enhanced clone, a copy made from the cells of a man long dead. He was a great fighter, a warrior, so when they started making cybers, they used his body. It's supposed to be perfectly proportioned and balanced, enhancing the ability to fight. I was born from an artificial womb, a machine that nurtured the embryos. I, along with my many brothers, was fitted with the cyber at one year of age. The cyber is a computer imbedded in the brow band, linked into my brain and powered by the tiny amounts of electricity present in my body."

"What is a computer?"

He glanced at her. "It's a machine that can think. It was what you spoke to initially."

Tassin nodded, longing to ask him what a machine was, but unable to bring herself to show the depths of her ignorance.

He continued, "Fortunately, I was too young to remember that operation, but I know they drilled holes in my skull and pushed wires into my brain, where they're now hooked in. I became aware of my lack of control at about the age of five, at which time we were placed in tanks filled with fluid. Machines oxygenated our blood and fed us with intravenous nutrition. It was like being back in the womb, I suppose. Same technology, at any rate.

"It was a time of sensory deprivation. I was in utter darkness, with no sense of sight, smell, taste, hearing or touch. That was when the cyber established its domination over my brain, since anyone subjected to sensory deprivation withdraws, and parts of the brain atrophy from lack of use. That didn't happen to me, though, because the cyber takes over those parts.

"I have no idea how long I was in the tank, but I remember when they took us out and counted the failures. In some, the domination had failed, and they were raving lunatics. In others, catatonia had robbed them of all function. Many would have emerged blind, although that wasn't counted as a failure, since the cyber uses scanners, not the eyes.

"I was lucky, I retained my sight and my sanity, but I lost control of my body. Out of the fifty in my batch, eight were failures. The control units were disconnected and they were allowed to grow to maturity, then put into cryogenic suspension, to be used as spare parts. It is, I suppose, one of the joys of being a clone. If a serviceable cyber is damaged, parts from his failed brothers can be used to fix him." He paused, his jaw clenching, then drew a deep breath.

"After that, I became a spectator, able only to observe what happened to me, though not very well, since I couldn't focus my eyes. Combat training started at ten, by which time my body was already well developed, due to drugs and hormones. Some drugs encouraged muscle development; others speeded up my growth rate. At fifteen, I was almost fully grown. After eight years of training, when I was eighteen, I went to the operating table to be fitted with the reinforcing. They had to wait for me to stop growing before they could do this, or it would have had disastrous results."

He frowned, and his soft voice took on a deep note of rage and hatred that made her shiver.

"They do it all in one go. They cut me open with lasers, so there's little bleeding, but they don't bother with anaesthetic. All the major bones are reinforced, and the skull and ribs. Two ribs on either side are plated with barrinium, which is welded to the plate on my sternum.

"When the cyber fought the King, two ordinary ribs were cracked; the reinforced ones prevented my ribcage from being crushed. Internal body armour, made of barrinium mesh, was implanted under the skin of my torso. I was sterilised, though not castrated, since male hormones are necessary for muscle development.

"I'm very difficult to kill. My skull can withstand two tonnes of pressure before it collapses, and my bones are almost unbreakable. If they do break, they only have to be straightened, if the plating's bent, and I can function again. Right now, for instance, I think I have several hairline fractures in my legs, ribs and arms, from the fall. That won't hamper me, though, and they'll heal in a few days.

"My only weaknesses are if I'm stabbed in the eyes or ears. I can be killed with a laser, although not as easily as a normal man. My limbs can still be dislocated or ligaments torn, and I can be knocked unconscious, although with difficulty, due to the increased viscosity of my cerebral fluid, a genetic enhancement.

"My respiratory system is my greatest weakness. I can be drowned, gassed, asphyxiated or smothered, but I can hold my breath for up to ten minutes, and that's while I'm exerting myself. In a dormant or inactive state, I can survive without air for almost twenty minutes. I'm difficult to strangle, due to a reinforced windpipe, and my jugular is protected with berrinium mesh.

"I can be poisoned, starved, bleed to death or die of thirst or disease, although I'm immune to almost every disease known to man, quite a few poisons and venoms, and several toxic gasses. If I'm not already immune to it, I have a genetically enhanced immune system that can produce antibodies or serum for just about any disease or toxin within a few hours."

His voice grew bitter. "You didn't have to worry about my hurting myself by tugging at the brow band. It's attached to the reinforcing around my skull, it can't be pulled off."

"But you made it bleed again."

"That's nothing, some damage done when I hit the rock."

"It is terrible, what they did to you."

"Yeah. Anyway, at the age of twenty, I was considered a finished product. I had to heal for several weeks after the operation, then I did a finishing course in combat to adjust to the added weight of the reinforcing. I was packed into my natty casket, and presumably sold. I don't remember the time spent in the casket, I was unconscious. My next memory was waking up in a rich old lady's house. She needed a bodyguard, and so she bought me. I was with her for five years, during which time I killed four would-be assassins. Then she died, and I was sold again, presumably to whoever brought me here. I woke up in your dungeon, and the rest you know."

Tassin studied him with a mixture of pity and sorrow. She had understood little of the technical jargon, but clearly he had suffered terribly at the hands of his creators, and she was ashamed that he had been through all of that only to end up here, almost a slave.

"The cyber said it was voice imprinted, or something, to obey me, but that does not apply to you, does it?"

Sabre shot her a mirthless smile. "No, I'm afraid not. Without the cyber to control me, like Mother Amy said, I'm as free as a bird."

"What will you do now?"

Sabre's smile faded, and his eyes grew puzzled and lost. "I'm not sure. I assume you didn't buy me, so I still belong to whoever loaned me to you. Unfortunately, that means they'll return for me some day. There's nothing I can do about that. They'll have me fixed and put back into service. My freedom is only temporary." He paused. "I'll help you to get to wherever it is you're going, then perhaps I'll be able to enjoy myself for a while."

Tassin sagged with relief. She had been afraid he would want to leave straight away. "I am glad."

He shrugged, looking away. "It's also possible that the cyber will take over again, and you'll have me anyway."

"I do not want that. I thought it was broken."

"It is, but not completely. Cybers are tough, and this one still tries to take over now and then, as you know. It's a strange battle."

Sabre closed his eyes, recalling the agony that flooded his skull when the cyber tried to take over. It still functioned; its scanner information appeared in his mind as a black field filled with different coloured lights, each indicating the presence of a particular kind of life form. He could understand it perfectly after the years as a powerless spectator. He had left a lot out of his tale, for she would not understand it. The electric shocks they had used during his training to speed up his

reflexes, the enhanced hearing, taste and touch senses, the skin treatments to withstand radiation, which was why his skin was a peculiar golden colour. Then there was his increased lung capacity, the increase of instinctive responses to certain stimuli, and dulling of others. The myriad languages he spoke, read and wrote, all piped into his brain by forced learning for the cyber's use, along with reams of programming and terabytes of information. He knew how to operate every space faring vessel ever built and all the atmospheric craft on any given planet, as well as every weapon, modern and ancient, known to man, plus a few alien ones to boot.

The cyber's information was even updated periodically by transmissions from Myon Two, relayed via its outposts. A cyber, however, was designed to operate in a modern environment, where it had the ability to interface with online security systems and override complex codes through its interface with all other AI modules. Even alien systems were not beyond its capabilities, with its powerful deciphering and translation facilities.

As supercomputers went, the tiny monster in the brow band, fondly known to cyber technicians as a control unit, was without peer. Even on this planet it still had many advantages in the form of the strength, speed, reflexes and fighting skills of its host, not to mention terabytes of war craft and stratagems. The unavailability of modern technology hampered it, however, especially once the energy weapons that had come with it ran out of power.

How could he ever explain to this naive girl what it was like to be a back seat observer to his actions, unable to do so much as yawn? He had only ever seen other people do that, but it looked interesting, and he wondered what it was like. What was it like, to yawn? Or sneeze? He had always been fully aware of his movements, and the sensations that accompanied them, which was why, when he had regained control, he had little difficulty adjusting.

Occasionally, he experienced slight tremors, which were probably due to an intermittent firing of motor neurons still under the cyber's control. Doubtless the little mechanical monster was on a full time mission to reclaim control of its host, but for now, he was in charge. He had endured far more, in the screaming silence of his skull, than he could ever tell anyone. For twenty years, he had thought the inner prison would be his tomb, and never hoped to escape it, until now. He had suffered indescribable agony and been unable even to give vent to his pain. No matter how brief his freedom was, he would make the most of it, and cram as much enjoyment into the time as he could, so he could live on the memories for the rest of his life.

Sabre sighed and opened his eyes to study the girl beside him. She was only a girl, albeit a queen, young and spoilt, but beautiful. Although brave, she was also wilful and selfish. The way she had treated the cyber told him that she scorned the lower classes, which she obviously considered him to be. If he stayed with her, he mused, his life would not be much fun, but would continue to consist mainly of hard work and servitude, which he longed to escape.

Sabre wondered if he was going to be able to get along with her, and perhaps wean her from the aristocratic scorn on which she had been raised. Otherwise, he could find little reason to remain with her. His short spell of freedom was far too precious to waste. Still, she had shown anguish at his suffering and even tried to offer sympathy, so perhaps she could be moulded into a better person yet, for she was still young enough to change.

His vision went black, and pain exploded inside his skull. He writhed, gripping the brow band as flashing lights filled his eyes and parts of his body went numb. He fought to stay in control as the blackness tried to swallow him, sucked at his mind and strived to hurl it back into the dark corner it had occupied for so many years. The cyber's hooks, deep in his brain, sent lances of agony through his cerebral cortex, striving to overload his mind with pain and send him into shock.

Tassin recoiled as Sabre convulsed and clutched the brow band. Flashing red lights filled it, more than before, and brighter. She resisted the urge to try to pry his hands from it, knowing how he might react. Now that she knew he could not harm himself, she did not worry too much when blood oozed from around the struts once more. She longed to help him, for he seemed to be in a great deal

of pain. The battle lasted only about fifteen minutes this time, and she relaxed when the lights went off and he opened his eyes.

"That was a bad one." He looked gaunt, but that might have been due more to the deprivation he had suffered. Digging in his pouch, he swallowed more of the white things, then sagged back on the blankets.

"Will it stop?"

"I hope so. It'll accept defeat, or take over again. Either way, it will stop, I suppose."

She leant forward to wipe away the fresh blood with a cloth. "I hope you win."

He smiled. "Thanks."

"Is there anything I can do to help, when it happens?"

He shook his head and winced. "No, stay away from me."

Sabre closed his eyes, lines of fatigue bracketing his mouth, his pallor unhealthy. A massive bruise covered his forehead, and red flesh ringed the brow band's struts. The rest of him must be just as badly bruised, she reflected. After a few minutes, she realised that he had fallen asleep again, exhausted by his battle with the cyber. Shifting away a little, she pulled together all the packs and took stock of the remaining dried rations. With two of them eating now, there was only enough food left for another two days, maybe. They would have to leave soon, but Sabre was still too weak.

That night, the temperature dropped, and Tassin woke shivering. She knew she would be unable to go back to sleep, and in desperation she crawled over to Sabre. He woke as soon as she moved, his head jerking up.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"I am freezing," she said, somewhat peevisly. She had to grit her teeth to stop their chattering.

"Uh." Sabre's head thudded back. "You want some more blankets?"

"You are warm."

He chuckled. "Oh yeah, the cyber was your heater, wasn't it?"

"I do not think I can warm up on my own, and I did give you most of the blankets because you were sick."

Sabre pondered the situation. The unexpected and unwelcome turn of events disconcerted him. Palpable waves of indignant expectation emanated from her slight form, and clearly she expected him to keep her warm as the cyber had done. He was reluctant to enter into the situation, however; it was just too strange. Apart from the night when she had slept with the cyber for warmth, and he had dimly sensed her closeness, he had never been in contact with another person. The prospect of being inundated with all the sensations he had so long been denied held a bittersweet dread.

"So take some blankets, there's lots," he suggested.

The level of tension rose as she drew a hissing breath. "I said I will not be able to warm up on my own."

He played his trump. "If I have another seizure, you could get hurt."

The tense silence grew more pregnant, and he was sure he could hear the thudding of their hearts. Her voice dripped with accusation. "Do you want me to freeze?"

"No, I don't want you to freeze, damn it," he said, annoyed by her persistence.

"So what is the problem?"

Sabre sighed and lifted the blankets so she could crawl in, which she did with alacrity. He grunted and shivered as her icy hands found their way to his skin, fighting the urge to push her away and avoid the alien contact that made him so uncomfortable. The strange sensations disturbed him, but he found he was able to ignore her presence more easily than he had expected.

"Lie still, and don't wriggle," he said.

Tassin sighed as his warmth soaked into her, defrosting her extremities. He remained tense, and prevented her from getting closer, but she soon fell asleep.

Sabre stared into the darkness and listened to her soft breathing, remembering the time when the old lady had owned him. She had taken him everywhere, as her bodyguard, even into the women's recreation centre, where women stripped nude and indulged in hot spas and mud treatments. A cyber was considered to be a machine, so he had been made to stand guard over his owner while naked women relaxed all around him. Some had found it amusing to poke fun at him, giggling with their friends when he had been unmoved by their taunts.

Their comments had been graphic and derogatory of men, giving him an insight into the feelings of women that few men shared. Fortunately, cybers did not allow anyone, apart from their owners or those with command privilege, to touch them, and the women had known better than to try. He drifted into a light sleep, but was jerked awake every time Tassin shifted or sighed, which increased his exhaustion to the point where, after several hours, her movements no longer disturbed him.

Sabre woke at dawn, to find that Tassin had made herself more comfortable during the night. She had draped an arm across his chest, pillowed her cheek on his shoulder and thrown a leg over his hips. His eyes sprang open, and he quelled the reflex that almost made him leap up in alarm. His training and conditioning urged distance around him, while a lifetime of sleeping alone, under a computer's control, filled him with a longing for forbidden intimacy. Hoping not to wake her, he eased her leg off, then her arm. She replaced them, forcing him to extricate himself again, and she muttered and squirmed when he shifted away. Just when he thought he would escape without rousing her, she opened her eyes.

"Where are you going?"

Sabre's brows rose at her possessive tone. Did she think he was her personal foot warmer?

"Out."

"Why?"

"Because I want to, okay, Your Majesty?"

Clearly startled by his testy tone, she sat up, rubbing her eyes. "It is cold outside. Are you feeling better?"

"Yeah, I feel fine," he muttered, crawling out of the cave. She joined him moments later, squinting in the sunlight while she finger-combed her glossy hair, then plaited it. He looked away when she glanced at him, and gazed at the vista. In the distance, the dry brown expanse of the Badlands spread out before them, vanishing over the horizon. Only blackened patches of melted sand relieved it. This was a post-holocaust world, he realised, and wondered which one.

"What's the name of this world?"

Tassin looked startled. "Earth, of course."

Sabre smiled. It was amazing how every world that humans colonised became known to them as Earth. "It must have another name?"

"Oh, yes, Omega Five."

Nodding, he accessed the cyber's information stored in his brain. Omega Five: solar system HL714. A G-class planet, colonised two thousand years ago. Nuclear war, five hundred and fourteen years ago. Indigenous life mostly wiped out and replaced by Terran stock at the time of colonisation, then further decimated by the holocaust. The survivors had been left to fend for themselves, and pay for their mistake. The world was classified as restricted, off-limits to spacers. Someone kept an eye on Omega Five, however, and particularly on Queen Tassin Alrade of Arlin. Whoever it was, he evidently had enough money to buy a cyber, but his motivation remained a mystery.

"We'll climb down today," he said.

"Really?" Tassin raised her chin in a regal gesture.

Sabre sighed. "With your permission, of course, Your Majesty." He performed a mocking bow, and she glared.

"Do not mock me."

"Then don't act high and mighty."

Sabre returned her glare, and she looked away, making him wonder at the tension that had

sprung up between them. He knew why he was on edge and snappish, but she had no reason to be testy, as far as he could ascertain. Tassin shivered as she contemplated the drop before them, and he realised that she was afraid.

"Why today?" she asked.

He tried to soften his tone, but the words still sounded harsh. "We're running out of food, and besides, I'm not acting as your foot warmer for another night."

Tassin scowled and stomped off to the cave. When he followed, intending to apologise, he found her sulking, instead of packing the bags. Making a sound of disgust, he packed them, finding them much lighter now that most of the supplies had been consumed. When he finished, he tossed them out into the snow and turned to the Queen. She was no more than sixteen, he guessed, a mere frightened child.

"It'll be okay, Tassin. It's probably not as bad as the first cliff, and you managed that alone. This time I'm with you. I won't let you fall."

"What if you have a seizure and fall?"

He shrugged. "I'll bounce. Anyway, I don't think the cyber will attack me on the cliff. It's counterproductive, and would endanger you, which goes against its programming. Besides, we can't stay here forever; you'll have to do it sometime."

Tassin crawled out of the cave, her expression determined. He followed, picked up the bags and tied them to his harness, then slung them over his shoulders as the cyber had done. Waves of weakness washed over him, warning him that his strength had not returned, and he still needed days of rest before he was restored to health. A flashing amber light deep in his brain told him that his bio-status was dangerously low, but he was unable to access the information to find out just how bad it was. It was not red, at least, and he was stronger than he had been the day before. The light was virtual, part of the cyber's interface programmes, to which it was currently blocking his access, apparently. Tassin stood close to the cliff edge, trying to peer over it. He gripped her arm and pulled her away.

"Don't look down."

"I want to see!"

He shook his head. "I'll look; I have no reaction to heights."

Leaning out as far as he could, Sabre studied the cliff face. A few metres to the right, a ledge ran down it, quite wide, but steep. He beckoned to her and walked along the edge of the cliff, his feet dislodging showers of snow that cascaded to the ledge far below.

"It's easy, come on."

Tassin followed him to the path, where he instructed her to hold onto the packs and look at the rock face. Loose chips of stone made the path treacherous, and in some places he had to avoid patches of ice. He kept a hold on the cliff face, which was fortunate, for twice Tassin slipped, only her grip on him saving her from going over the edge. Sabre moved cautiously, testing each step before putting weight on it, and the sun was overhead by the time they were halfway down. His stomach rumbled, but the ledge was too narrow to permit them to stop and rest. His vision went black, and he froze. Surely the cyber was not going to attack him now?

"Tassin, let go of the packs and hold onto the rocks."

"Why?"

"Just do it, now!"

The blackness persisted, and he waited for the pain and numbness. Instead, a blue scanner image of the cliff face appeared within his mind, some areas accompanied by measurements. A protruding rock ahead, which he had been about to use as a handhold, was outlined in red. He realised that the red-marked area was unstable, and, had he used it as a handhold, might have crumbled away, sending them to their deaths. Well, Tassin, at least. The cyber's ground-penetrating scanners had detected it, and it was warning him. After a few seconds, the image faded, leaving only a dull ache behind his eyes.

"Okay, hold on to me again," he said.

They completed the descent without mishap, and once safely on the next ledge he explained what had happened.

"So it is helping us?" she asked.

He nodded. "You, to be exact."

"Does that mean it is not going to keep trying to take over?"

"I don't know."

Blinding agony shot through his skull, and he fell to his knees, clutching the brow band. The battle for supremacy was on in earnest this time. Whirling lights flashed in his eyes in a dizzying vortex of colour, and blackness dragged at him as numbness crept into his limbs. He cried out, vaguely sensing the cold crispness of snow against his cheek.

Nebulous impressions flitted through his mind, a mixture of scanner images, flashbacks of his training, and a vision of Tassin plunging to her death, drawn in computer graphics. He struggled to push away the dark presence that tried to engulf him in its black folds and relegate him to the spectator seat he had occupied for so long. He fought it like a drowning man fights the cold water that drags him down, knowing that if he lost, he would never have another chance. His muscles went into spasms and his hands pulled at the brow band until it cut into his fingers.

The images and shafts of agony vanished, and he opened his eyes. He lay in the snow, and Tassin knelt a short distance away, watching him with intense concern. He sat up, holding his pounding head, weak and shaky in the aftermath of the intense pain. What little strength he had regained had drained away without a trace, and nausea churned his stomach. Stabs of dull fire exploded behind his eyes, and he dug in his pouch for more painkillers. When they took effect, he raised his head and smiled wearily.

"Does that answer your question?"

She nodded.

"It was actually trying to communicate with me that time," he said. "It thinks I'm not capable of looking after you."

"Why?"

"Because it thinks it's better than me."

"Is it?"

"No." A flash of bitterness shot through him at her innocent question, and he chased away the sense of inferiority with anger. She bit her lip when he frowned at her, then he climbed to his feet and went to the cliff edge, relieved to find an easy descent. A broad ledge meandered down, wide enough to walk on safely. He started down it, and she followed.

The desert's pale brown expanse drew closer as they descended, and a ribbon of road appeared beyond a broad strip of scrubby, rolling hills that bordered the mountain range. Sabre studied the desert, which stretched away to a dust-hazed horizon, utterly flat, and devoid of any features except the distant glassy patches.

They reached the foothills at dusk, and Sabre chose a campsite in a clump of trees. He dumped the bags and went in search of firewood, returning with two rabbits as well. The prospect of fresh meat delighted Tassin, but her smile faded when he held the carcasses out to her.

"Here, you clean them while I light the fire."

"No!" She shrank away. "That is your job!"

He shook the rabbits at her, making her scramble away from the splatter of blood. "Up until now, everything's been my job. But I'm not a mindless cyber anymore, so now it's your job."

"I will not!" She stood up, putting on her most regal air. "Queens do not soil their hands with rabbit offal!"

Sabre smiled. "It's time you did your share of the chores. If you want to eat, you clean them."

"You have to eat too!"

"Then I'll clean one, and you can go hungry."

She spluttered with rage. "How dare you? You have no respect! After all I did for you when

you were sick. I could have left you there to die!"

His eyes narrowed. "Yes, I suppose you could have. But you need me to help you escape from Torrian, don't you? Rest assured, if you were as sick now as I was then, I wouldn't ask you to help. I've agreed to help you escape of my own free will, which I actually have now, something you take for granted. I didn't have to go hunting, nor do I have to light the fire. I have a choice now." His voice softened. "All I'm asking is for you to help a little bit."

"I am a queen, not some kitchen maid to filthy my hands with muck!"

His brows drew together, but his voice remained soft. "You're a spoilt little cow, that's what you are. I hope I don't regret offering to help you."

"You are a commoner. You will do it; that is an order!"

The brow band filled with sparkling red lights, and Sabre staggered back, raising a hand to his head. The diagonal line of seven lights flashed in unison three times, then the band went black again. He lowered his hand, patently furious. Flinging the rabbits at her feet, he marched off into the gathering gloom.

Tassin huddled on a rock, staring after him with confusion and regret. She had not meant to hurt him. She had not known her words would spark a reaction from the cyber. His unexpected demand had surprised and dismayed her. No one had ever tried to make her do menial chores before. She longed to go after him and apologise, but pride kept her glued to the rock while stubbornness stilled her tongue. Her eyes flinched from the rabbits' corpses, and she could not bring herself to touch them.

Sabre found a rock and sat in the gloom, contemplating this fresh development. So, the cyber could still inflict pain, even when it was not trying to take over. It remained active, and had reacted to her words. Just as it had warned him of the flawed rock, now it warned him not to disobey. This time, her words had only triggered a minor bout, but what would happen in a more serious situation? Did this mean he was tied to this irritating young girl? What would the cyber do if he tried to leave her? He touched the band of crystals that circled his forehead. If only there was a way to get the damn thing off.

The crack weakened its structure, but a fall of hundreds of metres had caused that, so there was no way he could break it completely. This selfish girl had the power to hurt him, perhaps even to force him to obey her, and he resented that. After twenty years of being a captive in his mind, he was still not entirely free.

What he had was close to freedom, closer than any cyber host had come to before, but it was not complete. She could trigger a determined takeover attempt on the part of the cyber, one he might not be able to overcome. The thought chilled him, and his fear of the sucking darkness that had imprisoned him for so long made him cautious, but at the same time, angry and bitter.

Worried that Tassin might be frightened, alone in the dark, he made his way back to the campsite. She had lighted the fire in his absence, and huddled close to it. When she looked up, her eyes were filled with shame, but also pride.

"I lighted the fire."

Sabre glared at her. "Don't ever order me to do anything again, got it? Never."

She nodded. "All right."

Sabre cleaned the rabbits and handed her one affixed to a spit. She watched him as she held her spit, and the meat turned brown. He had shaved off the stubble, and looked better for it. A white line ran through his hair from the centre of his forehead, and she guessed that it was where they had cut open his scalp to attach the reinforcing. The things that had been done to him were horrifying, and yet he seemed quite normal.

Tassin did not understand some of what he had told her, like how they could make a copy of a

dead man, a clone, as he called it. That meant there were hundreds, maybe thousands more just like him. She had seen identical twins before, but it was hard to imagine so many who looked exactly alike. Also, machines that nurtured babies, like a womb? Unbelievable. How must he feel, knowing he had been created as a tool? Her rabbit burnt on one side, so distracted was she by her thoughts. She turned it again, glancing at Sabre. He looked preoccupied, and she wondered what he was thinking.

Chapter Twelve

At dawn, they started the long walk to Olgara, heading for the distant road that ran along the edge of the Badlands. Tassin was certain she was safer now, for surely Torrian would not dare to send soldiers into a foreign kingdom? She missed her home, and the servants who had made her life so pleasant. All she had now was one strange warrior, whose manners had not improved since he had become himself. If anything, they were worse. Now he used her title mockingly, and expected her to help with revolting, dirty tasks. At least he had not asked her to carry some of the baggage.

As they descended, the climate warmed, and Sabre removed his wool coat, revealing a chest mottled with yellowish bruises. The bruise on his forehead had also faded, and the skin around cyber band's struts was healing. They walked towards the road, where carts and wagons raised clouds of dust, and Tassin hoped they would be able to get a ride on one. She still had some money left from Sabre's fights, and wondered if he would fight for money again when it ran out.

Now she could no longer order him around, which complicated matters. She did not want to walk all the way to Olgara, already her feet throbbed and her legs ached. Sabre strode ahead, apparently tireless, and she glared at his back. She had removed her woollen coat, but by the time they reached the road, sweat trickled down her face and her head hurt. Deciding that she could not go another step, she sat down on a convenient rock.

"Sabre!"

He stopped and looked around, then strolled back to her. Although he looked a little drawn, he showed no other signs of fatigue, and his smile was cheerful. "Tired?"

She nodded. "My feet hurt."

"Ah, would you like me to wrap them again for you?"

"No. I want to wait for a wagon."

Sabre glanced up and down the deserted road. "You may have a long wait, it seems like rush hour is over."

"Then we will camp here tonight."

He shook his head. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?"

"We have no water. You drank the last of it."

"Oh." She frowned at him.

"It looks like there's a stream a bit further along the road."

Tassin spotted a line of verdure in the distance. "That is far! Could you not just go and get some?"

A short, pregnant silence fell. Sabre sighed. "Come on, it's not all that far. Then we can camp under the trees instead of out in the open, and we can wash. I don't know about you, but I need a bath, and you could do with one too, I think."

She resented his common sense. "If I pass out from exhaustion, you will have to carry me."

"No, I'll just leave you there until you wake up." She gasped, and he chuckled. "Just kidding. Come on, you won't pass out, you're a warrior queen, remember?"

Sabre's mocking smile spurred Tassin to rise to her feet and trudge after him, arriving at the stream as limp as a cooked nerril. Flopping down on the grass, she closed her eyes with a sigh. When she opened them, several minutes later, Sabre had vanished. She almost panicked, opening her mouth to bellow his name, then got a grip on herself and went in search of him instead.

Moving upstream, she came across a grotto that sheltered a waterfall, below which a deep pool of crystal clear water filled a rocky bowl. Sabre lazed in it, paddling idly. She climbed down to the mossy rocks beneath the rainbow-shot mist and sat down to watch him. He eyed her. His harness lay on the rocks beside her, and she noticed that most of its straps and hooks were empty. Soon he would need a sword. She looked up as he moved towards the bank.

"I'd like to get out now, if you don't mind."

"I am not stopping you."

His brows rose. "I'm not the local entertainment for pubescent girls, so scram."

Tassin smiled. "What will you do if I do not?"

"Dunk you."

"But you will have to come out to do that."

"If I must."

Tassin giggled, then retreated when he advanced, but only far enough to stay out of his reach.

He said, "You might think you're safe, but I promise you, I'll dunk you if you don't scarp now."

Tassin pulled a face and left him to dress, returning to the campsite. A few minutes later he appeared, clad in damp trousers and carrying a wet harness. He looked refreshed, the lines of fatigue washed from his face with the grime and dried sweat, and the pale operation scars stood out on his tanned skin.

He sat down nearby. "Your turn."

"That water is too cold. When we get to Olgara, I will have a hot bath at an inn."

"You stink."

"I do not!"

"It's not that cold. Once you're in, it's nice."

"You do not feel the cold."

Sabre regarded her impassively, reminding her of the cyber's blank stare, then seized her wrist and pulled her to her feet. Tassin gasped and tried to get free.

"Let me go!"

"No, Your Majesty, you're going to have a wash. You'll feel better for it, otherwise you'll be complaining all day tomorrow about how tired you are, and I'll have to put up with the smell as well as the whining."

"Unhand me at once!"

Sabre dragged her towards the pool, her struggles in no way slowing him down, but he stopped when she grabbed a sapling and hung on with all her might. He turned back, his expression telling her that he could easily have yanked her free, but had no wish to hurt her. Instead he pried her fingers loose, adroitly avoiding the kicks she aimed at his shins.

"Sabre, stop it!"

"What are you so worried about? Don't you primitive people ever bath? Or is it a once a year thing?"

"I bathe every day, but not in a freezing mountain stream!"

Sabre continued to pull her along, stopping to unglue her from various trees. When they drew close to the grotto, Tassin clutched a tree and sat down. Sabre turned and scooped her up. She gasped in outrage at this manhandling, struggled and cursed him foully in several languages.

"If you don't stop that, I might drop you," he commented.

"Put me down! That is an -"

"Don't!" He jerked to a halt. "Don't say it, or I swear I'll drown you."

Tassin huffed, furious at his unforgivable behaviour, and embarrassed by his proximity. Changing her tactics, she glanced at him through her lashes.

"Are you going to undress me as well?"

He smiled and walked on. "If you like."

"No!" She blushed, furious that her attempt to embarrass him had backfired.

"Then I'll just chuck you in with your clothes on."

"No! I will wash!"

Sabre nodded, and she studied him covertly, struck afresh by the placid cast of his features. He lacked the hard, aggressive aspect that most men had, possessing gentle eyes and a sensitive mouth. Putting her down beside the pool, he performed a mocking bow and left.

When Tassin returned to the campsite, Sabre was not there, but he soon returned, carrying a wild pig. A hole burnt through its head testified to his marksmanship, so the loss of the cyber had not detracted from his skills, it seemed. The pig was already gutted, and he set it on a spit over the fire to roast, noticing her interest.

"Don't worry; I'm just as good at what I do as the cyber. When they train cybers to fight and shoot, they're actually training the host, as we're called, and all the information is stored in my brain, not the cyber's memory."

"What was it like, being a cyber?"

He frowned at the pig. "Horrible. Cybers have a set of instructions on how to care for the host body, and one of the important ones is to keep it clean. That's all well and good, but washing in a freezing horse trough in winter is not exactly fun. When the cyber told you it controlled pain, it meant it didn't allow me to react to it, not that I didn't feel it. When I stepped out of that casket, I was in agony. If it hadn't been for the cyber, I would've been useless for a week. And of course, when I was wounded, that was just as bad."

He prodded the fire. "Cybers also don't care what they eat, but they know the host requires food and water. When I was guarding that dear old lady, she fed me animal food, because it was cheap and nutritious, but it didn't taste very nice. On a number of occasions, the cyber made me do things that caused extreme pain, and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it. The cyber, of course, doesn't really feel pain, although it knows when the host's being damaged."

Tassin had seen miscreants flogged and soldiers die in battle, but those agonies had been brief, deserved or voluntary. To be unable even to vent one's pain was something she found hard to imagine. Once she had seen a man who had been paralysed in battle, unable to move his arms or legs. Her father had given him a pension, and his wife had nursed him until he died, but the frustration and rage in his eyes had given her an idea of what it must be like to be unable to move. To have one's body controlled by another, however, had to be the ultimate degradation and misery.

"Those who did this to you must be monsters. They deserve to be punished as you were."

Sabre smiled. "A nice thought."

His calmness spoke volumes of pent-up anger, and she swallowed more hot words that might goad unwanted reactions. Instead she asked, "The cyber said that it did not need sleep, but surely you did?"

"Yes, it allowed me to sleep; that was no problem. It just woke me very quickly when it needed me to do something. It's a bit like having a bucket of ice shoved down your britches, and believe me, you wake up bloody fast. You see, the cyber can't control the host body on its own, otherwise they'd have removed my brain. It needs the brain to control the body, because that's far too complicated for it. It also needs the brain to store its memories. The cyber used my brain for its purposes, and I had no say in the matter."

Tassin shuddered. "It must have been terrible, especially when you were a child."

"Until they put me in the tank, I had some control. The cyber also did, so it was kind of a fifty-fifty relationship. When the cyber wasn't using me, I could do things on my own, but in the tank you lose contact with your body, and once it's gone, you never get it back."

"What do people use cybers for?"

Sabre shrugged. "Lots of things. Bodyguards are probably the most common occupation, but some very rich people have cyber armies. They're expensive, so that's rare. A lot of governments use cybers as police, since they're incorruptible and reliable, and they don't need to be paid or receive pensions. There are people who hire out cybers, and they make a fortune, because when a cyber's inactive he can be stored in his casket for years, costing nothing in upkeep."

"Quite often they're hired as hunters, taken to alien planets and sent after monstrous prey. The sportsmen watch from floaters. Of course, they're insured, in case a host is killed." His grim parody of a smile chilled her. "If they retrieve the cyber, they get a refund, because barrinium is expensive. They cremate the body to reclaim it."

"Some people use them for fighting sports, but usually against dangerous animals or aliens. No

man can beat a cyber, and two cybers are too evenly matched, the fight would go on until they both died of exhaustion. They're no good as companions, as you know, they don't have much in the way of conversational skills, and they're banned from competing in any sports against ordinary men, like foot racing or weight lifting."

"Has anyone ever tried to disconnect a cyber?"

Sabre turned the pig, watching the juices drip into the fire, spluttering and hissing on the coals. "I overheard a story about a woman who tried. It seems her cyber saved her from something terrible, at great cost to himself, and the stupid woman fell in love with him or something. Anyway, she took him to Myon Two and insisted that they remove the control unit, because she wanted to reward him with his freedom. They removed it, and he was left a vegetable, of course."

"But that's because it causes brain damage. What about if they just cut those struts, where they go into your head?"

He smiled. "You can't cut barrinium. There's something about its molecular structure that doesn't allow it. It can be melted, so everything is moulded and welded. When they put the barrinium cap on my head, they welded it to the cyber band. Barrinium joins with other materials easily, and in a process that doesn't involve heat, only tiny amounts of electricity. But it doesn't part company easily at all, so it's pretty well impossible to cut the struts. The entire cap has to be removed, including the wires, which are hooked deep into the brain, and that's what causes the brain damage."

"But if it is so easy to melt, surely they could melt the struts and take it off that way?"

"If they do that, the heat of the melting cooks the brain. To join or mould it, only a small amount of electricity is required to soften it, but to melt through it would need a lot more power, and make it too hot. Barrinium is a superconductor, as well as being extremely light, tough and impervious to metal fatigue, that's why they use it on cybers."

"The reason my brain didn't freeze when I was lying in the snow is because the conductivity works both ways, so my body heat prevented the cold from penetrating. It must have cooled my brain a bit, I expect, which would have helped to prevent swelling after the impact, and probably saved me from brain damage. The superconductivity only really becomes a problem when heat is involved, or if the control unit's subjected to such intense cold that it overwhelms my body's warmth."

Tassin shook her head, staring into the fire. "Was it not strange for you, being with all those other men who all looked exactly the same as you?"

Sabre cast her an amused glance. "Actually, I wasn't aware that I looked like them. I knew they all looked the same, but I didn't bump into a mirror until after I left Myon Two, and even then, the image was blurred. It's funny how the mind refuses to accept the obvious. I was convinced that I didn't look like all the rest. Even when I was old enough to realise that I must look like them, I never got a clear view of them either. It's quite a novelty, being able to see properly."

Tassin's mouth watered at the savoury aroma emanating from the pig. "So now you are unique. You must be the only cyber in the world who has taken back control of his body."

His eyes glowed silver as he watched the flames. "In the universe. The cyber wasn't joking, that night when it pointed to the stars. That's where Myon Two is. It's another planet. Your friend, who loaned me to you, must be a space traveller. Not only the gods live in the stars, people do too."

He paused, sighing. "It was certainly a freak accident that caused this; one that has probably never happened before, and may never happen again. That fall from the cliff was just far enough to crack the crystals in the brow band, and the rock was in just the right place. It was pure luck. If I'd hit a little harder, it might have killed me, less hard, and it wouldn't have broken the control unit. Somehow that crack is in just the right place to interfere with the cyber's control circuit."

Tassin pondered his creation in a machine. "Why did they do this to you? If they have these fancy machines that can nurture a baby, why can they not build a machine to fight too?"

"They've tried. They've built great big robots that can do all sorts of things, and certainly kill people." He noticed her confused look and explained, "A robot is an intelligent machine, a sort of creature made of metal. Anyway, these robots are okay against ordinary people, and they use them

for things like crowd control, fighting regular troops, or usually, other robots. But when they come up against a trained fighter they're useless, they simply don't have the speed or agility. And no matter how hard they try, they can't make them invulnerable. Even if they could, what good would that do, if they can't defeat their opponent?

"So they created the cyber, a machine-controlled man, the best of both worlds. We're known as cyborgs. They had to control us with a computer, because a cyber with the freedom to make choices would be extremely dangerous. The very fact that he's practically invincible is enough to make most men drunk with power."

"Are you afraid that will happen to you?"

Sabre shot her a look that made her wish she had not asked. "No."

Drawing the knife from his belt, he carved a slice of meat from the pig and handed it to her. "I think I have enough self-control not to take advantage of my situation."

The following morning, Tassin refused to walk another step, insisting that she would wait for the first wagon. Sabre shrugged and smiled, then went and squatted on a rock in the stream, trying half-heartedly to catch fish with his hands. Tassin became so engrossed in his antics that she almost did not hear the first wagon rolling by. When at last she did, she dashed out onto the road and tried to flag it down. The driver warned her off with his whip, refusing to stop, even when she offered money.

His only comment was, "Get lost!"

Tassin went back to the stream, and Sabre smiled at her as she approached, his fishing momentarily forgotten. "No luck?"

She glowered at him. "The man was a beast. I am glad he did not stop."

"Ah, of course." He nodded, glancing back at the stream, where silver shadows slid through the water.

"You could stop a wagon better than I."

Sabre chuckled, bending to gaze into the water, his hands poised. "Oh, sure, you want me to rush out there and hold them up at gun point? Maybe blow them away and steal the wagon?"

She remembered the wagoner's arrogant dismissal of her plea. "Would that be so difficult? You do not have to kill them."

He laughed, straightening to look up at her. "It's bad enough that you're on the run from the lecherous King Torrian, now you want to be an outlaw in this land too?"

Tassin raised her chin, glaring down her nose at him. "I am a queen. Once they know that, they will be glad to help."

Sabre shook his head and hopped onto another rock. "Do you really think they're going to believe you? You don't look like a queen, more like a vagabond, if you ask me."

"I did not ask you. I can pay them; that should be good enough."

"And what do we live on when we get to Olgara? You want to stay at an inn, and that costs money."

"You expect me to walk all the way to Olgara?" she demanded.

"It's not that far. And maybe if we're walking beside the road, someone will take pity on us and stop."

Tassin jumped up as a rumble of wheels and hooves announced a passing coach. Dashing out onto the road, she almost succeeded in getting run down by a team of blowing, sweating horses. She was left standing in the dust, shouting insults at the driver, who swore back with equal venom. Returning to the stream, she glared at Sabre, who was trying to tickle another fish.

"Are you not going to do anything?"

He swore as the fish darted away. "You really want me to stop a cart by force?"

"Yes!"

He looked up at her and sighed, flicking water from his fingers. "All right, Your Majesty. But don't blame me if we have to leave this country too, because we're wanted for hijacking."

"How can they cry foul if I pay them?"

Sabre turned back to the stream. "You go and try to stop them with your feminine charms. If that fails, call me."

Tassin stomped back to the road, where a wagon was visible in the distance, pair of trotting horses pulling it. The wagon kept going when she waved. As it passed her, she shouted her offer of money to the driver, who ignored her. She stamped her foot.

"Sabre!"

The wagon was moving away when Sabre sauntered onto the road, carrying the pack. She frowned at his tardiness, and he shot her an exasperated look. Dropping the pack at her feet, he said, "Bring this."

Sabre sprinted after the wagon before she could argue, knowing she would. Drawing alongside, he gripped the edge of the driver's seat and leapt aboard, settled beside the startled driver and turned to the gaping man with a smile.

"Excuse me, but my companion is a lady of noble blood, who needs to travel to Olgara. She finds walking something of a trial, since her feet are rather soft. I wonder if you would be so kind as to stop and give her a lift?"

The driver hesitated, glancing at a rusty sword stuck behind the seat, then hauled on the reins. The cart horses slowed, digging in their heels to halt the wagon's momentum while the driver leant on the brake lever. Sabre glanced back at Tassin, who marched towards them carrying the pack, her expression thunderous. He turned back to the driver.

"You'll have to excuse her manners, she's very rude. But I thank you for your generosity."

The driver, a middle-aged man with black hair, green eyes, a pock-marked face and jutting ears, nodded. The invasion of his wagon seemed to have rendered him speechless, especially since, Sabre guessed, the culprit appeared to be unarmed, yet displayed the kind of confidence only a warrior would have.

Tassin reached the wagon, and Sabre helped her up beside him, whereupon she said, "You took your time stopping him."

"Perhaps you would have liked me to slit his throat, then I could have stopped the wagon quicker?"

She looked at the open-mouthed driver. "No, that was not necessary."

The driver stared at them, then, seeing that the argument was over, he whipped up the horses. They threw their weight against the collars, and the wagon rolled forward. Gradually it gained speed, until the horses moved at a trot once more.

"You see why wagoners aren't keen to stop for hitch-hikers? It's hard for the horses to start the load again," Sabre commented.

"What are hitch-hikers?"

"People who stand at the side of the road with their thumbs out."

"Their thumbs?"

"Never mind."

The driver perked up when Sabre told him they would pay for the ride, and became quite friendly, chatting about his family while they rattled towards Olgara. The wagon was laden with fresh produce, mostly cabbages, covered by a tarpaulin. Its progress was slow, and they stopped beside another stream for the night. Sabre went hunting while the driver hauled water from the stream to throw over his vegetables, and the horses grazed nearby.

When Sabre returned with another pig, larger than the previous one, the driver had freshened his vegetables, groomed his horses, lighted a fire, boiled water for tea and laid out the bedding ready for the night. Tassin had washed her face in the stream, and lounged beside the wagon, rubbing her feet. The driver's name was Umgar, and he turned out to be a friendly fellow.

Again they feasted on pork, and Umgar contributed some boiled vegetables, which were much appreciated. They spent the night under the wagon, and Sabre slept strategically between Umgar and

the girl, just in case the wagoner turned out to be less innocent than he seemed.

Chapter Thirteen

At noon the following day, they came within sight of Olgara. Unlike the villages that dotted Arlin's verdant countryside, Olgara was a sprawling metropolis of low, white-washed stone buildings. It straddled a river that vanished into the badlands, and its limited farmland ran along the foothills of the Barrier Mountains. Few crops would grow in its poor soil, so the farmland consisted mostly of grazing for goats, cattle and donkeys. The King's abode dominated the city, a creamy marble palace with silver domes topped by graceful minarets. Tassin gazed at it, longing to go there and be welcomed into its cool luxury.

Sabre eyed her. "I hope you're not planning on going up there and knocking on the door."

"Not looking like a penniless beggar, no. I must get clothes more fitting to my station."

"And since you are penniless, just how are you going to buy more clothes?"

"You will have to fight again, so we can make money by betting."

Sabre gave a bark of laughter. "Oh, I will, will I? Maybe I don't fancy the idea."

"Sabre, you are sworn to serve and protect me."

"No I'm not."

She frowned. Now that he was free, he was no longer her servant. "I saved your life!"

"You're the reason I nearly got killed."

Umgar watched them with obvious amusement, his eyes shining. Tassin glowered at Sabre, unable to refute this. "Just how do you propose to make money so we can eat, then?"

He smiled at her growing ire. "I can probably get a job to support you, but not to buy fancy clothes so you can go and wriggle your butt to impress the King."

Tassin gasped and tried to slap him, but he caught her wrist and shook his head. "That may work wonders with the fops at court who tread on your toes, but it doesn't work so well with me."

"You are insufferable! You are a rude, ignorant, disloyal, disrespectful bully!"

Sabre released her. "You tried to hit me, remember? Perhaps you'd like me to leave?"

"Yes!"

His brows rose, and he turned away as if to jump down from the wagon.

"No!" Tassin grabbed his arm, and he turned back to her.

"Well, make up your mind."

She refused to meet his eyes. "I cannot manage on my own."

Sabre sat down again, studying her. "You've never heard of 'please' or 'thank you', never mind 'sorry', have you?"

Tassin raised her chin, and he sighed. Obviously she had not. He glanced at Umgar, who clearly enjoyed their argument, and decided that they should be charging him for the entertainment.

When they arrived in Olgara's crowded, dusty streets, Sabre helped the sulking Queen dismount, and she paid Umgar a few coppers for his trouble. The wagoner grinned and wished them luck, then chivvied the tired horses on the last stretch of their journey to the market. As Tassin turned away, a burly man shoved her aside in his hurry to move past.

She shouted, "Watch where you are going, lout!"

The man turned and spat at her feet. "Dirty foreigner."

Tassin gasped and lunged at him, her fist swinging for his chin. Startled, Sabre leapt after her, caught her just before the blow landed and yanked her back with enough force to make her teeth snick together. The man snatched a wicked-looking dagger from his belt, but backed away. Sabre pinioned Tassin's flailing fists and scowled at the Olgaran, who turned and vanished into the crowd. Swinging the furious Queen around, Sabre shook her until her teeth rattled.

"What the hell are you trying to do, get yourself killed?"

"He pushed me! And then he insulted me!"

"So you were just going to beat him up?"

"I am a warrior queen!"

"Oh, right!" He snorted. "Dammit, you're a half pint little girl with the brains of a flea, who couldn't pull the skin off a banana!"

Tassin kicked him in the shin. "Let go of me, you brute!"

Sabre hopped and cursed, releasing her. She flashed him a withering look, then strode away down the street. Sabre followed, taking in Olgara's ambience while keeping an eye on her, lest she attack some other lout who gave offence.

Jostling people, mostly clad in flowing black or blue robes, crammed the narrow streets. The women wore veils, and the dusky-skinned men were dark-eyed. This city, he mused, must have been founded by an Eastern culture, perhaps Arabic or Egyptian, and, with the fall of civilisation after the war, they had returned to their old customs.

Overladen donkeys and herds of skinny goats mingled with the populace, some of whom carried baskets of cackling chickens or pushed carts. Women shopped at stalls set up outside the houses that lined the streets, and beggars shoved for positions in the doorways. The shouting, braying, bleating crowd was redolent with dung, stale sweat and musky perfume. The men all appeared to carry nasty-looking curved daggers sheathed in their belts, and their eyes darted watchfully.

Sabre yanked Tassin out of the way as she was about to be run over by a heavily laden donkey being driven from behind, and was rewarded with a glare as she jerked her arm free. She turned and forged through the crowd again, heading for the centre of the city. Sabre smiled and followed, thinking she was quite cute when she was angry, which seemed to be most of the time. Her childish air of regal haughtiness amused him, and he found the fact that she was so serious about it oddly endearing.

Then again, perhaps it was merely the joy of freedom that made all aspects of his liberation pleasant, even her churlishness. He pondered his new situation with a burgeoning awareness of his inferiority. Unlike those around him, he had not been born a free man; in fact, he had not been born at all. He had no parents, no childhood, and no experience of the world, other than the second-hand perception the cyber had bestowed. At times, his hand crept up to touch the brow band, wishing it gone, and he noted the way people glanced at it. He was a product of science, not a real person at all, and would have traded places with the lowliest of crippled beggars to escape what he was.

When they reached it, the city centre proved to be a large open square in which a full-time market was established. Stalls sold all manner of goods, from exotic fruit to skinny goats, even wild animals. Tassin spotted a swinging sign and made her way towards it, arriving outside an inn built of white stone and crooked, weathered timbers.

She turned to Sabre. "I need to get out of this crowd. We will stay here."

He glanced up at the sign overhead, which read 'The Singing Harlot', and smiled. "Looks like a nice place."

She gave him a disgusted look and pushed through the bead curtain. "It is just a name."

Tassin went to the counter at the back of the common room and haggled with the innkeeper, mostly about paying extra for two beds. Settling for one bed, she said over her shoulder, "You will have to sleep on the floor."

Sabre shrugged, his attention caught by a serving girl clad in a skimpy top and sheer pantaloons, her ankles jingling with little bells. "Maybe not."

She stared at him, aghast. "You have to guard me!"

"Lock the door."

Tassin snorted and followed the innkeeper through a bead-hung archway into a passage, where he showed her to a door at the end. They entered a cramped room with a barred window and a

narrow bed against one wall. As soon as the innkeeper left, Tassin glared at Sabre, who closed the door, achieving an oasis of peace from the hubbub outside, and sat on the bed.

Tassin folded her arms. "So you think you are going to spend the night with one of those sluts?"

He tilted his head, looking puzzled. "I'd like to find somewhere comfortable to sleep, so... yeah, I guess so."

"How will you pay her?"

Sabre leant back, raising his brows. "Obviously you're not going to share any of the money I earned getting my head bashed in."

"Certainly not. There is not much left, and we need it for more important things."

"Maybe one of them will take pity on me."

Sabre did not sound hopeful, and Tassin was surprised he did not seem to realise just how likely that was. The thought of him frolicking with a tavern wench brought a bitter taste to her mouth, and she played her last card.

"Do you think the cyber will allow you to leave me?"

He frowned, his eyes narrowing. "I don't know."

"But you are going to find out."

"Damn right."

When they went to the common room to eat, Sabre drew a lot of looks from the serving girls, but he made no effort to encourage them, glancing away from their blatant come-hither stares. Instead, Tassin attracted trouble in the form of a tall, bearded man with a dusky complexion. He approached their table when they had finished eating a rather tough goat stew, and bowed to Tassin.

"May I buy you a drink?" he asked in a deep, strangely accented voice.

Tassin stared at him in confusion, then glanced at Sabre, who eyed the stranger with what appeared to be a mixture of annoyance and dislike. She wondered what he was thinking, and how he would react to this situation.

Sabre had a powerful urge to tell the strange man to go away, without knowing why. When he had contemplated finding somewhere more comfortable to sleep than the floor, Tassin's suggestion that one of the serving girls might provide him with a bed had been welcome. Their unwholesome interest in him had confused and repelled him, however, and he had decided that it was not such a good idea. Now the young Queen's obvious naiveté sparked a whole new set of strange and hitherto unknown emotions. He stood up, undaunted by the fact that the dusky man topped him by a good eight centimetres.

"She's not interested."

The stranger raked him with a scornful glance. "I see no wedding ring on her finger, and I was addressing her, not you."

Sabre looked at Tassin, whose wide-eyed confusion had given way to a calculating look that he knew boded ill. Whatever was going on in her pea-brain, he was sure he was not going to like it. His suspicions were confirmed when she smiled at the stranger with surprising boldness.

"I do not see why not."

Sabre's eyes narrowed as comprehension dawned. "Tassin, tell him to push off."

"No."

The man smiled, revealing white teeth. "Ah, my lady is most courteous. What would you like? Wine? I hear they have an excellent vintage here."

Tassin's smile widened, her eyes alight with glee as Sabre's brow furrowed.

Sabre toyed with the idea of leaving her to deal with the situation herself, a pleasant prospect on initial contemplation, but spoiled by the fact that he would eventually be called upon to extricate her from it. Far better to nip it in the bud, and perhaps avoid a conflict, he decided.

He turned to the man. "I said she's not interested. She's just a girl, and in my charge."

The Olgaran shrugged. "She's not that young. She can decide for herself." He reached for the back of a chair to seat himself, and Sabre's hand flashed out to grip his wrist, preventing him from completing his action.

"I'm only going to tell you once, now beat it."

The Olgaran's smile vanished, and he snatched a curved knife from his belt so fast that it seemed to appear in his other hand by magic, pointed at Sabre's chest. "I think it's you who should leave."

Sabre eyed the blade and shot Tassin a furious glance, which she met with a smirk.

"I don't want a fight," he said.

"Then you should leave."

"That's not going to happen."

The Olgaran's eyes glittered. "I recommend you release my arm, unless you'd like to lose some fingers."

Sabre considered informing the stranger that his chances of cutting through a cyber host's barrinium-reinforced phalanges were exactly nil, but the explanation would be far too complex. In a modern world, a man would have had more sense than to challenge a cyber, but here, they had no idea of his true nature. He glanced around, noting the growing interest of several nearby patrons, and decided that breaking the man's wrist might arouse rather too much unwelcome interest in his ability to do so. As would, most probably, the inability of the pugnacious Olgaran to slice off any of Sabre's fingers. Clearly the Olgaran had no intention of backing down, and Sabre released him.

The innkeeper must have had a good nose for brewing fights, for he appeared beside Sabre and ordered them to take it outside. The Olgaran smiled again, tightly, and gestured for Sabre to precede him.

Tassin followed, a crowd of eager spectators jostling her. She solicited bets on the pale-eyed warrior, and found a favourable response. It seemed the bearded man had a reputation as a good fighter, as well as a frequent picker-of-brawls. She found many takers, and bet as much as she could, knowing she would not have to cover the wagers.

The street was deserted, except for a few beggars who made their homes in doorways, the throng of merchants and shoppers gone with the sun. The crowd surged into it and formed a noisy circle. Tassin, her bets laid, wriggled to the front. The two torches at the inn's doorway lighted the scene, and a few spectators brought more torches as the tall Olgaran waited for Sabre to produce a weapon. When he did not, the Olgaran shrugged and lunged, and Sabre dodged with a swift sidestep. He leapt and spun, one foot lashing out.

The Olgaran ducked, receiving a glancing blow that sent him staggering into the crowd, which caught him and pushed him back. The Olgaran shook his head, scowling, then lunged at his foe again. Sabre swayed aside, allowing the knife to skim past his ribs. Stepping closer, he landed two stiff-armed jabs to the Olgaran's solar plexus, sending the man staggering back. The Olgaran went down with a grunt, clutching his stomach, and the knife fell with a tinkle.

Sabre turned to leave the circle, but the crowd closed ranks, refusing him egress. Apparently in this land, a fight was not over until one contender admitted defeat. He turned back to his opponent, who eyed him with newfound respect, nursing his belly. The Olgaran picked up his weapon and rose to his feet, his expression wary. He circled, tossing the knife from one hand to the other in the manner of a skilled knife fighter with a yen to show off. Sabre stepped closer in a flowing motion, aiming a punch at the Olgaran's head. The man ducked, and the knife flashed. A line of blood appeared on Sabre's chest. The Olgaran was fast.

Sabre chopped at the bearded man's wrist, but he moved swiftly, slashing again inside Sabre's guard. Another cut appeared on the cyber's belly, and Tassin frowned. The crowd cheered the Olgaran, laying more bets against the pale-eyed warrior. Sabre stepped closer and kicked the Olgaran in the chest, sending him reeling into the throng, which thrust him back into the circle again.

The Olgaran rubbed his chest with a grimace, then lunged at his opponent. Sabre skipped aside and landed a blow on the back of the man's neck. The Olgaran staggered, but his hand flashed up to inflict a shallow wound in Sabre's side, and more blood flowed.

Tassin bit her lip in vexation, wondering why Sabre moved so slowly, and allowed the Olgaran to injure him. As if reading her mind, Sabre's eyes glittered, and he spun. His right arm snapped out, striking his opponent's arm as the man raised his weapon again. There was a sharp, distinct crack of breaking bone, and the knife spun into the crowd, evincing a yelp from an unfortunate spectator. The Olgaran stumbled back with a stifled cry, clutching his broken arm. He glared at Sabre, who turned to the crowd, which parted to let him through.

Tassin squirmed into the throng in search of the men who owed her money as Sabre's eyes hunted for her. She collected most of it, though some punters had slipped away. Sabre took hold of her wrist and towed her towards the inn. He dragged her to the room, his expression thunderous. Shoving her onto the bed, he folded his arms. Tassin rubbed her aching wrist, eyeing him.

"Just exactly what did you think you were playing at?" he demanded.

Tassin returned his glare. "We need the money, and you refused to fight."

"So you just instigated a fight with a knife fighter."

"I did not know he was a knife fighter! Besides, you said you can beat any man."

"I can," he retorted. "But usually they die, and if I try not to kill them, I can get hurt. As it was, I had to break his arm."

"I did not know that. Maybe you should have explained it properly?"

Sabre's eyes frosted. "Maybe I should shake some sense into you, or better still, leave you to fend for yourself."

"You would not dare!"

"Wouldn't I?" He stepped closer, then swung away with a growl when she shrank back, going over to the table to pour a cup of water from the pitcher.

"We made a lot of money," she said.

"Great, now you can buy your fancy clothes and go shake your butt for the King."

He slammed the cup down and stalked towards her again, his manner threatening. "Let me explain it to you, Your Majesty. Cybers are killing machines. We're a great deal stronger and faster than the average man, or even, for that matter, a skilled fighter, armed or not. That means it's an effort not to kill or seriously injure them."

He held a scarred hand before her flinching eyes. "I can crush a man's skull with one blow. To me, it's like an eggshell. I can punch through four centimetres of hardened duronium, the strongest metal known to man. It's all in the natty brochure that comes with a cyber when you buy one. But you don't know what I'm talking about, do you? A normal man might break his hand before his opponent's skull was fractured. That's because the skull is stronger than a normal hand. Every blow I land, I have to control.

"I could've killed that guy in a couple of seconds, just as the cyber would have killed your King Torrian if he hadn't been wearing armour, and as it did kill those soldiers in the gorge. This is a primitive culture. Hell, it's a restricted world! I shouldn't even be here, and your spacer buddy broke quite a few laws when he brought me here. These people will think I'm using magic, just like you did. I don't want to end up fighting the entire City Watch because they think I'm a damned warlock, or something ridiculous. Holding back isn't easy, and I don't want to kill a local hero and make a lot of enemies. Understand?"

She nodded, staring at his hand as it clenched under her nose.

"You were lucky, you know," he continued, turning away. "You ordered the cyber to defeat the men at the fair. If you'd just told it to fight them, it would have had the lethal option, and it would have used it, because my bio-status at that point was very low. For a cyber, it's easier to kill than to defeat a man. Even so, a cyber only kills when necessary, like the soldiers at the river, or when ordered to. I was used to kill four assassins before I came here, and again with those twenty-two soldiers. I hate killing!"

Tassin flinched from his anger and huddled against the wall, hugging her knees. Sabre sat on the edge of the bed, and she watched him warily, biting her lip. He stared at the floor, his face grim with anger and something else, which, she realised with shock, was self-loathing.

"I can't change what I am, or what I'm capable of, so don't play your silly girlish games with me, okay? I'll help you, but don't instigate fights."

Tassin nodded and buried her face in her knees, blocking out his angry face. He touched her hand, and she looked up at him. The coldness and anger had left his expression, leaving only bitterness, and a yearning she did not understand.

"Don't be scared of me. I won't hurt you. I'm not a monster, although they tried to make me into one." He touched the brow band. "In spite of what they did, I'm still mostly human. That was an idle threat, okay?"

She raised her chin, annoyed by his assumption. "I am not scared of you. The cyber would not let you hurt me."

He jumped up. "You're the most maddening, smug, selfish female I've ever met! Here I am thinking I'm putting the fear of God into you, and you're laughing at me!" He swung to loom over her again, a finger raised. "Don't rely on the cyber, Missy; you could get a nasty surprise if you make me mad enough."

Tassin climbed off the bed and faced him. "Go on then, let us see if the cyber will let you."

"I wasn't talking about..." Sabre's mouth twisted. "You're a real little cow, you know that?" He strode out, slamming the door.

Tassin sank down on the bed again, wondering if he would return. Deciding that he would, she pulled out the money she had won and counted it. She had more than enough to buy a good quality outfit and pay for lodgings for several weeks. Sabre did not appreciate her forethought, and she did not understand his reluctance to use his abilities. As far as she knew, warlocks and witches were respected in Arlin, and, she assumed, the other kingdoms.

Sabre received accolades in the common room. The men showed him new respect, and several bought him drinks, introducing him to the novelty of alcohol. The strong ale soon made him light-headed, and he enjoyed the relaxed feeling it bestowed. Cyber training had honed his mind to a constantly vigilant, ever guarded cesspit of reflexes and situational mandates, which he wished he did not have. They dictated many of his reactions, so much so that he found it hard to find a normal response to some situations. More than anything, he wanted to be human, and indulging in copious amounts of this bitter brew seemed to be something men did. Therefore, it stood to reason that he should, too.

The men took turns to slap him on the back and buy him a fresh drink whenever his cup ran dry. It seemed that even if they had lost money on him, they liked a good fighter, and it was always prudent to be friends with one, Sabre mused. At first, the back slapping had evoked a hostile response, but he soon realised that it was a form of friendly mannerism, and curtailed his unnatural reaction. One of the primary responses of a cyber-trained mind was to defend against any form of potential or perceived attack, and, although he overrode his initial reflex, it still made him uncomfortable. The men regaled him with tales of past fights between the local brawlers, praising his abilities.

After an hour or so, Sabre had consumed a great deal of ale, and his head spun. He blearily eyed the new man who sat at his table, bringing him a fresh drink. The man was blurry, and the room swayed like a ship at sea.

The stranger smiled and leant close to mutter, "I know who she is."

Sabre tried to focus on the stranger, but the room slid away to the right, taking the man with it. "Really." His tongue was numb, and the word was barely intelligible.

"Yes, I work in the palace, and Torrian's messenger has already been there." The man peered at Sabre, but he merely quaffed his ale, pawing at the beer that spilt down his chin. His hands seemed

to have turned into bunches of bananas, and he studied one in amazement.

"Torrian has offered a reward for her, and I think the King will be glad to take it."

"Owdoyouknow... oosheis?" Sabre enquired as clearly as he could.

"The description was very good, and you give her away. There are not any other men with a... thing stuck on their foreheads."

Sabre raised a hand to finger the cyber's crystals. "Showwhat?"

"I just thought to warn you, is all. Do not let her go to the palace."

Sabre glared at the man. "Thalilbitch... hic!... cangotohell." His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth, and he drank some more ale to loosen it. The strange, periodic convulsions that gripped his chest preoccupied him. The sensation was novel, and annoying. Then again, it must be part of being human, unless it was some sort of covert cyber attack. He shook his head. Surely not. It did not seem to be very effective, if it was.

The stranger laughed and stood, thumping Sabre on the back. "A good fight, my friend." He wandered off.

Sabre drained his glass, then tried to stand up. Another tiny, irritating convulsion made his breath catch. The room tilted, and he staggered into a table, grabbed it and hung on. Several men laughed and joked about his current ability to fight, but Sabre ignored them, for he had a sudden and inexplicable urge to vomit. The innkeeper must have had a good eye for green men about to hurl all over his floor, because he appeared at Sabre's side and helped him to the door.

Outside, Sabre emptied his stomach, and the innkeeper left him with a grunt of disgust, his common room floor now safe. Sabre had never experienced nausea before, and found it singularly unpleasant. Of all the new sensations his freedom had brought, this was by far the worst, he decided. The cool night air made the nausea worse, and he discovered that he could not walk. The ground refused to stay still, and he clung to the wall. When he tried to take a step, he found himself flat on his back, wondering how he had ended up there.

The irritating convulsions continued, accompanied by strange noises that echoed down the street. Just around the corner were the stables, and he levered himself to his feet with a great deal of aid from the inn's wall. He worked his way along it, leaning against it, then stumbled across the stable yard. The straw's sweet smell made him ill again, and he retched before crawling into the nearest pile, cursing the tiny spasms that gripped his chest with annoying regularity. The paroxysms kept him awake for a while, but when they stopped he fell asleep.

Chapter Fourteen

Tassin woke at cockcrow. An amazing number of roosters inhabited the city, most of which, it seemed, were perched outside her window. She had never heard such a cacophony of crowing in all her life. Certainly there was no chance of a lie in, so she rose and washed in the basin of water, deciding to ask for chicken at supper time.

Only after she had washed did she realise that Sabre had not returned. She frowned, wondering where he was, then remembered his plans to sleep with one of the inn's many sluts. His behaviour disgusted her, and she made her way down to the common room and ate an unappetising grey paste that was served for breakfast. With that sitting like a lump of lead in her stomach, she set off for the shops to buy some new clothes.

The pretty garments and reasonable prices in the bustling marketplace delighted her. The redolence and crowds were unpleasant and the men rude, but the abundance of goods was so distracting she hardly noticed the curious stares and dark looks she received. As the only unveiled woman, she was out of place, and that was the reason for the hard glances, but she refused to allow it to bother her.

Tassin spent the morning picking out a pair of black satin pantaloons embroidered with gold thread and a blue silk blouse, over which she chose to wear a natty tunic of a darker blue, ornamented, like the pantaloons, with gold embroidery. A pair of black velvet slippers completed the outfit, and she went back to the inn to change. There was still no sign of Sabre, so when she was ready, she left a message with the innkeeper and set off for the palace.

Sabre jerked awake as a deluge of cold water splashed over his face. The icy shock made him try to spring to his feet and drop into a fighting crouch, but most of his limbs did not seem to work, and all he did was roll over and raise a hand. A grinning stableman stood over him, holding an empty bucket. When he saw that his wake up call had been successful, he wandered away. Sabre sat in the wet straw and groaned. His head pounded as if the cyber had just staged another take-over attempt. His stomach squirmed and complained with loud rumbles, and bile stung his throat. His mouth tasted like he had been eating cow dung, or a rotten cow, he was not sure which, and his eyes flinched from the sunlight. He staggered into the stable yard, holding his head, since it seemed liable to fall off.

Locating the nearest water trough, he plunged his head into it, gasping as the cold water redoubled his headache, and the shock made him vomit again. His shaking legs buckled, and he sank down beside the trough, clinging to its side. The dried blood on his chest pulled at his skin, and he tried to wash it off. Stablemen chuckled as they walked past, calling rude advice. Digging in his pouch, Sabre swallowed some painkillers, then groaned and rested his aching head against the trough. He had no idea how long he lay there, his stomach a tight knot and his throat burning.

A hand touched his shoulder, and he looked up into the brown eyes of a smiling young serving girl. She held out a mug of tea, and he muttered his thanks as he took it, washing some of the cow dung flavour from his mouth. The serving maid coaxed him to his feet and helped him into the kitchen, where she plied him with more tea and bread. When his stomach stopped growling, she presented him with a bowl of creamy porridge. Only when he had finished eating, did he remember Tassin. By that time, the maid was washing the dried blood off his chest, and ordered him to sit still when he would have left.

Deciding that the ungrateful Queen could wait, Sabre basked in the warm concern of the pretty girl, whose long golden hair framed a plump, rosy-cheeked face. Her ministrations soothed his sour mood, and her admiring gaze was a salve for his battered ego. How she could admire a man she had found lying in a pool of vomit was beyond him, but he was grateful for the attention. Her appreciation did wonders for his self-esteem, even though she did not know what he was. He tried to

forget that and enjoy her ignorant regard. After she had finished washing his cuts, he sat and watched her work, sipping the tea she had made him. She cast him a lot of coy looks that made him look away in confusion, yet he found the experience interesting. After she had dropped two plates and spilt a pot of hot water on the assistant cook, however, the cook ordered Sabre out.

By then, it was mid-afternoon, and Sabre was still in no mood to confront the Queen. He went back to the water trough and scraped the stubble off his face, then cleaned his teeth and washed. That done, he decided to face Tassin, whom he was sure he would find sulking in the room, ready to pounce on him and give him a tongue lashing. Steeling himself, he knocked before entering, and was surprised to find the room empty.

After a few seconds of dull contemplation, he went down to the common room. She had probably gone to spend her ill-gotten gains, he thought sourly. The common room was almost empty, since the evening crowd had not yet arrived. He sat at a table and ordered more tea, forswearing ale. The innkeeper who served it relayed Tassin's message, and Sabre frowned, trying to remember something he had heard last night.

The last man to buy him a drink had said something about Torrian. His numb brain chugged through the memory, which was distinctly fuzzy around the edges. Torrian had sent a messenger to offer a reward for Tassin's capture, and she had gone to the palace. Sabre leapt up and went in search of the innkeeper, to ask him how long ago Tassin had left. The answer made him angry, and he cursed the stupid girl, leaving the inn at a lope.

Tassin reached the palace tired and angry at the crowds' rudeness. People jostled and pushed, and several times she had narrowly avoided being shoved into the gutter by hurrying locals, whose lack of manners rivalled Sabre's. Her new clothes were dusty and sweat-stained, although they still retained most of their glory. The walk would have been arduous even without the crowds, for the palace was located a fair distance from the inn, atop a low hill. The dusty roads had almost ruined her new slippers, and her feet ached. She had been unable to hire any form of carriage, and was forced to arrive at the palace on foot, hot and dishevelled.

A high wall surrounded the King's abode, and the tops of spreading trees hung over it, filled with exotic fruit. Beggars and urchins camped outside to collect fallen fruit, and numberless caracans kept up an incessant chirring in the sweltering sun. Bright fire birds and keeters added their raucous cries to the din. Tassin had to walk around the wall for some distance before she found the main entrance, fending off the grasping hands of beggars who accosted her. Tall gilded gates kept commoners out of the paved courtyard that swept away to the palace's pillared entrance and the manicured gardens around it.

One of the bored guards who stood outside the gates, clad in Olgara's rich green livery and silver chain mail, enquired as to her business in a laconic drawl. Tassin raised her chin and glared at the insolent man.

"You may tell King Xavier that the Queen of Arlin wishes to see him."

The guard raked her with a scathing glance and smiled. "Sure, and I'm the Duke of Tarlon. Be off with you!"

Tassin stood her ground. "I am travelling incognito, hence I have no retinue, but I assure you, I am Queen Tassin. Tell the King at once!"

The guard looked uncertain, apparently unsettled by her confidence and strange accent. He glanced at the other sentry, who shrugged, and the first man left, presumably to call his superior. Tassin mopped her face while she waited, trying to brush the dust from her wilting finery. A soldier in a silver-trimmed tabard arrived, and called for the gates to be opened, ushering her inside with a low bow. Tassin smiled, pleased to be treated with the respect to which she was accustomed. The guard sergeant led her into the vast, echoing marble entrance hall, where he handed her over to a white-liveried flunky.

The manservant showed her into a richly furnished room, its walls adorned with murals and its

floor patterned with intricate mosaics. Arched windows hung with silk allowed sunlight to brighten it, dappling exotic tasselled carpets. Within minutes, the servant returned and announced that she had an audience with the King. Once again, she followed the man along a cool, tiled passage, past an indoor garden filled with twittering pinbirds and lush foliage. Trellises supporting creeping flower plants covered the archways that separated it from the passage, and the sweet scent of blossoms and damp soil rode the cool air.

The manservant showed her into a vast chamber adorned with more murals, the floor tiled with alabaster and the arched windows hung with swathes of embroidered silk. Two massive tusks stood beside an empty fireplace, relics of a long-extinct beast whose name she could not recall. The fireplace did not look like it had ever been used, and, since Olgara was a hot country, she wondered why it had been built in the first place. A pair of glass-paned doors opened onto a cool terrace shaded by a pagoda, over which a flowering marru-plant had been trained. The seeds of the marru-plant, whose huge white blooms opened only at night, were reputed to be a powerful aphrodisiac.

Painted urns of all shapes, sizes and colours stood in corners or on mantels and tables, according to their size. In a small one, several incense sticks filled the air with a spicy aroma. A panel of embroidered velvet swung from the ceiling, powered by a string that vanished through the filigree ventilation holes along the edge of the ceiling. Outside, some patient servant tugged the string to stir the air for his king's comfort.

King Xavier VIII was a short man, dark-skinned and slant-eyed, with a pointed beard. He wore a long, gold-embroidered coat of heavy green satin edged with white fur over a white silk shirt and dark green trousers. He smiled when Tassin bowed her head, and returned the regal inclination. With a languid gesture of a slender hand, he invited her to sit on one of the many velvet-covered chairs that dotted his audience room. Gilded pillars upheld a high domed roof adorned with exotic paintings and gold inlay. The effect was a trifle overdone, but suited Xavier's exotic looks and obviously lavish taste. He sat behind his coalwood desk and regarded Tassin over folded hands.

"I was about to send men to the inn to escort you here in comfort. You need not have walked; the streets are not fit for a queen."

Tassin's brows rose. "How did you know I was there?"

"My brother last night encountered your man-at-arms, and lost, I might add. He now nurses his arm and his pride."

"That was your brother?"

Xavier looked pained. "I am afraid so. Victor enjoys the entertainment available at inns, though they are not a fitting place for a prince."

Tassin helped herself to a buttered pastry a servant brought, along with an elegant silver tea service. "Your brother put up a good fight. My man is an excellent warrior."

The King shrugged, his eyes sliding away. "He must be, for Victor has a passion for combat. He has been trained by the best fighters available, and has never been beaten before."

Tassin quelled a spurt of pride at Sabre's prowess, trying to look suitably chagrined. "I am vexed that he was injured. Had I known who he was, I would never have allowed my man to fight him."

Xavier smiled. "That is exactly why he goes to town incognito. If people knew who he was, no one would challenge him, and he lives to fight."

A maid poured the tea, and Tassin noticed that she filled three cups with the steaming golden brew. Before she could ask who the third cup was for, the carved doors at the far end of the room opened, and a tall man entered with a brisk tread and lofty bearing. Tassin did not recognise him until Xavier introduced him, for his beard had been removed, revealing lean swarthy cheeks and a cleft chin.

Victor bowed over her hand, and her heart leapt with hope. The Prince's oriental looks could only be described as handsome, and his dark eyes flashed with subtle fire. His black tunic and trousers, edged with silver and severe in their simplicity, indicated a similar taste to hers. Plaster encased his right arm to the shoulder, and Tassin found herself apologising for his injury.

"I do hope you are not angry with me for starting that fight last night." Tassin turned the full effect of her limpid eyes upon him.

Victor laughed. "Not at all. A fight was exactly what I was looking for. I recognised you right away, and your man looked a capable sort, so I was keen to see how good he was. Naturally I was surprised when I lost. He is a formidable fighter, and I hope I can procure a rematch, perhaps even a few tips from him."

Tassin demurred. "I am afraid he was very angry with me for starting the fight. Sabre is a conservative man; he does not fight for fun."

"Angry with you, Majesty? Surely he is yours to command?"

"Yes, of course he is." Tassin cursed Sabre for making her forget her queenly status. His reprimand had made her feel like a naughty child, a novel sensation for her, and the memory irked her still. "I meant he made it clear he was unhappy about it. He was afraid he might kill you, and he does not enjoy fighting."

"Strange, for a man who excels at it. I assure you, I am not that easy to kill."

Tassin cursed her flapping tongue for getting her into all sorts of trouble. "Of course not, perhaps Sabre is overconfident."

"I drew more blood."

"Indeed you did. You are an excellent fighter." Tassin took refuge in sipping her tea to prevent herself from pointing out that Victor had been the only one armed with a knife. She noticed the meaningful glance that passed between the brothers, and when she looked up, Xavier smiled at her.

"I am sure you will excuse me. I have business to attend to, but Victor will be glad to entertain you."

Tassin nodded, and Xavier left. He was nice too, she mused, but married. Victor was a real possibility, though, and she was not about to let him slip away. She had much to offer him, and he could save her from the hateful Torrian. He invited her to walk in the gardens, and she accepted, wanting to get to know him better. With any luck, she would return to Arlin with a consort, and Torrian could take a running jump into his moat.

When Sabre arrived at the palace gates, he was not surprised to find that he was expected. He only hoped he would be slung into the same dungeon as Tassin, while she awaited Torrian's arrival. Then at least he had a chance of freeing her. The guards demanded his weapons, and he handed over his knife, hoping that if he co-operated, he would be treated better than if he kicked up a fuss. He would be no good to Tassin if he became embroiled in a major conflict with the palace guard, who would undoubtedly win through sheer dint of numbers and his reluctance to kill. The grizzled, craggy-faced sergeant eyed the wrist laser with a frown.

"What's that?"

"An ornament."

"It could be used as a weapon, remove it."

"I'm Queen Tassin's man-at-arms. Surely I should be allowed to keep my weapons?"

The sergeant shook his head. "The Queen has no need of protection within the palace. You'll get them back when you leave."

Sabre unclipped the laser, switched off the power pack so it could be handled safely, and gave it to a pimply-faced soldier who took it as if it was a basket of vipers. "Now will you take me to the Queen?"

"No, now you'll go to the dungeons."

"Where's the Queen? Is she also in the dungeons?"

"Certainly not," the sergeant said. "I believe she is having tea with Prince Victor."

"Then why am I going to the dungeons? What have I done?"

"You're a commoner, and she's a queen. As to what you've done; nothing yet. It's what you might do that we're trying to avoid."

A soldier shackled Sabre's hands behind his back. "You mean when Torrian arrives."
"Precisely." The sergeant looked startled. "How do you know King Torrian's coming?"
"Call it an educated guess, since he's trying to capture her."

The officer frowned. "But you obviously didn't warn the Queen. Well, you'll get no chance to tell her now."

Two soldiers gripped Sabre's arms and marched him around the side of the palace, where a square of barracks enclosed a sandy training arena. Spreading fruit trees overhung from the gardens, attracting swarms of insects. Fallen fruit gave off a sweet tangy smell, and monkeys scampered from their feast to leap into the foliage. The soldiers took him to a formidable stone structure, marched him along a corridor and down a flight of steps. They thrust him into a cell, not bothering to remove his manacles. As soon as the door closed, Sabre sat down and worked his hands around his rear so they were in front of him, then took stock of his cell.

A barred window near the roof let in light, and dirty straw covered the floor. A hole in one corner gave off a foetid stink of stale urine, indicating that it was used as a latrine. The sturdy door, made of seasoned wood, would take considerable strength to break, but was the only exit. Settling in the furthest corner from the smelly hole, he waited for the cover of darkness to aid him in his bid to free the idiotic Queen. The prospect of searching the palace daunted him, but there was no other way.

Tassin enjoyed Victor's company on their stroll through the palace gardens, finding him to be polite and attentive. Strange, exotic plants and trees crowded the vast acreage of verdure, and a veritable menagerie of creatures populated it. Numerous ponds housed bright fish and flowering lilies, and birds with stilt-like legs waded in them. Victor pointed out some of the more bizarre flora, enumerating their peculiarities with a depth of knowledge that made her wonder if he was a closet horticulturist.

Tassin plucked several sweet-scented flowers, and Prince Victor laughed and flirted with her, apparently charmed by her light-hearted prattle. After Sabre's rude company, he was a delight of decorum. All too soon, however, a messenger interrupted their jaunt to whisper in the Prince's ear. Victor issued muttered instructions, and the servant trotted away. The Prince turned to her with a rueful grimace.

"It seems I am required elsewhere, but I have asked Queen Mirrial to keep you company. I am sure she will be delighted to talk to you while I attend to this trifling matter."

Tassin smiled, raising her brows. "Must you hurry off? If it is such a trifling matter, perhaps it can wait."

Victor returned her smile rather tightly. "I am afraid I have to go, but I shall hurry back to see you again." He glanced around. "Ah, here is Mirrial now."

A petite, stately woman approached them, her black hair swept up in an elaborate coif studded with jewelled pins. A gold necklace clasped her slender throat, and emeralds glowed on her fingers. Mirrial possessed the dusky skin and exotic beauty of her people, and wore an elegant, peacock-blue silk gown trimmed with white lace, which swept the ground in graceful folds. She bestowed a warm smile upon Tassin when Victor introduced them, and, as soon as he had performed this duty, he bowed and strode away. Tassin gazed after him, wondering what required his attention so urgently. Princes generally did not have many duties, and those they did, they usually preferred to avoid, yet Victor seemed eager to attend this business.

Mirrial gestured to a quartet of cushioned garden chairs around a wrought-iron table. "Let us sit and chatter, Tassin. I am so curious about your kingdom. You must tell me all about it."

"Yes, of course." Tassin replied, tearing her thoughts from Victor.

Sabre looked up in surprise when the door of his cell opened again so soon after he had been

incarcerated. A tall Olgaran man entered, his eyes flicking over Sabre with a look of smug satisfaction. He seemed familiar, and Sabre stood up as the man closed the cell door and stepped closer.

"You do not recognise me, do you?"

Sabre noted the cast on his arm. "You're the man I fought last night."

"Correct. I am Prince Victor, brother of the King."

If Victor expected Sabre to bow and apologise, he was disappointed. Sabre nodded. "How's the arm?"

The Prince frowned. "Painful. Your skills impressed me, and I was surprised to be beaten. I could, of course, order your execution to salve my pride, but that would be a waste. I study fighting skills, and have always considered myself the best knife fighter around. You, it seems, are better than I, so I am offering you a chance to live. Show me how you broke my arm and I will spare you."

"Where's Queen Tassin?"

"Safe and happy, talking to Queen Mirrial, at the moment. You need not concern yourself with her. She will be well cared for. Now, what about my offer?"

"If I refuse, I assume I'll be taken directly to the hangman, or whatever you people use."

Victor nodded and shrugged. "The axe man. He is always on call."

Sabre's lips twitched in a bitter smile. "Then I accept, naturally."

"Excellent." Victor grinned, clearly knowing full well that the outcome of his offer was never in doubt. "We will go to the training yard."

"Now?"

"Yes, I am eager to see what you have to offer. The best fighters in all the lands trained me, so I hope you will not disappoint me."

"So do I, since I assume it will cost me my head."

Victor chuckled, fingering his cast. "You are remarkably astute, for a commoner."

"So only if I show you something new, will my head remain joined to my shoulders?"

"Correct. Come." Victor turned and pushed open the door.

Sabre followed him, and two soldiers fell in behind them. At the end of the short corridor they emerged into the late afternoon sunlight, and Victor headed for the training yard. Several men practised there with swords and knives, stripped to the waist, their skin gleaming. A stout wooden fence surrounded the sandy area, which boasted some straw figures tied to poles and a few well-used targets. A stocky, powerfully built man with grizzled black hair shouted instructions at the warriors.

Victor indicated the man with a rude finger. "That is my master arms man. He taught me a great deal."

Sabre watched the fighters without interest. "It would save a great deal of time if you showed me what you already know."

Victor looked peeved, probably at Sabre's omission of his title. "What weapons do you know?"

"All of them."

The Prince's brows shot up, and he smiled. "All? Sword, knife, lance, spear, sling, bow, star, mace, dagger, sticks, staff, javelin, cutlass, scimitar, cudgel, foil, um... rapier?" Sabre nodded, and Victor's smile widened. "Then you may have a great deal to share with me. What is your best weapon?"

"I have no favourites. I prefer unarmed combat."

"I want you to show me how you did this." The Prince tapped the cast.

Sabre rested his arms on the fence. "I can show you, but you'll never be able to do it."

"Why is that?"

"Explaining it would take some time, but I'll be happy to, if you wish." Sabre only needed to stall the Prince for a couple of hours, and it would be too dark to give a demonstration.

Victor considered this. "Show me first, then you can explain it."

Sabre held out his bound hands. At the Prince's nod, a soldier stepped forward and removed the shackles while Sabre gazed around the training yard. He needed to impress the Prince enough to

prevent the axe man from trying to chop his head off, but without revealing the true extent of his abilities. If they did try to behead him, it would be even more difficult to explain why the axe bounced off. Spying some wooden planks stacked against a nearby wall, he pointed at them.

"I need one of those, set across two supports."

The Prince issued the orders, and men scurried to obey. Those who were training halted and gathered to watch. The stocky man swaggered over and bowed to Victor.

"My Prince. May I ask what's going on?"

Victor smirked at his master-at-arms. "Certainly, Garvon. This man is about to demonstrate an extraordinary prowess he possesses."

Garvon measured Sabre with hard, expressionless black eyes. His face was that of a man who had been in numerous fights, not all of which had left him unscathed. His flattened nose, scar-padded brows, broken knuckles and banana-like fingers told the tale of his conflicts. Almost every visible part of him bore scars, and part of one ear was missing, as well as several teeth. His remaining ear was grotesquely enlarged, and he walked with a limp. If men measured their skill in scars here, Garvon was a veteran of renown. Sabre gauged a man's abilities by his lack of them, however, and Garvon did not rate high by that measure.

Sabre knew that in Garvon's eyes he was a fresh-faced youth, for Garvon looked to be in his fifties. The master-at-arms turned away to watch the preparations. The seasoned plank the men had laid across two short logs was easily four centimetres thick and thirty centimetres wide. It looked like it had come from a wagon bed, grey and scarred from years of use. Garvon smiled crookedly, shaking his head. No doubt he expected the young upstart to come to grief, and Sabre quelled a smile.

Sabre sauntered over to the plank as the men gathered around it. He calculated that it was too thick for a normal man to tackle without doing himself serious injury, and enough to impress the Prince. The watching men muttered, eyeing him and the plank as he positioned himself, rubbing his right arm in anticipation. This exercise would bruise him somewhat, despite the thickened skin along his arm earned from such practices in the past. He took a moment to prepare himself, focussing on the plank as he recalled the years of involuntary training he had been forced to endure.

Swinging his arm high, he brought it down as he dropped to one knee, using his weight to add to the force of the blow. His arm hit the plank squarely, and it broke with a report like a rifle shot, the two halves bouncing and clattering to the ground. Sabre stood up, rubbing his tingling arm. Dead silence reigned for several seconds, then Garvon's exclamation broke it.

"That's impossible!" He swung to glare at Sabre. "He is using magic!"

Victor tore his eyes from the broken plank to stare at the cyber. "Are you using magic?"

Sabre shrugged, ignoring Garvon's pugnacious scowl. "Of a sort, but not the kind Garvon thinks. I told you I can't teach you to do what I do, but I can help you to achieve something like it."

Garvon spluttered, "Your Highness, this man is a wizard, not a warrior. He is tricking you!"

Victor waved him away, his attention riveted on Sabre. "What can I achieve without magic?"

"You could break a plank half as thick as that, using the technique I just did."

The Prince looked excited, nodding. "That would be good enough."

Garvon thrust his battered face into their conversation. "Your Highness, I challenge this man to fight my best warrior, without his magic. Until I see that he can really fight, I submit he only uses magic to achieve his miracles."

Sabre grimaced. The arms master's suggestion was unwelcome. Sabre had used the demonstration in the hope of avoiding a fight with anyone. He glanced at the sinking sun, wishing it would hurry up.

Victor's eyes glittered. "Bring forth your best man."

Garvon snapped a name at a nearby warrior, who ran off.

Sabre turned to the Prince. "I would rather not fight."

"So Queen Tassin said," Victor drawled. "You have avoided the axe man, but I have other means of persuasion. You will fight this man. I want to see you beat him, then I will be truly

convinced."

"You weren't convinced last night?" Sabre looked at the cast on the Prince's arm.

Victor scowled, glancing at Garvon. "You used magic. I want to see you defeat this man with skill alone."

"The light's fading."

"It is still enough. I will have torches brought if it grows too dark."

Sabre sighed, turning away. This was the last thing he needed now. Everywhere he went on this primitive planet, it seemed that some idiot tried to pick a fight with him, and this time there was no way of avoiding it. All he wanted was to go back to his cell and wait for darkness, then he could find Tassin. He looked up as a tall, well-built man appeared from the billets and strode towards them, his countenance fierce. Sabre kicked at the pieces of plank in frustration. He could have saved himself the effort, it seemed.

Chapter Fifteen

Tassin soon grew bored with Queen Mirrial's company. She was a pleasant woman, but rather empty headed, her conversation limited to clothes, food, babies and her husband. Tassin allowed her mind to wander while Mirrial rhapsodised about the contents of her wardrobe. She had been with Mirrial for two hours now, and her patience was wearing thin. It was almost dark, so where was Victor? For that matter, where was Sabre? Annoyance swept through her. Had he been so angry that he had abandoned her? Of course, she did not need him now she was safe amongst royalty again, but it irritated her that he would leave without her permission.

She interrupted the Queen's detailed description of the velvet gown she had received for her last birthday. "Mirrial, I am expecting my man-at-arms to join me. Do you know if he has arrived at the palace yet?"

The Olgaran Queen looked confused by the sudden change of topic, her account of her peacock-plumed dress stumbling to a halt. "I have no idea. I would have to ask the guard sergeant."

"Would you be so kind?"

Mirrial smiled and reached over to pat Tassin's hand. "You have no need of a man-at-arms here. Do not look so worried."

Tassin schooled her features into a placid smile. "Of course, but would you ask?"

Mirrial signalled to a hovering servant, and the man hurried over. Tassin looked around while Mirrial conversed with him, spotting two soldiers loitering in the shadows. When the servant left, she enquired, "Do you usually have soldiers so near your private quarters?"

Tassin sat with the Queen in her morning room, a place where soldiers were not normally found, and Tassin thought it suspicious. Mirrial gazed at the men. "No, but perhaps Xavier is concerned for your safety."

Tassin frowned. "Why would I be in danger? Especially within the palace walls."

"Well naturally you may not be, but he is a cautious man."

Tassin's hackles rose. No would-be kidnapper could possibly get into the palace, never mind into the morning room. Besides, why would she be in any danger at all? Xavier did not know about Torrian. Or did he? No one else had any reason to harm the Queen of Arlin. If Xavier knew about Torrian, were the guards there to keep him out, or her in? She looked up as the servant returned and bent to talk to Mirrial.

"Queen Tassin's man-at-arms did arrive, Your Majesty. He is in the billets," he said.

Mirrial beamed at Tassin. "There, you see? All is well."

"I want to see him."

The Olgaran Queen recoiled in unfeigned shock. "Whatever for? He is a common man. He belongs in the billets."

Tassin indicated the lurking soldiers. "So do they. If I am in danger, I would prefer to have my own man guarding me. He is very good."

"Out of the question." Mirrial frowned. "Foreign soldiers are not allowed to bear arms in the palace."

"You can take away his weapons."

Mirrial looked flummoxed. "Then what good would he be? You are in no danger, I assure you."

"Then get rid of those men."

Mirrial sniffed in patent disapproval of Tassin's peevishness. "That is up to Xavier."

Tassin gritted her teeth at this flagrant evasion. Naturally, Xavier would be unavailable and the soldiers would have to stay. Mirrial had the power to dismiss them, but chose not to, which roused Tassin's suspicions.

Rising to her feet, she said, "In that case, I will return to my lodgings in the city. I object to

these hovering soldiers. I will feel safer with my own man."

Mirrial rose too, clearly flustered. "That is not necessary. You will be far more comfortable here. An inn is no place for a queen, really!"

Tassin raised her chin. "I may do as I wish, and I wish to leave."

Spinning on her heel, she swept out, brushing past the astounded servant. The soldiers clumped after her, doubtless on Mirrial's order. She got as far as the main hall, where Xavier stepped out in front of her. He looked unhappy and tugged his beard, his eyes avoiding hers.

"I understand that you wish to leave us."

She inclined her head. "Good news travels fast."

Xavier clasped his hands behind his back and rocked on his heels. "I am afraid I must insist that you stay."

"Insist?" Tassin's brows shot up. "What sort of hospitality is this, that a guest may not leave when they wish? Or am I no longer a guest? Perhaps prisoner would be a more accurate description?"

"There is no need to get upset." He made a soothing gesture. "Your betrothed, King Torrian, is on his way to collect you. You have been through enough foolish hardships, now it is time to return to the life to which you were born."

"And how much has he promised to pay you, to hand me over?"

"He merely expressed his concern at your strange behaviour, and asked that I inform him should you arrive here."

"Well, you have informed him," she retorted. "So now I shall leave."

"I also promised to detain you."

"I see. Did it ever strike you that Torrian is not my betrothed, and I am being forced into a marriage to which I object?"

"That is not my business. You will remain in your suite until he arrives."

Tassin drew herself up. "So if I choose to walk through that door, you will order your men to lay their hands on me?"

"Unfortunately, yes. I hope it will not come to that, for it would pain me to treat a queen so. I urge you to remain in the palace, and spare us both a great deal of embarrassment."

She glared at him in helpless rage. To try to escape would avail her nothing, save the indignity of being manhandled. "Is my man-at-arms also a prisoner?"

"He is being detained, certainly. You must not think of yourself as a prisoner, merely an honoured guest."

"An honoured guest who is not allowed to leave is a prisoner. Obviously you do not wish to continue your alliance with Arlin."

"Most certainly I do," Xavier protested. "You misunderstand. I am trying to help you."

"You are helping my enemy. I declare our alliance at an end."

Xavier eyed her, and she revised her opinion of him, deciding that he looked rather cunning. "Once you are wed to Torrian, it will be for him to decide with whom he wishes to be allied."

"I will die before I wed Torrian, and if not, he will die shortly thereafter. When you throw a snake and a mongoose into the same pit, one will always die, usually the snake."

Tassin turned and followed the servant, who trotted ahead to show her to her suite, her mind in a turmoil as she cursed Torrian with renewed venom. Only he would sink to bribing the king of a poor country to ensnare her. Her only hope now was to offer marriage to Victor, but where was he?

Sabre frowned at the man who lay at his feet, his ribs aching from several blows he had allowed the warrior to land. Garvon's man was well trained and quick, but nowhere near as fast as a cyber, who could, with the benefit of predictive target programming, dodge laser beams. He had, in his estimation, done a fair impression of a normal, but skilled fighter, and defeated his opponent without seriously injuring him. The intensive training Sabre had undergone made his defensive

reactions instinctive, and suppressing them had taken a great deal of concentration.

Victor studied him with a calculating expression. "Very good. I don't believe you used magic. Do you, Garvon?"

The master-at-arms shook his head. "No, Majesty, he is a skilled fighter, better than Trin."

The Prince beamed at Sabre. "Tomorrow you will start showing me what else you can do. I want to learn all your skills, especially those kicks and jumps. Unfortunately, I cannot participate until my arm has healed, but in the meantime I can watch, and you can explain the theory to me."

Sabre shrugged, thoroughly fed up with the whole business. Hopefully tomorrow he would not be here, if Tassin knew of another country or city they could flee to now. He looked up as Victor signalled to a hovering soldier to replace the cuffs, resorting to politeness.

"May I ask a favour, Highness?"

"Certainly."

"I'd like to see Queen Tassin, to assure myself that she's well and to reassure her that I'm also well."

Victor's smile vanished as he appeared to consider this. "I suppose that would be all right, so long as you say nothing to alarm her."

"I won't. She'll be comforted to know I'm here, and well."

The Prince nodded, and Sabre followed him into the palace, two soldiers walking behind him with studied alertness. Their boots tapped on the polished floors of several deserted corridors, whose splendour was becoming tarnished by the first signs of neglect and decay. Whatever wealth had founded this city had long since vanished, leaving behind the remnants of a more prosperous era sinking into ruin. At the end of a short corridor that led off one of the echoing halls, Victor stopped at a carved door and knocked. A maid opened it, and answered his muttered query in a hushed voice, her expression sombre.

He turned to Sabre. "It seems your queen is now aware of her situation, so I stress that you will say nothing to encourage her or make her hope for release."

"You mean she knows she's a prisoner now."

"If you wish to call it that." He shrugged. "I prefer to think that she is under our protection, until her betrothed arrives. This foolish business must end."

Victor led him into a room furnished with satin-covered chairs, carved tables and tapestries depicting hunting scenes. Vases of spring flowers added their sweet perfume to the air, and paintings of verdant landscapes graced the walls. Long, green silk curtains framed arched windows that overlooked an exotic garden. Oil lamps hung on the walls, adding to the sunset's glow.

The maid vanished through a door at the far end of the room, and moments later Tassin entered, dressed in a strapless, dark blue satin gown trimmed with white lace, whose full skirts swept the floor. It also looked in danger of falling down at any moment, in Sabre's opinion. At the sight of him, her expression brightened and she hurried closer.

"Sabre!"

Victor stepped forward and bowed. "Queen Tassin. I brought your man to see that you are well, and for you to see that he is also well. I hope this pleases you?"

She stopped and bestowed a regal smile upon him. "That is most kind of you, Victor."

The Prince stood aside, and Sabre bowed, aware that Victor watched him. "My Queen. It eases my heart greatly to see you well and happy."

Tassin's smile became strained. "I am well. I trust you are also being treated with the respect you deserve?" She glanced at Victor.

"Indeed I am, Your Majesty. Prince Victor's dungeons are fine and spacious, fit for a king."

Victor shot him an angry look, but Tassin nodded with apparent unconcern. "As long as you are treated well."

"I hope to see you soon, My Queen, very soon." Sabre hoped she would understand. The Prince signalled to the soldiers, who gripped his arms and tugged him out of the door.

Tassin turned her smile upon the Prince as the door closed behind Sabre. "Do sit down, the maid will bring tea."

Victor seated himself, and she sank into a chair opposite as the maid left on her errand. Tassin clasped her hands to hide the tremors of rage that the sight of Sabre's chains had provoked, gazing at Victor.

"It seems my situation here has become unpleasant," she said. "Torrian is on his way to take me prisoner."

"Surely not?"

"Indeed he is. I fled my kingdom to avoid an unwelcome marriage, and now I will be handed back to my enemies."

Victor squirmed, studying his shoes. "I am distressed to hear that."

"I know it is not your doing. Your brother has made a deal with Torrian, and undoubtedly he stands to grow richer from it. I have a proposition for you, and I pray that you will consider it."

The Prince fiddled with his cast. "If I can help in any way..."

"You can. If I am already married when Torrian arrives, his plans will fail, and I shall be able to return to my kingdom."

He looked blank, then understanding dawned, and his eyes widened. "I am deeply honoured." He jumped up and paced around the room.

Tassin's heart sank. "Will you consider it? It would be beneficial for our kingdoms. A strong bond, a blood tie such as most kingdoms share. Olgara has long been left out in the cold, so to speak. There have been no royal marriages between us for several generations. Your Queen Mirrial is the King's cousin, and there are no ladies of high station for you to marry."

Victor stopped pacing and gazed out of the window. "I cannot accept. My brother holds the power here, and I cannot go against him."

"What can he do? You will be my consort, almost his equal, a far higher station than a prince. He does not have to know until after it is done. You can arrange to take me to a church, and we can be wed this very night."

The Prince turned to her, his expression bleak. "He will hate me. He will disown me, and I shall be unable to ever return to my homeland. I do not want to live in a foreign country for the rest of my life."

"If you do not agree to this, I shall break the alliance between Arlin and Olgara, and your brother's kingdom will suffer."

Victor's eyes narrowed. "Blackmail? It ill becomes you."

"This is what I have been reduced to." Her voice developed a hard edge. "Your dear brother thinks he has all the cards, for once I am married to Torrian, he will rule Arlin." Victor brightened at this, and she went on, "But that will never happen. If I am forced to wed Torrian, he will not outlive the wedding night, and I will rule both kingdoms. Then Olgara will suffer."

"It is my brother's decision. I cannot go against his wishes."

Tassin stood up. "If you are so spineless, and content to remain a princeling for the rest of your life, so be it. You have my permission to withdraw."

Victor paled at the blatant insult of being treated as an inferior, reminding him of his lesser status, then bowed and marched to the door, almost bowling over the maid as she entered with the tea. Tassin stormed into her bedchamber and slammed the door, leaving the maid clutching the tea service and staring after her in bewilderment.

Sabre sat in his cell, his eyes closed as he recalled the route from Tassin's chambers to the dungeon, waiting for the palace staff to retire for the night. He hoped she had understood him, and would be ready to leave when he came for her. The guard had delivered his food four hours ago, and soon it would be midnight.

Opening his eyes, he studied the crude manacles on his wrists, testing them. The metal bent slightly, and the cuffs cut into his skin. He relaxed and positioned the iron bands where they would do less damage, then gripped the chain, steeling himself for the inevitable pain. Putting his foot on the chain, he used his back to increase the power of the pull. A cyber had a dead lift pull strength of over six hundred kilograms, and he doubted the shackles would be able to withstand it. The bands bent, and the chain links stretched with a soft creaking. Sweat popped out on his brow as the pain increased with the power he used.

One of the links snapped with a dull plink, and his hands flew up past his ears. Releasing his pent breath, he rubbed his bruised wrists. About eight centimetres of chain dangled from each manacle, and this he held in his hands as he rose and approached the stout, metal-bound door. He studied it, weighing up the possibilities. He might be able to bend the bolt outside if he pushed hard enough, but the problem was gaining enough traction on the floor. It would certainly be quieter, but also more difficult.

Rejecting that idea, he walked to the back of the cell and leant against the wall, facing the door. The room was not large enough to build up much speed, but it would have to do. Pushing himself off the wall, he sprinted across the cell and leapt at the door, concentrating all his power into his right leg. His foot hit the door square in the middle with a terrific bang, and the wood shattered into thousands of splinters and several fair-sized planks that clattered into the passage. Sabre rubbed his foot, then pushed through the sagging remains into the corridor, where a guard gaped at the ruined door.

Sabre reached him before he could make an outcry and felled him with a blow, then checked that he was still alive before loping down the corridor. Like a flitting shadow, he crossed the deserted yard, staying close to the walls and avoiding the pools of light that spluttering torches flung. Entering the palace, he traversed the halls on silent feet, passing dozing guards without disturbing their slumber.

Two soldiers guarded the door to Tassin's suite, their chins sunk onto their chests as they wiled away the night enwrapped in pleasant dreams. Sabre crept up to the nearest, gripped his face and thrust his head back against the wall. The guard slumped, and the second man looked up, roused by the soft crack of his comrade's head on the stone. Before he could react, he joined his partner on the floor.

Sabre entered Tassin's apartment, where a few lamps still burnt, illuminating the sitting room. Crossing it, he slipped through the far door into a dark, sumptuous boudoir dominated by a mammoth four-poster bed draped with gauzy material. The bed was empty, and he paused in a deep shadow to scan the room. Spotting a dark shape at the window, he crept over to it.

Tassin was industriously employed tying sheets together and passing them out through the window, her back to him. The natty black pantaloons and embroidered jacket she wore were, at least, more practical than the gown she had been wearing earlier. Sabre smiled and walked up behind her, clamping a hand over her mouth. She gave a muffled scream, clawing at his hand, and he murmured, "Hush. It's me, Sabre."

She stopped struggling, and he released her.

"How dare you sneak up on me like that?" she demanded.

"I'm glad to see you too," he retorted, scowling. "Should I have knocked?"

"You scared me half to death!"

He smiled. "I had to stop you from making a noise."

"You could have done that without laying your filthy hands on me!" She rubbed her mouth in disgust.

He gritted his teeth. "I should have left you for Torrian. You deserve each other."

Tassin hissed with rage, and Sabre stepped back before she clouted him. "What were you planning?" he enquired. "No doubt it didn't include me."

"I am not here to rescue you. I was making my escape, since you were stupid enough to allow yourself to be flung into the dungeons."

He turned away and gripped the window ledge, striving to remain calm. "I allowed myself to be flung into the dungeons so I could rescue you."

She folded her arms. "So, what are you waiting for?"

"You to learn some damned manners." Pushing himself away from the window, he took her arm and pulled her towards the bedroom door.

She gave a yelp of outrage. "There is no need to drag me about! You are as bad as that stupid cyber!"

He stopped and turned to her. "And you're an ungrateful little cow, so shut up."

Tassin's rigid back, raised chin and furrowed brow spoke volumes of outraged indignation as he led her through the sitting room. He checked the corridor before stepping into it, towing the furious Queen, then stopped when the tapping of her shoes on the marble floor echoed down the hall.

"Take your shoes off," he whispered.

"Why?"

"Because they're making a noise!"

Grumbling, she removed her shoes, and he guided her through the palace, retracing his steps to the side entrance that led to the dungeons, where he emerged into the yard. Two moons hung in the sky, one a silvery giant, the other an orange dwarf. The combined light was too bright for his liking, and he pulled her into the shadow of the three-metre wall that surrounded the palace. Tassin bent to replace her shoes, and he glanced around.

"I'll lift you up, and you grab the top of the wall and pull yourself onto it, okay?"

She looked up, patently horrified. "I am not climbing that!"

"Why not?"

"It is too high! I might slip and fall over the other side. What is wrong with using the gate?"

"There are guards there," he said.

"So? Kill them, or give me a sword and I will."

"I'm not killing anyone if I can help it, and nor are you. Just do it, okay?"

"No!" She jerked free and marched towards the main gate.

Sabre reached her in two strides, caught her arm and almost yanked her off her feet. "Damn it! I'll throw you over that bloody wall, if I must."

"You are hurting me!"

Sabre eased his grip, and she jerked free again, then jumped out of his reach and ran towards the gate. Clearly she expected him to follow and smash his way through the guards to freedom. Sabre caught up with her in three strides and halted her once more. She scowled at him, then turned her head towards the gate.

"Guards!" she bellowed.

Once again, a potent wish to scale the wall and leave her to Torrian assailed Sabre. She hissed as his grip on her wrist tightened, and he eased it. The four gate sentries shouted and ran towards them, drawing their swords. Tassin looked up at him, her expression triumphant. He released her and strode to meet the soldiers, dodging the thrust of the first man's weapon and felling him with a punch that dropped him in his tracks.

One sentry sprinted towards the billets, shouting for reinforcements, while the other two attacked. Sabre side-stepped the next man's lunge and seized his arm, jerked him closer and punched him in the head. The sentry collapsed, and Sabre ducked the second soldier's sword stroke, which would have done serious damage to his neck, then stepped closer and sent the man crashing onto his back with a kick.

Cursing, Sabre sprinted after the fleeing sentry as Tassin trotted towards the gates. The man proved to be fleet, and halfway to the billets Sabre gave up. Tassin was almost at the gates when he caught up with her. Taking her arm again, he forced her into a wild sprint, ignoring her hisses of protest. Judging by the ruckus emanating from the billets, soldiers were already jumping from their beds to give chase. Sabre swerved off the road, holding up the stumbling Queen, who panted curses.

Soon the clatter of boots on cobblestones heralded soldiers pounding in pursuit, and he pulled Tassin into a narrow, smelly alley, where she made soft noises of disgust at the stench. He scanned the alley for a refuge, but all the houses were shuttered, their doors bolted against the night chill and all who might be abroad in it. Torches flared in the street, illuminating running figures, and he pushed the Queen into a dark doorway.

"Well done," he said. "Now we've got the whole damned army looking for us."

"It worked though. We are out."

"But for how long?"

Tassin muttered under her breath about stupidity and incompetence, and Sabre gritted his teeth. When the soldiers had disappeared around a corner, he continued down the alley, towing the puffing Queen. No sanctuary presented itself, and he toyed with the idea of breaking into a house. He was unwilling to risk rousing an irate family that might raise the alarm before he could silence its members, however.

The choice was revoked when torch-bearing soldiers entered the alley, and Sabre dived into the nearest doorway. He leant against the sturdy door, which gave slightly, creaking. Tassin tugged at his webbing, and he shook her off. With a final shove, the bolt gave and the door flew open. Sabre stopped it before it banged on the wall, shutting it behind the Queen. Going over to a window, he peered down the alley through a gap in the shutters. The soldiers advanced slowly, searching every doorway and evicting sleeping beggars from them. Sabre crouched beside the window, waiting for them to pass, and Tassin panted in the darkness nearby.

He muttered, "If we'd gone over the wall, they wouldn't have missed us until morning, by which time we'd have been long gone."

"And I could have broken a leg, or my head!"

A faint creak made Sabre spin around. A burly man, dressed in a flannel nightshirt and armed with a club, descended the staircase at the back of the room, holding a lamp. With a whispered curse, Sabre moved into a deeper shadow, hoping the man would see nothing and return to his warm bed. The Olgaran spotted the torches outside the window and padded across the room to peer out at the commotion. Sabre crept away from him, hoping Tassin was well concealed. A crash of breaking pottery made him wince, and the man swung around, shining his light on the source of the noise. Tassin crouched beside a table, a smashed vase on the floor beside her and a look of guilty horror on her face. The man growled and raised the club.

Tassin yelled, "Sabre!"

Sabre sprang up and charged the Olgaran, who, warned by Tassin's cry, swung around, dropped the oil lamp and gripped the club in both hands. The lamp smashed on the floor in a blaze of fire. The man swung his club, missed the swift cyber and smashed a chair to matchwood as Sabre veered away. Shouting in alarm, the Olgaran flailed about, demolishing furniture and pottery as he tried to hit the elusive intruder.

The door burst open and a flood of soldiers poured in. Two of them captured and disarmed the terrified Olgaran, the rest spread out to surround Sabre and the Queen. Fifteen hard-eyed men crowded into the room, drawn swords glinting in their fists. Tassin glanced at Sabre and raised a brow. Smiling crookedly, he spread his empty hands. He could not defeat so many men without killing some of them, and that, he was not prepared to do, since this was not a life-threatening situation. The Queen scowled at him.

"Get us out of here, Sabre!"

He shook his head. "No way."

"Damn you! I know you can beat them, so do it!"

He shot her a piercing look. "No. This is your doing. I'm not murdering them to save your worthless hide again. Torrian can have you."

She gasped in outrage and brushed past a soldier to approach him, ignoring the swords pointed at him. "Kill them!"

His mouth twisted in a bitter smile. "No. I make my own decisions now. You're the damned

warrior queen, you kill them."

Her eyes narrowed, and he knew what was coming, but this time there was no way to forestall it.

"I order you!" she snarled.

Agony exploded in Sabre's skull, and his hands flashed up to grip the brow band. He fell to his knees, then keeled over backwards. The soldiers muttered and stepped back as he writhed, his face twisted.

Sabre fought the sucking darkness of the cyber's power, which rose like a tide of shadow, threatening to swamp him. Whirling lights flashed in his inner eye, a kaleidoscope of dizzying, mind-numbing confusion. His eyes lost focus, and the ring of soldiers blurred. His vision came and went as the waves of a foul psychic sea washed over him. His legs went numb, cut off from his brain, then his hands released the brow band and fell to his sides.

Paralysis spread through him, and he fought to stay conscious, the last battle in this unequal war of wills, the loss of which spelt his defeat. If the cyber shocked his brain into unconsciousness, his fate was sealed. He stared at the ceiling, trying to keep his vision, an anchor in reality.

The struggle appeared to have reached a stalemate. The cyber had robbed him of all motor function, but was unable to re-establish its control. Perhaps that was why it had not attempted such a determined takeover before, knowing it would fail, and render him useless to the Queen. In the face of his defiance, however, it had been forced to make the attempt, since he was of no use to her anyway. The strange numbness was abnormal. It seemed that the cyber, unable to take over completely, had blocked his motor cortex, thereby robbing him of all movement and sensation.

Many hands lifted him, and the distorted mutter of the soldiers' voices reached him through the numbness, a deep undertone to the Queen's shrill fury. Tassin's face swam into focus as she glared down at him, then blurred. He blinked, cybernetic fetters imprisoning his mind. As yet, he was not utterly beaten, only helpless. The soldiers carried him up the street, their boots clumping on the cobbles.

Sabre pushed at the psychic clamp that held him, tested its strength and found it immovable. Without the use of his body, his mind could only wait for the end, a prospect he did not relish. How many days of hunger and thirst, trapped in the dark prison of his skull, would he be forced to endure before death claimed him? Cyber hosts were genetically modified to live far longer without water than normal humans, so his torment could last for up to a week.

Once more, he tested the chains of numbness with a desperate lash of willpower, but it rebounded off an impenetrable metaphysical wall. He was trapped like a wild bird, and would beat his wings against the bars of his cage until he died of exhaustion, his wings broken, his spirit crushed by despair. He knew his enemy of old, and compassion was not amongst its traits. If it could not win, neither would it lose. Blissful oblivion beckoned, and he allowed it to wash over him.

Tassin followed Sabre's recumbent form, which four soldiers bore up the street, torn between rage and self-pity. Why had he not done as she ordered? By defying her, he had forced her to say those words, and now he appeared to be comatose. He could have killed these men as easily as the cyber had killed the soldiers in the gully, but instead he was now crippled. In a way, it would serve him right if the cyber did take over again, at least it obeyed her. The soldiers surrounded her, but kept a respectful distance. If she tried to run, they would grab her, and the thought of being manhandled did not appeal to her.

King Xavier waited in the palace's entrance hall, Victor yawning beside him. The king's velvet robe had clearly been donned with haste, his hair was ruffled and his brow furrowed. As she trudged into the hall, he impaled her with hard black eyes.

"A foolish attempt." He glanced at Sabre. "And your last, since your man-at-arms appears to be injured."

Victor frowned and walked over to Sabre. "What happened to him?"

Tassin glared at the King. "It may be my last attempt, but the gods will punish you for your injustice. You would condemn me to a life of horror and pain. Yet it shall not be. You and yours will suffer for this night's betrayal."

He shook his head, watching Victor question the soldiers. "You exaggerate. Torrian is a good man, and I doubt he will be so easy to murder. Your threats are not worthy of serious consideration. You are powerless to avoid your fate. Now you will go to your room, and this time you will stay there. I do not enjoy being roused from my bed in the dead of night."

Xavier marched off before she could reply, leaving her glaring at his back with helpless fury. A servant came forward and bowed, gesturing for her to precede him down the hall. With a last glance at Sabre, she headed for her rooms. Occasional red flashes still lighted the brow band, running along it in sporadic patterns. A twinge of concern went through her, and she regretted using the fateful words now. Had she known this would happen, she would not have done so. She had only wanted to punish him for his disobedience, thinking the pain would force him to obey. Instead, he and the cyber had entered into a battle that he appeared to have lost.

Sabre lived in a shadowy realm he had drifted into from the sweetness of oblivion, caught in a limbo between subjugation and awakening. Muttering voices reached him, and he opened his eyes. He lay on a soft surface, and all that remained under his control were his unfocussed eyes. Blurred shapes moved around him, then someone raised his head and pressed a cup to his lips. Bitter liquid flowed into his mouth, and he swallowed on reflex, an involuntary reaction. He closed his eyes.

"What is wrong with him?"

The question filtered into Sabre's brain through the cyber's smothering control, and he recognised Prince Victor's voice.

"He appears to be under a powerful spell, Your Highness."

The second voice was unfamiliar. Probably a magician, he thought, and wanted to laugh. As if some primitive mage could understand the intricacies of the cyber. A spell, indeed. Curious, he listened to the conversation, straining to understand it through the muffling.

"I know he uses magic. Has he been caught up in his own spell?" Victor asked.

"I believe so, Highness," the stranger replied.

"So there is nothing you can do?"

"I am afraid not. He uses an odd magic, one with which I am unfamiliar. Perhaps he will still recover."

Silence clamped down. Either the magician had left, or they had moved out of earshot. Sabre allowed his thoughts to wander. Perhaps if Tassin commanded the cyber, it would relinquish its partial control so he could serve her again. The prospect was galling, but preferable to lying here until he died of thirst, since these people had no way of feeding him properly. He could not communicate this idea, however, and he allowed the blackness to wash over him again.

When Sabre drifted back to consciousness, the rumbling emptiness of his stomach and a burning thirst told him that a fair amount of time had passed. He wondered what had awakened him, and opened his eyes. Everything was in focus. Surprised, he tried to move his arm, but found that his body was still beyond his control. A voice close to his ear startled him.

"Did you hear me, Sabre? I said Queen Tassin has left for Arlin." Victor leant over him, frowning.

Sabre blinked, striving to move or speak, but the cyber kept him helpless. He stared up at Victor, wondering how he could communicate with the Prince, then he became aware of something going on inside his head. Concentrating on it, he received another surprise. The cyber's information was displayed as a virtual image, unobtrusive, yet easily available when he looked. The scanners' data, set against a black background, showed points of light indicating the living organisms in the room, since the stone walls blocked the bio-scanners.

Sabre studied the rest of the information now available to him. A structural analysis of the

room appeared as a faint collection of lines, to the left of a scrolling list of numbers and letters. They indicated room temperature, air pressure, atmospheric composition, the co-ordinates of the planet according to the Schellion Grid, a radiation level, which was slightly elevated, the exact time and date on several major planets, with Myon Two first, and a plethora of other data. As he contemplated this, it changed to a map of those parts of the palace he had visited. That faded, and an analysis of his bodily functions replaced it. Interested, he concentrated on the computer image of his body, which showed the areas the cyber controlled in green. Several major areas of his brain were red, which explained the tiny supercomputer's incomplete domination.

The cyber appeared to be ready to strike a bargain, and make its information available to him, presumably in return for his co-operation in completing its mission. Perhaps Prince Victor's news about Tassin had sparked the cyber's offer. Whatever the reason, it was a deal he was eager to accept. He would pursue the Queen and rescue her, he thought, if the cyber would relinquish control of his body. The numbness receded, and pain shot up his arms and legs, making him grimace. A cramp knotted his left thigh, and he gritted his teeth.

"Sabre? Are you all right?" Prince Victor demanded.

Sabre stretched, wincing as stiff muscles protested. His limbs were leaden and his stomach was a tight knot. Shakily he raised himself on one elbow, and the Prince straightened with a look of relief.

"So, I wondered if that bit of news might rouse you."

Sabre nodded, running his tongue around a dry, foul-tasting mouth. "I need a drink."

The Prince clapped his hands, bringing a hovering servant to his side, and gave terse orders to bring food and water. The servant hurried away, and Victor smiled at Sabre, his eyes hard.

"You have caused me a great deal of trouble. I hope what you have to teach is worth it. King Torrian wanted you very badly, for his axe man to play with. Apparently he is rather upset that you defeated him in combat."

Sabre looked up at the Prince. "So why didn't you give me to him?"

"Because I want you for myself, of course. I want to learn your way of fighting. Fortunately, I was able to persuade my brother. His agreement with Torrian did not include you, so he refused, and Torrian had to accept it." Victor smirked.

"How long ago did they leave?"

"Just this morning, only two hours ago. Your Queen Tassin was most upset. I have never heard such language from a woman before, never mind a queen."

Sabre smiled. "She has her moments."

The servant returned with the food and water, and the conversation stopped while Sabre drained five cups of water and consumed a bland gruel. When his hunger and most of his thirst were assuaged, he slid off the bed, testing his legs. He appeared to be in one of the palace's suites, as sumptuous as the one Tassin had occupied. Victor lounged in a chair, watching him, and two soldiers stood at the door. Sabre tested wobbly legs and cursed his weakness.

"How long was I asleep?"

"Three days," the Prince supplied with languid disinterest.

Sabre sat on the bed, waiting for some vitality to flow into him from the gruel. "What kind of transport did Torrian have?"

Victor looked smug. "A big, gold-plated coach. Torrian loves his pomp and ceremony, although it is not very practical."

Sabre stared at the floor. That meant they would not be travelling fast, and would probably only reach the pass in two or three days. It gave him time to escape from Xavier's palace and catch up with Tassin before she arrived at Torrian's castle, or better still, before they reached the pass. He became aware that Victor was addressing him.

"...I do feel sorry for your queen, however, she is a lovely girl. I was most distressed to have to turn down her offer of marriage. It was extremely tempting."

"She asked you to marry her?" Sabre's brows shot up.

"Oh, indeed, she was terribly upset when I refused."

"I'll bet."

"She has a rather... astringent tongue."

"That's putting it mildly."

Victor nodded in a superior manner. "Naturally you, as her man-at-arms, were subject to her fury more than once."

"Naturally."

"When do you suppose you will feel well enough to start teaching?"

"Maybe tomorrow."

The Prince rose to his feet. "By the way, I was impressed by what you did to the dungeon door, and the shackles. How did you break them?"

Sabre glanced at one of his wrists, which had a broad black bruise across the top of it. "I snapped them."

"So easily?"

"Not that easily."

"So you do use magic, then."

Sabre shrugged. "Not exactly. You could say that magic has been used on me, to make me stronger."

"And you cannot use this magic on another, to make him stronger too?"

"No."

"But your magic turned against you in the end, did it not?"

"More like I turned against it." *By disobeying the Queen*, Sabre thought bitterly.

"I see."

Sabre knew he did not, and hid a smile as the Prince left. The guards at the door bowed as Victor passed them, then eyed Sabre with deep misgivings. It seemed that the tales of his prowess had spread to all and sundry. He winked at them, making them tense, then he sighed and lay down. Torrian was no fool. Thirteen days had passed since the wolf's attack on the mountain. During that time, the King had deduced their destination and despatched a messenger, then set out for Olgara himself.

Tassin glared across the coach at Torrian, who smiled at her with conceited arrogance. He looked like an oaf, when compared to Sabre, she reflected. His coarse handsomeness and large nose were repugnant to her now, and she wondered how she had ever thought him attractive. His low forehead overhung his close-set eyes, and his expensive perfume did not completely overpower his pungent odour. Instead, the two mingled to form an even more repulsive smell.

Thick black hair curled from under his collar, making her shudder to think of what he must look like without the royal trappings. She tore her eyes from his hateful face and stared out of the window at the passing scenery. The heavy coach rocked and swayed on the rough road, making her nauseous. Only the occasional crack of the coachman's whip broke the incessant rumbling. She had remained silent for the duration of the journey so far, rising to none of Torrian's baiting about her failure to elude him.

Tassin shifted as her girdle pinched her, tugging at the uncomfortable gown. Queen Mirrial had insisted on dressing her in a lacy pink concoction with ruffles and puffed sleeves, despite Tassin's fierce opposition to the ridiculous idea. The girdle made breathing difficult, and the frock was impractical for a journey. Its delicate lace overskirt begged to be torn by protrusions, and the numberless petticoats made walking tiresome, never mind climbing in and out of a coach. The gown's copious white lace already showed the dust that blew in through the window. Her hair, piled atop her head, was fastened with long pins that pulled at her scalp. A bit of grit flew into her eye, and she turned from the window, rubbing it.

"Are you all right, my sweet?" Torrian's deep, solicitous voice and false concern annoyed her.

"Oh, shut up."

"You will have to learn to treat me with more respect, Tass. I will soon be your husband."

"Do not call me Tass," she snarled.

"I will call you whatever I want, including bitch."

"I will never marry you. My father would turn in his grave, if I was forced to marry a stinking, hairy pig like you."

Torrian smiled. "Then he should have made arrangements before he died."

"He wanted me to choose my husband, and I am not marrying you."

"You have no choice, my dear. Your magic warrior is useless to you now. Victor has him, and I have you, so what will you do?"

Tassin snorted. "Do not be so sure you will not die on your wedding night, should you get that far."

He chuckled, his eyes glinting with unwholesome amusement. "Idle threats. You are only a woman, Tass." Leaning forward, he placed a hairy, banana-fingered hand on her knee. "A very lovely woman."

Yanking a pin from her hair, she stabbed it into the back of his paw as hard as she could. Torrian jerked away with a yell, then raised his hand as if to hit her. Tassin shrank back, holding the pin poised, ready to impale any part of him that came within reach. He subsided with a growl, sat back and inspected his hand.

"You will pay for that, you bitch."

"You keep your dirty paws off me, Torrian, or I will do worse than that, I promise."

He sucked the wound, glaring. "I can see I will have to tie you to the bed on our wedding night."

Tassin blanched at the thought. "You will also have to be careful what you eat, when you sleep, whom you trust, what you drink, and especially whether or not I am safely tied down every night."

The King's eyes narrowed. "So, it is to be a war, then?"

"I shall kill you somehow, I swear it. You will never be able to relax in my company. I will make what is left of your life a living hell."

Torrian sat back, regarding her with loathing. "Believe me, if not for your kingdom, I would never marry a harpy like you."

Sabre sat on the yard fence and watched Victor's men practising the moves he had shown them. A lot of his strength had returned since the previous day, but he did not reveal it. Victor had supplied all the food he could eat, eager for him to start the training he had promised. Earlier, the Prince had watched Sabre demonstrate the techniques the men worked on now, and seemed well pleased.

The cyber constantly prompted Sabre to go after the Queen, and he had decided to leave tonight. With a fast horse, he might be able to overhaul the coach by the following night. In a way, he was sad to leave Prince Victor. He was a decent man, if somewhat pompous, and had treated Sabre well, even hinting that Garvon was due to retire soon. A job as Victor's master-at-arms would be a well-paid position, and he could lead a normal life in Olgara, until the spacer who had brought him returned to reclaim him.

The idiotic Queen had to be rescued, however. Even without the cyber's insistent prompting, he disliked the thought of Torrian forcing her into an unwanted marriage, despite the fact that she had ruined their best chance of escape.

A burst of laughter disturbed his reverie, and he jumped down to break up a brewing fight, then returned to his perch when the men resumed their practice. The new partnership with the cyber pleased him. He found the computer's information useful, and it no longer intruded on his control. Sabre hoped the cyber would be content to remain in the back seat and allow him to pursue his life once Tassin was safe. At worst, the cyber would keep him at her side, a prospect he found

unpleasant. He had no wish to spend his precious freedom at the beck and call of a silly girl.

Sabre signalled to the men to stop their training for the day, and followed them into the barracks, where he now stayed. After a final night of luxury in the palace, Victor had informed him that he was to share the billets with the other men. Sabre would have preferred the privacy of a cell; his training made rubbing shoulders with a lot of people uncomfortable.

His freedom had surprised him; he had expected to be shackled and locked up when he was not teaching the men. Evidently Victor thought there was nothing Sabre could do now that Tassin was Torrian's prisoner, and did not think he would try to rescue the Queen. The broken shackles and smashed cell door might have also convinced him that he could not keep Sabre prisoner, in any case. Making him sleep in the barracks was the Prince's only attempt at guarding him, probably thinking he would have little chance of escape from there.

Chapter Sixteen

When Sabre woke, the control unit's chronometer informed him that it was two in the morning, local time, as he had planned, and he wondered if the computer had woken him. Sitting up on the hard bed, he listened to the amazing variety of noises men made in their sleep. The barracks resounded with rattles, buzzes, whistles, wheezes, grating, grunting, moaning, sawing, and a peculiar flubbing sound made by lips flapping in the breeze. He smiled as he dressed. He certainly did not need to creep around. The racket would cover any noise he made, unless he shouted at the top of his voice.

Sabre left the barracks and used the shadows to seek the outer wall. The three-metre wall was easily climbed, and he walked into town in search of a stable, still angry that Tassin had refused to scale the wall. At the Singing Harlot, he cast his eye over the assortment of horseflesh available. Spotting a rangy chestnut with a broad blaze and four white socks, he recognised it as the mount of the young nobleman in Arlin. Sabre saddled and bridled the animal, then led it outside. The chestnut pranced and sidestepped, tossing its head, so he led it to the outskirts of the city before mounting. On the open road, he gave the horse its head, allowing it to stretch out in a cracking gallop.

Dawn found him watering the horse at a stream, wishing he had been able to bring provisions. He also wished he had not lost the wrist laser, even if there had been little ammunition left. When the horse had drunk its fill, Sabre rode on at a more sedate pace, conserving the animal's strength. The horse remained eager and bouncy, moving at a fast trot.

Night had spread a gloomy shroud over the land when he spotted Torrian's gilded coach beside the road. Sabre tethered the chestnut and walked closer, using the cyber's scanners to ascertain the sentries' positions. Crouching behind some bushes at the edge of the camp, he studied it. Torrian's warriors shared a fire, while the King and Tassin sat at another, a servant attending them.

Two tents were pitched close to the coach, presumably for Tassin and the King, and Sabre smiled. The horses were picketed beyond the firelight, and he approached them, using the scrubby bushes for cover. Selecting a sturdy-looking bay, he saddled it and led it back to his chestnut, tethering it there. Returning to the camp, he settled down to wait for everyone to retire, his stomach rumbling at the smell of cooking.

Tassin glared at Torrian with deep loathing. After she had stabbed him with her hairpin, insults had thickened the air, and she had longed for the strength to overpower him and escape. Forced to quell her rage-induced wish to kick him, she had contented herself by winning the verbal sparring. By the time he had resorted to sullen silence, the atmosphere was almost too thick to breathe. Its stifling animosity remained, making the servant scuttle nervously, for fear of bearing the brunt of their ire, she assumed.

Tassin forced herself to eat the roasted fowl and steamed vegetables she was served, despite her knotted stomach. Torrian consumed his repast with much lip-smacking and grease-dribbling, which nauseated her further. He rounded off his revolting performance with several loud belches, and refilled his wine cup. The servant offered her wine, fruit, nuts and pastries, but she waved him away and retired to her tent to escape Torrian's company.

Tassin removed her girdle and hairpins, wishing she had other clothes. In their absence, she took off the outer dress and lay on the pallet in her thin under gown. Staring at the tent's roof, she contemplated her bleak future, filled with dread that Torrian would choose to molest her now that she was at his mercy. The thought made her stomach clench further, and she forced herself to relax, listening to him talking to one of his officers beside the fire. Her vigilance did not wane until she knew, from the silence, that he had retired to his tent, then she closed her eyes and fell into an uneasy doze.

Tassin jerked awake as a hand clamped over her mouth, stifling her scream. A man with sparkling lights on his brow crouched over her.

"Hush. It's me."

Sabre's husky voice made her slump with relief, and he removed his hand. Becoming aware that it smelt of leather oil and horse, she scrubbed her lips. Indignation rushed in to fill the void that the sudden ebb of dread left, and her anger flared.

"I wish you would not keep doing that!"

"What, rescuing you?"

"Putting your dirty hands on me," she growled.

"It's a good thing I wasn't expecting gratitude from you. Would you like to stay here? I'm sure Torrian stinks worse than me."

"No!" Tassin squeaked in panic, then realised that he was joking and relaxed. "You are well now?"

He smiled, and she stared at the brow band. Many of the lights that had been flashing red after his fall from the cliff were now steady green again, and a few flashed amber. The diagonal line of lights remained red, and the topmost two flashed. Obviously he was not under the cyber's control, but something had changed.

"No thanks to you," he said.

"You made me angry."

"I take it that means you're sorry?"

"Go to hell."

"Likewise. Shall we go, your high and mightiness?"

Sabre stood up, ducking to avoid the tent's low roof. Tassin pulled on the overdress while he rolled her bedding into a bundle.

Leaving Tassin to finish dressing, Sabre wandered over to the stew pot that hung above a cook fire's glowing embers. Sampling it, he glanced at the cyber's data. The sentries patrolled on the camp's outskirts, staying well away from the tents to avoid intruding upon the royals' privacy. The cyber tracked their meandering progress and frequent meetings to chat.

Tassin emerged and glared at him. "What are you doing? This is no time to eat!"

He glanced at her. "On the contrary, I'm hungry." Taking in her ruffled pink finery, he chuckled.

She flushed. "This was Mirrial's idea, not mine."

Sabre tried to stifle his laughter, coughing. "It suits you."

"It is a stupid dress!"

"I think it's cute. All those bows and ruffles, little flowers too. You look like a real queen."

Tassin stamped her foot. "Very funny. Let us go!"

Sabre chuckled and turned his attention back to the food. "What's the rush? This is a really good stew."

"What if someone wakes up?"

He shook his head. "That will only happen if you wake them with your squeaks of rage."

Tassin glanced around. The waning silver moon, Argos, gave little light, and the orange moon, Pythal, had not risen yet. Bridling her impatience, she waited while Sabre ate his fill, since he was not going to listen to her. The pot was almost empty when he put down the spoon and rose.

"Where are the provisions?"

"I think they are strapped to the back of the coach."

Sabre vanished into the darkness, and Tassin crept over to Torrian's tent. Just inside the flap, she found the bundle of armour and weapons she had seen him place there earlier, and uncovered a

gleaming gold-hilted sword sheathed in soft leather. Digging in the bundle, she drew out a long, slender dagger and wrapped it, together with the sword, in a length of cloth.

Tassin glared at the hulking form of the sleeping King, wishing she had the skill and strength to end his life while he slept. She had never killed a man, and, much as she longed for his death, the thought of plunging the dagger into his flesh sickened her. If she did not kill him with one blow, he would rouse the camp and Sabre would be forced to fight again. Somehow she doubted Torrian would be easy to kill. Sabre could do it, but he would not, and she resented his refusal to do as she wished. With Torrian gone, Victor would marry her, she was certain, and her problems would be over.

Sabre returned a few moments later, with water skins and food, which he bundled together with her bedding, then paused, turning his head slowly, like the cyber had done.

"Okay, the sentries are moving away. Hold onto the back of my webbing, and try not to make any noise."

Sabre led her through the bush to a pair of tethered horses, making her previously impossible wish to escape seem ridiculously easy. He loaded the supplies, then turned and spotted the bundle she clutched to her breast.

"What have you got there?" She displayed the sword, and his teeth flashed in a white grin. "At last, the warrior queen is armed!"

"It is not funny!"

"But it is! You couldn't swing that thing if your life depended on it." He held out his hand, and she stepped back.

"It is mine."

He chuckled. "Okay, keep it. Just don't drop it on your toe."

"I know how to handle a sword, Sabre." She lashed it to her saddle.

"So, where to, Your Majesty?"

"Back to Olgara."

"Are you nuts?"

"Nuts?"

"Never mind." He ran a hand over his hair. "We can't go back to Olgara. That's the first place Torrian will look, and Xavier will help him."

"There is nowhere else to go." She sank down on a rock. "If Torrian does not find me in Olgara, he will search Arlin, and his kingdom, and Grisson's and Bardok's. Beyond those kingdoms is the Infinite Sea, which cannot be crossed, and otherwise there is only the badlands, which cannot be crossed either."

Sabre rubbed his chin with a faint rasp of stubble. "What's beyond Olgara?"

"The sea."

"And the other way?"

"Badlands. The desert cuts right across the land, stopping at the Barrier Mountains."

Sabre gazed into space, digesting this. "But there's good land beyond the Badlands."

"No one knows that. The legends say there is a paradise there, but we cannot cross the Badlands. It is cursed." She shuddered. "And if you try to cross it, you have to go through the Death Zone."

He nodded. "Mother Amy said something about that."

"It was to have been the cyber's mission, before Pervor ordered it to protect me instead. The cyber was meant to destroy the Death Zone. It is getting bigger, and the monsters that come out of it are crossing the mountains and attacking villages in Arlin. The lands we live in are life zones, the desert is the Badlands, and in the middle of it is the Death Zone."

Sabre turned to gaze into the desert. "Radiation."

"What?"

"The curse. It's radiation, from the nuclear war. That's what causes the monsters. They must be mutants."

She shook her head. "It is evil magic, like Mother Amy said."

"Call it what you will, it's deadly."

"So we go to Olgara."

"No. We'll just get caught. We cross the Badlands."

Tassin jumped up. "You are mad! You will kill us both! Even if it could be crossed, I do not want to live in a strange land, where I will be nobody. I have a kingdom. I am a queen!"

He shrugged, tightening his horse's girth. "Then marry Torrian."

"No! I wanted to marry Victor, but Xavier made a stupid deal with Torrian, and Victor is too spineless to go against him."

Sabre looked thoughtful. "What about that young lord we met on the road to the pass. What was his name? Algar or something. He's in Olgara. I stole his horse. You could marry him."

"He is not important enough. Torrian would kill him. He would not kill Victor, because that would start a war with Olgara, but that young lord is small fry."

"Then marry Grisson, he'll kick the bucket soon enough."

She shuddered. "He is disgusting."

"Doesn't Grisson have a son? Or Bardok, for that matter?"

"No. Grisson's two sons died, and Bardok has only twelve illegitimate daughters."

"Then it'll have to be Grisson. You have no other choice."

She paced around. "If only Victor was not such a coward!"

"But he is, so forget him."

"Perhaps he will agree now. After all, Xavier has fulfilled his bargain and got his money."

He watched her with an exasperated expression. "I think he'll still hand you back to Torrian."

"I want to try. We will go to Olgara."

Sabre leant against the horse and draped an arm across the saddle. "Right now, we have horses and supplies. If we go back to Olgara, we lose them, and our chance to cross the Badlands."

"I do not care. I have no intention of crossing the desert. I am not going into the Death Zone." She folded her arms and glared at him, daring him to refuse.

Sabre muttered a curse and glanced eastward, where the first pale glow of dawn brightened the sky. "Tassin, if we go to Olgara, you'll end up back with Torrian, and I'm not saving your butt again. If you go to Olgara, you go alone." He glared at her, a twinge in his brain warning him of the cyber's dislike for this idea.

"How dare you defy me?" she cried.

He groaned and leant his forehead against the horse's withers.

She stamped her foot. "You will do as I say, damn you, Sabre! You will take me back to Olgara, now!"

Shaking his head, Sabre untied the chestnut and gathered up the reins, preparing to mount. "Go if you want, but count me out."

Tassin flew at him and grabbed his webbing, trying to drag him away from the horse. He turned to her, and she pounded on his chest, then slapped his face. He frowned, surprised when she burst into tears and sank down in a plethora of frilly skirts, sobbed and covered her face. Sighing, he stared across the foothills, quelling a surge of sympathy and reminding himself that this was how women got their way, when all else failed, by resorting to tears. This particular gem of wisdom he had learnt at the women's spa, when he had been the old woman's bodyguard.

"You cannot leave me like this, I need you!" she wailed.

He shook his head. "You need me to kill people. You certainly don't want my advice. You're a damned warrior queen, and now you've got a sword, so kill them yourself."

"I need you to help me, not to tell me what to do!"

"I'm trying to help you!"

"Then kill Torrian!" she shouted.

"What?" Sabre's eyes snapped down to her in shock.

"Kill him! He has no heir. His cousin will inherit, and he is a coward. He will cause no trouble. Grisson and Bardok will not prevent me from marrying Victor. With Torrian dead, there will be no reason why Victor cannot marry me. Do you not see? It will change everything!"

He turned away in disgust. "I know you're desperate, but that's really low. I'm not murdering anyone to facilitate your little dream of what your life should be. If you want him dead, kill him yourself."

"If I am forced to marry him, I will!" She stood up, wiping her eyes.

Sabre gathered up the chestnut's reins. "Fine, go murder him then, but leave me out of your sick little plans."

She grabbed him again. "No! Do not leave me!"

He pushed her away hard enough to make her stumble back and sit down with a thud. "What do you need me for? You've got it all worked out. A few convenient murders and your life will be idyllic."

"I cannot! I could not kill anyone in cold blood, not even Torrian!"

"Well, at least you have that much sense. But I'm not doing it for you, either."

She gazed up at him, her eyes shimmering with tears. "You do not know what he is. If it was only a loveless marriage, I could live with that. He is not a decrepit drunkard like Grisson, or a fat smelly lecher like Bardok. He is far worse; he is a rapist and a woman beater. Would you condemn me to that?"

Sabre frowned. "No."

Tassin drew up her knees and buried her face in them.

Golden sunlight quested across the land, and he looked inward at the cyber's scanner information. Many red and blue dots, indicating men and horses, moved on a black backdrop with a green grid for scale. A close-packed twenty came from the direction of Olgara, and the dozen in Torrian's camp moved about in agitation. They had run out of time. Victor was coming after him, and Torrian would soon be heading back. They were caught in between, with a mountain range at their backs and a radioactive desert before them.

Tassin looked up. "Help me, Sabre... please?"

He took her wrist and hauled her to her feet, shoving her towards the bay horse. "Get on the bloody horse."

Shooting him a calculating look, she swung into the saddle. Sabre took her horse's reins while she clung to the pommel, the copious skirts of the ridiculous dress billowing around her. Mounting the chestnut, he turned it towards the road.

"We are going to Olgara?" she asked.

"No."

Urging the chestnut into a canter, he guided it through the rough terrain. When they reached the road, he slowed it to a trot and glanced towards Olgara, where a distant cloud of dust marked Victor's approach. The new-born sun glinted on weapons and armour, and the faint drumming of hooves carried on the wind.

Tassin cried, "It is Victor! He has changed his mind! He has come for me!"

"No, he's coming after me."

"Why would he do that? He has come for me, I tell you!"

Sabre guided the chestnut across the road, leading Tassin's horse. "He wants me to show him how to fight. I escaped last night."

"Where are you going? Turn towards him!"

"Shut up, Tassin, we're crossing the desert."

"No! Let go of my horse! Victor is coming to rescue me!"

Kicking his horse back into a canter, Sabre headed into the Badlands' arid sands, ignoring the Queen's enraged shouts. When her shrieks stopped abruptly, he glanced back. She had jumped off the horse, and was climbing to her feet, clearly intent on heading back towards the soldiers. With a

muttered curse, he brought the chestnut to a propping standstill, then yanked the horse's head around and urged it into a canter again. The Queen gathered up her skirts and ran, kicking up plumes of sand.

Sabre guided his horse alongside her and pulled her onto his pommel. She fought and kicked as he turned the chestnut with one hand, forcing him to increase the pressure of his arm until she gasped. He eased it when she stopped struggling, allowing her to breathe again. The bay horse followed when he spurred the chestnut into the desert, and Tassin slumped, looking back at what she thought was her prince in shining armour.

What a shock she would have got, Sabre mused, to find that she was not the object of Victor's desire after all. The Prince would be after blood, for the insult of Sabre's escape from the palace. He urged the horse on, and the chestnut stretched gamely into a full gallop across the hard sand.

Victor's troops turned off the road and followed, but their slower mounts fell behind as Sabre skirted a large area of black glass. According to the cyber, the radioactivity was still high in the glassy areas, where the bombs had exploded. Sabre kept checking the scanner information, and avoided invisible pockets of radiation. He slowed the tiring chestnut to a canter, allowing the bay horse to catch up. Far behind, the dust that marked Victor's position had stopped. Evidently the Prince and his men were unwilling to brave the Badlands' curse.

Sabre slowed the blowing gelding to a walk, not wanting to exhaust it at the outset. Although it was unlikely that the animals would survive the trip, he wanted them to last for as long as possible. The scanners showed him that Victor's men had turned back, and met up with Torrian's dozen. They would have a nice little chat, he surmised, imagining how furious they would be. Tassin gazed over his shoulder until the troops vanished into the distance, then buried her face in his chest. The situation was rather too intimate for his liking, but he knew that if he objected, it would only spark another furious outburst and lead to an argument. After a few minutes, she leant back and glared at him, her eyes accusing.

"You have doomed us. We will die out here."

"Not necessarily. The cyber and I have come to an arrangement. It's programmed to help you, so it's agreed to help me. It can detect radiation, or the curse, as you call it, so I can avoid it. With a bit of luck, we'll cross the desert."

"The Death Zone will kill us!"

"The Death Zone is just radiation."

She shook her head. "It is evil, terrible magic, just like Mother Amy said."

"There's no such thing as magic. Believe me, we'll be all right."

She rubbed her eyes. "If we do not die of thirst."

"There is that."

"And if we do reach the other side, we will be trapped in a strange land."

"Perhaps you'll find a nice prince there, or even a king, then you can come back. If it can be crossed one way, it can be crossed the other."

Tassin stared over his shoulder. "I am the Queen of Arlin."

"Well, you don't want to marry any of the kings, so you're being a bit picky."

"Victor was coming to save me!"

"Victor was coming to try to chop off my head."

She sniffed. "Are you sure?"

He shrugged. "Either that, or he still wanted me to train his troops."

"So you could have stayed with him?"

"Yes."

"But you came after me."

He smiled. "The cyber made me."

"Oh." She rubbed her nose. "So you did not want to?"

"Not particularly. I knew you'd only find fault."

"You do not like me, do you?"

He glanced at her. "You're a hard person to like."

"Why?"

Sabre gave a bark of laughter. "Because you're bossy, selfish, pig-headed, thick-skinned, rude and abrasive."

She scowled. "That is because I'm a queen!"

"You're still a human being."

She snorted. "You are just a commoner, what do you know?"

"Then don't ask me."

"I will not."

"Good."

A thick silence fell, which only the steady thudding of the horses' hooves broke. As the sun climbed higher, the heat increased, and shimmering waves danced on the horizon. Sweat trickled down Sabre's chest, and Tassin leant away from him, rigid with disgust and indignation. Her hair grew limp with perspiration, and clung to her brow in damp tendrils. The chestnut sweated under the double load, but he did not trust Tassin not to steal the bay and make a dash back to the mountains.

At midday, Sabre stopped and helped her to dismount. The heat drained the horses' strength, and sweating dehydrated them. The distant mountains danced in the heat waves, a beckoning haven of verdure and water. The horses stood with drooping heads, and Tassin flopped down in the bay's shadow. The sun had reddened her arms and face, and he knelt beside her to inspect the burns.

"You must cover yourself, or you'll get sunstroke."

"How solicitous of you. Would it not be better if I died? Then you would be rid of an unwanted burden."

"Stop being stupid. Take off one of your petticoats."

Tassin complied, muttering, and he fashioned it into a hooded poncho, then retreated to his patch of shade and contemplated their situation. They had enough water for several days, if it was used sparingly. The food would last longer, and, if the Badlands could be crossed in a few days, they would be all right, but for all he knew, there might not be a paradise on the other side, only a poisonous sea. A gurgling sound made him glance around to find Tassin gulping from one of the water skins. He jumped up and grabbed the skin.

"The water has to last. Drink only a little at a time."

"I am thirsty!"

"So am I, but you'll suffer more if we run out."

Hanging the water skin back on the horse, he retreated once more to his precious patch of shade and lay down, ignoring her glare.

Chapter Seventeen

For four nights, Sabre led the Queen across the desert, skirting glassy areas and pockets of wind-borne radiation. Tassin whined about the water rationing, complained about the discomfort of sleeping on the hard sand and grumbled about riding in the cold wind. After a while he tuned out her constant carping, even though there was little else to occupy his attention.

On the fifth night, the cyber's scanners detected underground water at the limit of their range, and he headed towards it. A concrete slab was half buried in the sand, and he dismounted to study it, ignoring the Queen's plaintive questions about why they had stopped. Sand had drifted over the slab, hiding what could only be a pre-war reservoir. The cyber informed him that the seeping water it had detected was not contaminated, but the slab was too heavy for a normal man to shift. Sabre crouched and brushed the sand away from the edges, and Tassin came to stand beside him.

"What is it?"

"There's water under here. I just have to move this."

"Water! I can have a drink. We will be able to refill the skins!"

"Yes, but not too much, or it'll make you sick," Sabre warned as she trotted to the nearest horse and grabbed a flaccid skin. While she gulped from it, he exposed the entire slab, wondering if he would be able to lift it. He had little choice, especially now that she had consumed half the remaining water. The slab offered no handholds or protuberances to which he could attach a rope, even if he had one, so he could not use the horses to pull it aside. He joined Tassin and drank some water while he pondered the problem.

The slab was a good twelve centimetres thick, and he estimated its weight at around eight hundred kilos. He prompted the cyber to raise his metabolism to provide the necessary energy, and a warm flush of vitality washed through him. He handed the skin back to Tassin and returned to his task. Digging the sand from under one side, he made enough room to insinuate his fingers. It would be an awkward lift, placing a lot of strain on his back, which was reinforced only with a telescopic strand of barrinium to prevent disks from slipping. The springy metal did not interfere with his spine's suppleness, but only added a little strength to it. Crouching, he slipped his hands under the slab and prepared to lift it.

Tassin stared at him in patent amazement, and he almost smiled. The slab looked far too heavy for anyone to move, never mind lift off the ground, he supposed, but then, she had no idea of a cyber's capabilities. He took a few deep breaths, then went rigid as he took up the strain. His thigh muscles burnt, and cords strained at the skin of his neck. His heart rate quadrupled and his face grew hot as his blood pressure shot up, causing vessels to throb on his forehead and bulge on his arms. Pain lanced from his shoulder, elbow and wrist joints, and he grimaced. Tassin's eyes widened as the slab rose with a dull grating as he straightened. He leant against it, and it slid back, exposing a round hole. Unable to push it further without falling down the well, he dropped the slab with a gritty boom.

The smell of water excited the thirsty horses, which tried to reach it. He caught them and turned them away before they kicked sand into the well, removed a pack and tethered them to it. Returning to the half open well, he peered in. The scanners indicated that the water was a good ten metres down, and he cursed, wishing he had some rope. His gaze flicked to the ribbons and ruffles of Tassin's pink dress, and he stepped closer to finger the material. She stared at him with wide, horrified eyes.

He smiled. "I need something to make into a rope. This will do." Without giving her a chance to protest, he ripped off the long strips of material that formed the bows and flowers. Yards of tough silk came away in his hands, and he remarked, "I'm glad Mirrial made you wear this, it's proving mighty handy."

"I am so happy I have something to contribute," she sniped.

"Me too."

After a great deal of ripping, Sabre held four long pieces of superfluous cloth, which he tied together. The dress yielded around seven metres of silk, and he made up the difference with his weapons' harness. Using an empty saddle bag as a bucket, he hauled up enough water to fill another for the horses. When their thirst had been slaked, he flopped down to rest while the animals dug in the sand, hoping to uncover grass. Their instincts did not help them, for there was no grass to find here, as there was under the snow in winter. Nothing had grown in this desert for decades.

Sabre considered the beasts sadly. They had not eaten for five days, and the flesh had melted from them to reveal ribs and gaunt muscle. The water would help, but he calculated that soon they would be too weak to ride. He tossed Tassin some dried meat and tore at a piece while he considered her. Because of her dark colouring, she had tanned to a deep gold, which suited her. His skin had also darkened, making his scars more noticeable.

They spent two days at the well, where the plenitude of water allowed them to bathe to stave off the heat during the day. Sabre knew they could not linger there for long, however, without food for the horses. Soon they would have to press on across the burning wasteland.

Torrian glared at his advisors, who studied their feet and shifted uneasily. A tense silence filled the banquet hall, broken only by the sputtering of torches and the scratching of a dog under the table. Suits of armour stood in the corners, and fading tapestries adorned the walls between coats-of-arms and battle banners. The wrought-iron chandelier that hung on a stout chain from the open beams cast flickering light on the silver cutlery and golden goblets. A fire roared in the vast hearth, warming the room and the three wolfhounds that basked on a bear skin rug before it. The hall's décor, and indeed the rest of the castle, reflected Torrian's penchant for the trappings of hunting and battle, its walls hung with trophies and weaponry.

After two days on the dusty road from Olgara and a further week to reach his castle, Torrian's temper was frayed beyond any foreseeable hope of repair. His ego still smarted from the insults Tassin had rained upon his head and the ease with which she had escaped him. The advisors had been summoned to the banquet hall soon after his arrival, to suffer the brunt of his ire. Torrian presided over a cooling feast, his appetite gone; only the rich wine in his goblet of any interest to him. The King's eyes flitted over his elderly counsellors and came to rest on Gearn, who shuffled under his scrutiny.

Torrian growled, "You have failed me, mage. Your wolves failed. Now that accursed man has stolen her away again. He is truly a powerful magician. More powerful than you, I suspect."

Gearn's eyes glinted. "I could defeat him, Sire, but they will surely die in the Badlands."

"Perhaps, perhaps not. If that man is as great a wizard as he seems, he may well be able to cross the desert and the Death Zone."

"What will that avail them? The Queen cannot rule her land from the other side of the desert, Sire. She will return."

"Maybe. But I am not a patient man. So long as she is free, I am denied her kingdom and its riches, for which my men have fought and died. I demand a solution to this. I want her back here!"

"Sire." Gearn bowed. "I have no other solution to offer. Perhaps you should send more soldiers after her."

Torrian snorted. "We all know soldiers cannot defeat that man. He is a mage!" The King leant forward, his eyes narrowing. "No, you will go after them, Gearn. You will defeat him, as you say you can, and bring the Queen back."

"Sire, I am honoured that you have such faith in me, but... what if I cannot?"

"Then you will pay for your failure, I suspect, with your life. You are a great wizard, Gearn, the best in all the kingdoms, am I right? Certainly that is what you have always boasted, so perhaps now is the time to prove it. This may be the challenge for which you have been waiting. I want that girl brought back here, and I have ordered you to perform this task. I do not care how you do it, is that understood?"

"Yes, Your Majesty." Gearn bowed low, his cadaverous face pale. The rest of the advisors had slumped with relief when Torrian had focussed his anger on Gearn, and some of them shot the mage smug looks. They had long resented his high status and privileged position with the King, earned with the unsavoury arts of magic, most of which they thought were trickery. Gearn had not helped matters by being arrogant and rude, which meant that he had no friends amongst the advisors. Torrian dismissed them, and they filed out after Gearn, who stalked from the room with an air of proud determination. Torrian pulled a leg from a roasted fowl and gnawed it, ignoring the whining dogs that watched him with hungry eyes.

Gearn hurried along the cold corridor that led to his chamber in one of the castle's many towers. The heavy wooden door creaked when he pushed it open, its hinges rusted from lack of oil. The servants never came to his tower, and consequently it suffered from neglect. Dust covered the floors and shelves, cobwebs festooned every corner and beam. Piles of unidentifiable paraphernalia cluttered the dirty floor, and a long table groaned under mounds of herbs and strange rocks, flasks and pots.

Skulls grinned in the shadows, and dusty cobwebs festooned the sconces like dirty rags. Guttering torches filled the room with smoky light, and a fire blazed in the grate, sustained by a magical log that would burn forever. The room reeked of enough magic to offend the nose of the most uneducated peasant, and few dared to enter Gearn's lair. Several wards ensured that any who did would regret it, particularly if they were fellow magicians.

Gearn stood before the table, deep in thought. He caressed the pots of potion that had transferred the souls of the old soldiers into wolves, remembering the magic he had used to achieve it. That had been a mighty spell, more powerful than any magician had cast since the great, long dead Rimlon. He would overcome this young upstart mage who protected the Queen, and if he could catch up with them before they entered the Death Zone, so much the better. The thought of braving that dreaded place did not please him, for the Death Zone's magic was powerful and evil.

Gearn's gaze fell upon the wolf that lay in a dusty shadow, his muzzle on his paws, his yellow eyes watching the mage. "You will come too, Miate, your task is not yet complete."

The wolf whined, raising his head.

"Yes, you long to redeem yourself in the eyes of the King, do you not?"

The wolf lowered his muzzle back onto his paws, his eyes eager.

"Go and bring Hispor."

The wolf rose and padded out, a flitting grey shadow. Gearn turned back to his potions, rubbing his chin as he pondered the problem. "I need something better than a wolf, something stronger," he muttered. "That man is not only a mage, but a warrior too. A warrior mage, a magic warrior... That's it!" He snapped his fingers. "A great warrior, with me to protect him with magic and make him stronger."

Gearn went over to a bookshelf and ran his finger along the row of ancient tomes, selected one and took it down. Clearing an area on the table, he opened the book and leafed through it. He glanced up as his apprentice came in, a black-haired youth with dark eyes and a lean, expressionless face. The wolf slunk in behind him, returning to his shadow beside a pile of skulls.

Gearn contemplated the boy. "Hispor, I have been assigned a great task. I must cross the cursed lands and bring back Queen Tassin. The King has entrusted this most important work to me, for he knows I will not fail him. I shall find the Queen and defeat the warrior mage who guards her, and the King will shower me with praise and riches. In this endeavour, you will play an important part."

Hispor gazed at his mentor, his eyes reflecting the fire's flames. He seldom spoke, and sometimes unnerved Gearn with his cold black stares. Gearn turned away, holding out his hands to the fire. He always found it necessary to assure Hispor of his importance, and treated him with far greater kindness and courtesy than anyone else, purely because he entrusted the boy with important

tasks that he could not afford to have sabotaged or bungled.

"You will find me a warrior, Hispor. A gladiator, whatever it takes. I want a big man, very strong, a fighter. The King tells me this warrior mage is a small man, so we will find one who can beat him, aided by my magic."

Hispor nodded. "A good plan, master."

Gearn glared at him. "Of course it is, now go. There is no time to waste. Find me a fighting man, the biggest you can get. Promise him riches, women, everlasting life, whatever it takes. They are usually stupid and greedy. You know what to do."

Hispor bowed and vanished through the door as Gearn turned back to his workbench. He cleared a space with a sweep of his arm, consigning numerous bottles and pots to the pile on the floor, then began to assemble a new set of potions while the wolf in the shadows watched.

Chapter Eighteen

Sabre gazed at the distant city, wishing he could explore it. There might be water in it, but it would be radioactive, like the city itself. It could not harm him, but Tassin's presence forced him to detour around it. Two nights ago, they had left the well and headed across the desert once more. Now they passed the ruins of a great city destroyed by the bombs, its crumbling walls rising like jagged teeth from the sea of sand that lapped at their feet. The city was the reason such a vast area had been irradiated. It had been the focal point of the war, and its destruction had ended the holocaust.

When Tassin asked him about it, he explained the ancient war that had created the Badlands and the Death Zone. Now and then they encountered ruins half buried in the sand, but they were radioactive and had to be avoided, to Tassin's chagrin. Sabre surmised that there had once been a river running through the centre of the Badlands, and the city had been built on its banks. Huge residential areas must have surrounded it, but these had been bombed out of existence, leaving behind the scattered ruins they passed.

Four nights after leaving the well, the horses were too weak to be ridden, and they were forced lead the stumbling animals. Tassin complained about the added hardship, but Sabre ignored her. He had noticed that the water supply was dwindling far too rapidly, and knew she was helping herself to it while he slept. This annoyed him, but instead of rebuking her and starting a row, he used the last two water skins as a pillow.

The next day, he was woken by her tugging a skin from under him, and cursed the fact that the cyber's flashing red warning light had not roused him from his exhausted slumber sooner. He wrenched the skin away from her, and she glared at him.

"I am thirsty, Sabre!"

"So am I. So are the horses. There's not enough for any of us, and I have no idea how long it will be before we find more. If you drink it all now, you could die before we find any."

"We might never find any!"

He sighed. "There you go with that fatalistic crap again. It has to last as long as possible, to give us the best chance of finding more, okay?"

"No! I want some now!"

"Tough shit."

"How dare you speak to me like that?" she fumed. "You got us into this mess, now you expect me to suffer because of your stupidity! This is all your fault, so you should go without, not me."

"I'm already going without."

"Then it is all mine, and I may drink it when I please."

Sabre frowned, his concern for her welfare decreasing with every barbed remark she made. Deciding that she would argue until she got what she wanted, no matter what he said, he tossed the water skin to her.

"Just a little," he warned.

Tassin shot him a triumphant smile and lifted it to her lips, the gurgling sound making his mouth burn. The horses nickered and shuffled closer, and Sabre sympathised. The only thing worse than being thirsty was being forced to watch someone else drink.

The food had run out, and he considered slaughtering one of the horses, for it would provide moisture as well as food, if eaten raw. The animals had protruding ribs and shrunken bellies, their eyes sunken with dehydration.

When he rose at dusk, he found that the bay had died in its sleep, sparing him the onerous task of killing the hapless animal. Sabre butchered it and ate the liver, kidneys and heart, but Tassin refused to eat any of it, grimacing in disgust. The chestnut whinnied for its friend, a lost and lonely sound. Sabre cut thin strips of meat from the horse's haunches and packed them away to be laid out

to dry in the sun the next day. While he chewed on the raw liver, he considered their predicament again.

After ten days, they must have covered over nine hundred kilometres, yet still no end was in sight. They had passed the ruined city on the eighth night, and, if it was at the centre of the Badlands, they should only have another six days to go. There was only enough water for two more days, however.

That night, they continued to trudge across the desert, leading the shambling chestnut. Close to dawn, Sabre stopped, and Tassin stumbled into him. The cyber's scanner information showed a band of radiation that stretched across the desert in front of them, blocking the way. Tassin lay down and fell into an exhausted sleep, not bothering to ask why they had stopped. Sabre left the horse beside her and approached the radiation belt to see how thick it was. The scanners found it to be over a kilometre wide, and there was no way to tell if it was moving. He returned to the Queen and set up the tents, then lay down to sleep through the heat of the day.

Waking at dusk, Sabre caught Tassin helping herself to the water and snatched it from her.

"Don't be bloody stupid! You've got to make it last."

She glared at him. "We are going to die anyway, why suffer more than necessary?"

"We're not going to die." He put the skin away. "Another four or five days and we'll be out of it."

"You think. Maybe we will just find the sea."

Sabre's throat was too dry to argue, so he rose and collected what little equipment they had left. The cyber told him that the radiation had dispersed or moved away during the day, and he frowned, studying the information again. A mauve dot pulsed at the limit of the scanners' range, directly in their path, and the colour indicated an unidentified life form. He had not expected to encounter any life so far out in the Badlands.

Sabre persuaded Tassin to start walking and headed towards it, hoping it was something he could kill for food. The life form remained stationary, and, as they drew closer, he slowed. Even with infrared vision the desert ahead seemed empty, although they were within two hundred metres of the life form now. He stopped and turned to the Queen.

"There's something out there. You stay here, I'm going to look."

Tassin opened her mouth, but he strode away.

Sabre approached the life form warily. The brilliance of the mauve dot indicated that the creature was large, but the desert ahead remained empty. Unless the scanners were malfunctioning, which he doubted, the creature must be underground. He studied the sand before him, wondering if he would have to dig it up, and if so, whether it was worth the effort. He was tempted to detour around the spot, for the only weapons he possessed were the knife from the packs and Tassin's sword. The possibility that it could provide food for them was too tempting, however. He crept nearer, then swung around at the sound of footsteps to find Tassin approaching, looking annoyed.

"What are you sneaking up on? There is nothing here. You must be going mad, Sabre."

"I'm not – go back to the horse, now!"

She folded her arms and glared at him. "Not until you tell me what you are doing, creeping around in the middle of an obviously empty desert as if you were stalking some sort of animal."

"There's something here, under the sand..."

A red warning light flashed in his brain as a grating sound came from behind him. Tassin's gaze focussed on something beyond him, and her eyes widened. Sabre whipped around as she turned and ran.

A huge, buff-coloured creature rose from the ground, sand running like water from its scaly hide. Massive clawed feet heaved a sinuous body from its hiding place, and it shook the sand from its head, opening eyes and ears. Long blades of horn framed a narrow, fierce-eyed head crowned by a cluster of curving horns. It reared up with a sibilant hiss, its beak-like jaws opening to reveal a blue tongue covered with backward-curving spikes.

Sabre stepped back as a bright red frill opened around its throat, adding to its formidable air.

Dropping to all fours, it moved towards him with a lizard's twisting, pigeon-toed gait. Sabre backed away, clutching the knife as he assessed its weaknesses. Only its eyes, and maybe its ears, were vulnerable, tough scales covered the rest of it. This was a truly alien animal, a remnant of the indigenous species that had once lived on this planet. Perhaps it had always been a desert dweller, or maybe humans had forced it to live in this radioactive land.

As it stalked him, he considered his options. It seemed confident, not hurrying after its prey. The sword in the horse's pack was far away, and if he went after it the creature would follow, endangering Tassin. There was nowhere to run or hide, and the beast appeared to be well aware that it had the advantage. He would need the cyber's help to overcome such a formidable foe without injury, and he could not afford to waste energy on a protracted battle.

Tassin stood beside the horse, gasping with shock and fear. She gripped the cold hilt of the sword strapped to the saddle, but the sight of the monster kept her frozen. She became aware of a deep humming, like a throbbing, soundless song that crept into her bones, and tore her eyes from the monster to study Sabre. The cyber was circling away from her, drawing the creature after him, and now faced her. The brow band shone with vivid blue light that brightened as the tone of the strange humming increased, making her dizzy. The horse collapsed with a groan, tucking its head into its flank as if to try to escape the droning.

Shaking her head to overcome the dizziness, she watched in amazement as the monster stopped, apparently mesmerised by the vibrations. The brow band blazed electric blue as the mind-numbing drone deepened, going well below the range of human hearing, yet still exerting its power. The monster snapped its beak with a clashing of razor-edged horn, not as easily overcome as the horse. Nevertheless, its eyes glazed and it stood immobile, transfixed by the cyber band. Sabre walked closer, and the creature turned its head to follow his movement, its orange eyes filled with impotent rage.

Sabre paused, clearly aware of the animal's continued aggression, and neither moved as the brow band's hum changed note again, searching for the right frequency to incapacitate the alien beast. After several moments, it seemed to find it, for the brute's head sagged and its eyes lost their lustre. It sank to the ground as if exhausted, and Sabre approached its neck. He pried up several scales, pulling them off to expose the soft hide beneath, then plunged the knife into the beast's jugular.

The creature shuddered, its tail twitching, but it was unable to escape the cyber's control. Blue blood pumped from the wound, almost drenching Sabre, who backed away. The beast's head lowered until it rested on the sand, its eyes growing blank and glazed. Its limbs trembled as it struggled to escape the cyber's control, and the blood that flowed from its neck dwindled to a trickle. When the monster had ceased to twitch, Sabre turned to Tassin.

For a second the full power of the cyber swept over her, like a pressure beating at her brain. Then the brow band dulled to its usual blackness with red, amber and green sparkles and the pressure vanished along with an indiscernible something that she had not been aware of until it was gone. Beside her, the horse snorted and clambered to its feet.

Sabre came over to her, a strange emotion in his eyes. "It's dead."

"What is it, a dragon?" She gazed at the creature, wide-eyed.

He glanced back at the beast. "I suppose you'd call it a dragon. I'd call it a survivor of the indigenous animals that once inhabited this planet, and I regret that I had to kill it."

"But it would have killed you."

"That's why I killed it." He bent to clean the blood-smeared blade in the sand.

"How did you do that?"

Sabre straightened and tapped the brow band. "That's what cybers do. Cyber is short for cybernetics, the science of control and communications in animals and machines. Just as the cyber once controlled me, it's able to control animals over a limited distance. Unfortunately, it can't control

people, or I'd have used it on you a long time ago."

"Why would you want to do that?"

"Because you never listen to me! I said stay with the horse, but no, you come trotting after me, endangering both of us. When I tell you to do something, I'm not just enjoying the sound of my own damned voice!"

She lowered her eyes, annoyed and surprised by the wash of shame that went through her.

"Maybe you did not have to kill it, for it was very slow. How did it know we were here?"

He took a water skin from the saddlebag and sipped from it. "It's a type of reptile, a cold-blooded animal. Doubtless it's a day hunter and moves a lot faster in the heat. Cold always makes reptiles sluggish. I think it would have followed us, and you aren't strong enough to run any distance.

"Being a reptile, it doesn't have to eat that often, although I can't imagine what there is to eat here. I haven't seen another life sign since we left the road. As to how it knew about us, that's simple. All movement causes vibrations, and that animal was an ambush hunter. It lies in wait until something comes near enough, then grabs it."

"But how did you know it was there?"

"The cyber told me."

"That is what you meant when you said you had made a bargain with it? It helps you now?"

He nodded, gazing at the huge corpse.

She glanced at it. "Are you going to eat it?"

"No. According to the cyber, it's poisonous. Its blood contains a lot of copper, ours contains iron. Too much copper is very bad for a human."

"So if it had eaten you it would have died too?"

He smiled. "Well, it might not have died, but I'd probably have given it indigestion. Then again, with all the barrinium in me I'd give anything a stomach-ache. There must be another indigenous animal that lives here. That creature's too alien to live on our type of flesh. Perhaps that's why the colonists wiped out the indigenous species, because they were useless to them."

"I hope we do not meet any more of those."

"Next time I'll give it a wide berth. I thought it might be something edible, even though the cyber told me it was alien. The scanners couldn't analyse its body chemistry until I was close to it."

The following night, they encountered life again, but this time the dot on the cyber's scanners was pink, also unidentified, and a lot smaller. Sabre went to investigate, and found a strange, cylindrical beast crawling across the sand. Tassin tried to hold him back when he approached it, and he urged her nearer, sure that the slow-moving, worm-like creature was harmless.

"I think it's what the dragons eat, don't be scared," he said.

"I am not scared," she retorted, releasing him and approaching the beast, as he had known she would.

The worm creature moved on six stumpy legs, dragging a fat, boneless body after it. Its blue internal organs were visible through its pale, translucent skin, and its eyeless head searched the sand with long whiskers, ingesting certain rocks and sand, which it ground to a paste. Sabre squatted beside it and watched it for a while, fascinated. The cyber's scanners showed that it also contained a lot of copper, which meant that this was a closed system. The worms ate sand and the dragons ate the worms, but what, if anything, ate the dragons?

The alien creature seemed oblivious to their presence, and he did not wish to alarm it, not knowing what sort of defensive mechanisms it might possess. Despite his assurances to the Queen, he was aware that many apparently harmless prey animals were sometimes armed with dangerous defences. Strangely, this creature was nocturnal while the dragons were diurnal. Perhaps this was not their original food source, but one they had been forced to adopt when all the other animals had been wiped out.

"What is it?" Tassin whispered.

He glanced at her. "Well, it's not a reptile. This one seems to be more like a worm. It eats certain types of rock and sand, feeding at night and probably living in a burrow during the day. Its skin is far too fragile to withstand the sun. You'll probably find that they have water in their burrows. Since this is a man-made desert, there could be plenty of water underground. This is definitely what the dragons feed on, quite harmless."

She pulled a face. "It is ugly."

Sabre stood, his curiosity satisfied, and scanned the flat expanse that surrounded them. They had encountered no sign of burrows on their journey, so it seemed likely that the worm creature fabricated a lid for its hole. If he could find one, it might be possible to climb down it and fill the water skins from the worm's supply, but the scanners could not detect anything deep down. They had been fortunate to stumble across the well, which had seeped water into the surrounding soil, probably cracked during the conflict. The scanners had detected the water because it was only ten metres down, but a worm's twisting tunnel was probably far deeper and plugged with a thicker lid.

They left the worm to its sandy meal and walked on, almost mechanically now. Despite his efforts to conserve water by travelling at night, Sabre's tongue rustled dryly between cracked, parched lips, and an amber warning light flashed in the cyber's host status data, indicating his dehydrated state. According to the data, his bio-status was only fifty-two per cent, dangerously low. He had drunk no water since the previous night, and that had only been a few sips. Tassin had consumed most of it, and was in far better condition. The chestnut still dragged itself along, but he did not think it would live much longer.

Sabre watched its staggering gait for a while, then, as dawn broke and they stopped to rest for the day, he decided to end its suffering. The chestnut, unlike the bay, was not giving up. After sharpening the knife to a razor edge, he made a nick in the horse's jugular. The animal did not appear to feel it, and stood with a hanging head. He collected the blood in one of the empty water skins, saddened by the death of the noble beast. As its blood pressure dropped, the gelding lay down and closed its eyes. It stretched out on the soft sand, heaved a great sigh, and died.

Tassin sat and watched with dull eyes, clearly too tired to care. The horse's death meant one last infusion of life for them, and it would not have survived the journey anyway. Sabre drank the blood in small amounts, so it did not sicken him. Tassin accepted some this time, to his surprise, pulling a face at its taste. He butchered the animal and ate the soft organs again, but she drew the line at raw meat. They drank all the blood before it spoiled, then Sabre cut strips of meat. When he had as much as he could safely dry, they left the corpse and walked on for a distance, not wishing to sleep beside it.

Gearn studied the giant who stood before him, nodding in satisfaction. Five days had passed since Hispor had departed on his mission, and Gearn was well pleased with the result. The gladiator's two-metre frame was padded with ridges and slabs of muscle. He had barely fitted through the door, his shoulders too wide for the portal, and his head brushed the stone roof. The giant's brutal face showed the battle scars of many years in the arena, owning a flattened nose, missing teeth and a jagged, ugly scar that twisted his face, running through one eye, although the orb had survived unscathed.

His shaven head sported more scars, and his ears were ragged remnants. A gold ring dangled from one, drawing attention to the ropes of muscle that corded his neck. A chain mail breech clout was his only garb, exposing his mighty bronzed body to the envious stares of lesser men and the lustful gaze of women. His arms and legs bulged with muscles that writhed each time he moved. Sturdy gladiator's boots reached his calves, laced with leather thongs, and polished steel bands encircled his wrists.

Gearn, annoyed at having to twist his neck, gestured to a chair. "Sit down. Tell me your name."

The giant lowered himself into the chair, which creaked under his weight, and growled, "I'm

Murdor, champion of the arena."

"Good. Did my apprentice explain the task to you?"

"Sure, you want me to kill some spindly little man."

Gearn coughed, shooting Hispor a dark glance. "Well, almost. I need you to come with me across the Badlands, find this man and kill him. But he's a great warrior, so you'll need my help."

"I'll squash 'im with one fist." His scarred hand clenched, and Gearn shuddered.

"I'm sure you could, but I want to make absolutely certain. So I'll give you magical protection, and before we leave I'll make you even mightier than you already are."

The gladiator smiled, the scar making his eye droop. "What about me payment?"

"What do you want?"

"Gold, women, a castle." He shrugged. "All the things a man needs in life."

"Naturally. That's no problem; it will be waiting when we return."

"Then let's get on with it."

"Certainly." Gearn turned to the bottle of potion he had prepared while Hispor had been away. Its effect would be permanent, and he hoped Murdor would retire from the arena after this journey. Once he had consumed the magical fluid no man would be able to stand against him, including the warrior mage. When they caught up with the Queen and her foolish champion, he almost pitied the unfortunate man, and looked forward to the confrontation. His triumph was assured, he was certain, along with the King's reward.

The *Cyber Chronicles* saga continues in Book II, *Death Zone*, followed by Book III, *The Core*, Book IV, *Cyborg*, Book V, *Overlord*, Book VI, *Warrior Breed*, Book VII, *Sabre*, Book VIII, *Scorpion Lord*, Book IX, *Precipice*, and many more as yet unwritten.

About the author

T. C. Southwell was born in Sri Lanka and her family moved to the Seychelles when she was a baby. She spent her formative years exploring the islands – mostly alone. Naturally, her imagination flourished and she developed a keen love of other worlds. The family travelled through Europe and Africa and, after the death of her father, settled in South Africa.

T. C. Southwell has written over thirty novels, ranging from fantasy and science fiction to romance and adventure, as well as five screenplays. Her hobbies include motorcycling, horse riding and art, and she earns a living in the IT industry.

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